

Glittering Kyoto

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

Broadly speaking, styles employed in Japanese arts, crafts and architecture can be divided into two distinct types. One represents a fascination with rustic, seemingly random effects and delights in the use of natural materials for their inherent beauty, or for qualities acquired with age. The other is characterized by a richness of design and color, and occasionally entails the use of gold and silver leaf.

But, although baroque in nature, this second type is more often refined than showy. Sometimes these styles are played off against each other, but essentially speaking, both are represented in all areas of artistic endeavor and can be found both in the past and present.

In ceramics, for example, the ash-glazed accidental beauty of *bizen* pottery is countered by the multicolored porcelain of Kutani ware. Kyoto's Katsura Detached Palace is often referred to as a pinnacle of the refined rustic, while the polychromatic decorations of the Toshogu mausoleum in Nikko represent a much more flamboyant side of Japanese architecture. In textiles, too, the simplicity of the cotton "folk" cloth from various parts of the country is matched by the richly woven, or dyed silk kimono cloth from Kyoto.

Another technique which produces an effect consistent with this style is called *kinsai*, and involves the application of gold and silver leaf to various materials, but perhaps most impressively to kimono silk. Very much associated with Kyoto, it could hardly be more representative of the grander



Above: Flakes of gold leaf flutter down to decorate kimono silk.
Below: Layered effects in a piece of Kyoto kinsai work

aspects of Japanese decorative art, simply because of the amount of gold and silver leaf which is used in a number of different ways.

Sometimes tiny flakes of gold leaf are shaken through a wire mesh attached to the end of a bamboo applicator. The flakes are urged through the mesh either with a stick or by a small ball bearing; and as the applicator is shaken the flakes fall at random on to a prepared area of cloth, a protein paste made from a particularly glutinous rice being the adhesive. Alternatively, a paste of gold powder is piped on like icing, or sometimes sheets of gold leaf are laid on the cloth to build up large areas of gilding. In some cases a number of different ways of applying the gold or silver leaf are combined with stencil dyeing and other dyeing techniques to produce designs so rich and



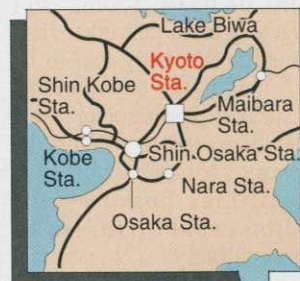
Vermilion grandeur at Heian Jingu

complex that it is not easy to absorb the qualities of the total effect at first glance: it takes time to distinguish all the individual effects and to read them in their own right.

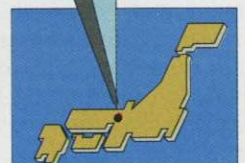
The technique originally came to Japan from the Asian continent during the T'ang dynasty and was developed independently by Japanese artisans, mainly to adorn garments of the noble and wealthy. Some of the best historical examples of this work can be seen in the National Museum in Kyoto and at Hayashibara Museum of Art in Okayama.

Of course, gold and silver figure in other types of craft in Kyoto such as on fans and screens as well as on Buddhist paraphernalia. Architecture, too, has a representative: Kinkakuji glowing under its weighty quantities of gold leaf. Even the interior of Nijo Castle is flamboyant by Japanese standards, although the exterior is more restrained and only boasts broad sweeping roofs. But neither of these buildings seems gaudy.

Kyoto can be easily reached by train. Museums are usually closed on Monday but temples and shrines are mostly open throughout the year except on some holidays. To see modern examples of *kinsai* work, contact Kyoto Kinsai Craft Cooperative, Tel: 075-461-8300. Go to the Gion district in the late afternoon to catch sight of a maiko on her way to work in one of the exclusive restaurants there. Even if your pocketbook will stand it, it would be better to seek sound advice on how, when and where you can have the chance to enjoy the song and dance of one of these highly costumed and very refined ladies.



JR line
Shinkansen



Perhaps the only one which is a borderline case is Heian Jingu, the shrine built in 1895 to commemorate the 1,100th anniversary of the founding of the Heian capital, and dedicated to the Emperor Kammu. In plan it is reminiscent of Chinese forms with a strict symmetry and broad spreading wings, but is actually a greatly scaled down replica of the first Imperial Palace erected in Kyoto in 794. In col-

oring, too, the total effect is much closer to Chinatown restaurants than the kind of wood and paper archetype of Japanese architecture, which has stuck in the Western mind for so long.

So if rustic inclinations in design must be represented by the weather beaten wood of the Zen temple and the town house, then the *maiko*—those accomplished ladies of song and dance—are, in costume and

appearance, the crescendo of grander, more colorful leanings in the decorative arts of Japan and will always be a symbol of glittering Kyoto.



In cooperation with
JAPAN TRADITIONAL
CRAFT CENTER

TABLE TALK

Chez Inno & Taillevent—Robuchon

"For ¥12,000 per person, I am confident I can completely satisfy my diners with Japanese cuisine, even though my restaurant is located in Ginza."

This oblique reproach by Mr. Michiba Rokusaburo in the monthly magazine *Bungei Shunju* was directed at forbiddingly exclusive restaurants which charge as much as ¥50,000 to ¥60,000 per head for Japanese cuisine. Mr. Michiba was a regular guest on Japan's popular TV program "Ironman Chefs," and his mastery of Japanese cuisine is well established. His explanation for such exorbitant prices is this: Diners at these first-class restaurants also are paying for top-of-the-line dinnerware, a hanging scroll in the alcove, and a stone-paved approach and entryway.

His criticism is straight to the point, leaving no room for argument. Here's my question: Do the fortunate guests at these extravagances really appreciate scrumptious food and exquisite hanging scrolls? I suspect their topics of conversation are more rather than less of a nefarious nature. Politicians contrive how they will ride the coming Diet session, and scheme to choose the next prime minister. Corporate diners are no more interested in dinnerware and art, either. Reverently placing the client at the position of honor,



restaurateurs hope this entertainment will be generously rewarded in sales volume. While diners' heads spin with worldly dealings, they are in no position to taste the food, let alone to mobilize their aesthetic sense.

Then why do they continue to visit expensive dining institutions? My guess is that they think they can be unrestrained in their spending since the company picks up the tab. The more they spend at the restaurant, the more appreciative the guest feels. However, the recent spate of political scandals has revealed that not all visitors to first-class restaurants are first-class people.

The same issue of *Bungei Shunju* has an article about sommeliers written by Mr. Shigekane Atsuyuki, a journalist. In his article Mr. Shigekane quotes comments on sommeliers from a speech in Tokyo given by the manager of the restaurant division of Hotel Mercure which operates 300 hotels throughout Europe:

"Protests are most often heard when the diner looks at his check and realizes how much he has been charged for the wine. A sommelier is only meant for high-class restaurants where the cost of dining is substantial. Second-tier restaurants, including my hotel, do not need a sommelier's service at all. Hotel Mercure has 14 kinds of wine, and we add the equivalent of ¥800 per bottle to the wholesale price. Furthermore, the most expensive wine in our list is no more than about ¥3,500. Waiters called *echansons* perform the duty of sommelier."

I thought about Mr. Michiba's comment and the speech, concluding that after the burst of the bubble economy, which encouraged high-rolling dining to the extent of ridicule has finally abated. People are awakening to a more realistic way of thinking.

Mr. Mita Morio's publication *Epicurien*, reputed to be the Japanese equivalent of Michelin, awards three stars to seven French restaurants in Tokyo. They are: Apicius, Chez Inno, Hiramatsu-tei, La Tour D'argent, L'écrin, L'osier, and Cote D'or. These restaurants were chosen from many eateries, and also ranked high in other similar publications. I can't say I agree wholeheartedly with his choices. For example, Apicius and L'écrin, are located below ground level. I would remove them from the top ranking, because a restaurant can't call itself first-class if it is not at least on the ground level to have a view. My choices for the best restaurants in Tokyo are Chez Inno and Taillevent—Robuchon.

Hori Yoshimichi
President, Fukui Oil Storage Co., Ltd.

Chez Inno
1st Floor, Daihyaku Seimei Bldg.,
3-2-11 Kyobashi, Chuo-ku
Tel. 3274-2020

Hours: Lunch—11:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.
Dinner— 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Closed on Sundays
Lunch courses: ¥4,500, ¥6,000, ¥8,000
Dinner courses: ¥13,000, ¥15,000

Taillevent—Robuchon
1-13-1 Mita, Meguro-ku
Tel. 5424-1338
(Please see *Journal* issue #83)

