

## Kamakura Perspectives

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

One of the most obvious differences between traditional forms of Eastern and Western art is the way that space is depicted on a two-dimensional surface. In the West, artists used the

quasi-mathematical system of perspective, which may have been invented by the Italian artist Brunelleschi in the 15th century, to depict a scene, rather in the way that something is viewed through a camera lens.

But in the East and in Japan in particular, although some artists dabbled with Western perspective techniques in the 18th century, space was more

usually represented using various pictorial devices such as scale, the layering of elements, a type of aerial perspective, and a form of axonometric projection with no vanishing points. Such principles characterize the Ukiyo-e woodblock prints of Hokusai, Hiroshige and others whose work found such favor in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, although by this time many Japanese artists were

## TABLE TALK

### Chinese Restaurant Akasaka "Min-Min"



In last year's hit TV series "Long Vacation," it was none other than a ramen shop where the young characters had their meals. These young people expressed their anger against society, bit their lips in helplessness, made their biggest decisions in life, and teased each other in a ramen shop. It would seem that Japanese have an everlasting love for ramen.

In a back street of Akasaka, many Japanese ramen lovers can find especially tasty Chinese food at reasonable prices. "Min-Min" is actually closer to Aoyama though the address is in Akasaka, on an unpretentious street lined with a beauty shop, drug store, and other small shops.

Min-Min is more an eatery than a restaurant, a rare vestige of one's university days—ramen, fried *gyoza* dumplings, and fried liver with leeks. Just thinking about these dishes is clue enough for most Japanese to imagine the shop's simple atmos-

phere. But what counts is the taste, volume and very reasonable prices. After WWII, a Chinese restaurant named Min-Min appeared in a humble area of Shibuya. Patrons jealously kept this shop's location secret from others. The chief cook of this restaurant is the master of the current Min-Min in Akasaka.

Seating oneself at the table, one says, "I'll start with beer." Quenching his thirst, a peculiarly Japanese aperitif, he would consider the menu and beverage to go with his meal. He may order another glass of beer. Then the beer is no longer an "aperitif."

Along with the second beer comes a small dish of pickled radish—a special treat of this restaurant—green onion with miso paste, and fried garlic. One order should be the favorite—stir-fried liver and leeks (¥700). I like bean sprouts in mine, which gives the food more color and a crisper texture. (One has to ask for the bean sprouts.) Then one may have two or three other foods. If you're still hungry, fried gyoza dumplings (¥500) may be suitable, but include noodles or rice for the final plate. If you're rather full after all this, finish the meal with a small bowl of ramen at ¥200. Yakisoba with a thick gravy topping (¥750) and spicy, hot "Dragon Fried Rice (¥750)" are very filling. Spicy tofu egg drop ramen (¥950) is a commoner's version of "Soup Pekinese" and is recommended for a cold winter day. Eating steamy noodles in summer is also enjoyable. If one has a cold and does not have much appetite, the chef may kindly cook some warm *gruel*.

One would not find an "ironman

chef" at Min-Min, but young cooks offer homemade foods which go far beyond homemade cooking. Cooks and patrons communicate over the counter, saying "Try my squid balls," or "The youngest chef made this fried rice. What do you think?" Some of these young, earnest cooks may grow to become "ironmen chefs" like those you see on TV.

The latest menu item is stir-fried conger eel, red pepper, *maitake* mushrooms and green onions. The tasty conger eel has more flavor of Japanese than Chinese cuisine.

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

**Chinese Restaurant Akasaka "Min-Min"**  
8-7-4 Akasaka, Minato-ku, Tokyo  
Tel: 03-3408-4805  
Hours: Lunch—11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. (last order)  
Dinner—5 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. (last order)  
Closed: Sundays and holidays  
Credit cards: Not honored







Above: Ceramics, wood, lacquer, bamboo—the best of Japan's craft past at the House of Antiques

Right: An encapsulation of Kamakura's charm



advantage.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that graphic uses of such drawing techniques were not widely used in Japan until a little more than a century ago, the principles of perspective were recognized and exploited for architectural purposes, and for what would now be called "urban design strategies."

One example is the stepping stone in front of the main entrance to Katsura Detached Palace in Kyoto. By changing its shape slightly, the natural effects of perspective have been countered in order to give the stone a more regular appearance.

At Nikko on the way up to the Toshogu Mausoleum, walling beside one of the *torii* is designed in such a way as to exaggerate perspective and thus dramatize the effect of the elements.

But the Dankazura in Kamakura is perhaps one of the most effective and yet so often unrecognized landscape devices to manipulate the effects of perspective. Basically it is a raised

tree-flanked path leading from the sea to Kamakura's main shrine, Tsuruoka Hachimangu. Originally it was over one kilometer in length and wider toward its seaward end than near the shrine. The part that now remains begins near the station and narrows to about two meters at the shrine end. This means that while the perspective effect is greatly exaggerated when looking toward the shrine, the sides of the path do not appear to converge as they should when looking down it toward the sea. But imag-



The San-no-Torii dominates the inland end of the Dankazura

Kamakura is best reached by train, as traffic congestion on the way and in the city itself can totally spoil a visit. Takeshita's House of Antiques may be visited by appointment only. Call in English or Japanese for an appointment: 0467-43-1441. Examples of Kamakura lacquer ware are available at the store Anzai located to the right of the Dankazura on the way up to Tsuruoka Hachimangu: 0467-22-5867. This prized lacquer ware is also available from Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami-Aoyama, Tokyo, Tel: 03-3403-2460.



ine how much stronger the effect would have been when the Dankazura reached almost to the shores of the bay.

It was constructed in 1182 by Minamoto Yoritomo, who was later destined to become Japan's first Shogun, in the hope that his wife would safely give birth to their child. Nowadays, of course, it is difficult to imagine how creating such an illusion could ever have contributed to the event.

His wife, Masako, would no doubt have been much happier to have had a fine piece of Kamakura lacquer ware, which in its own way also relies on illusion.

A form of carved relief in wood which is subsequently lacquered, it was originally a craft engaged in by specialist wood-carvers in their spare time and may have developed out of religious work done for the many temples in Kamakura.

The addition of several coatings of lacquer give the carving a substance beyond mere relief, and in some cases pieces are antiqued by sprinkling lamp black over the wet lacquer.

Genuine antiques, however, can be found in another corner of this historic city, in a somewhat unexpected setting. Takeshita Yoshihiro the architect, antique dealer and collector of things Japanese, has moved three old farm houses from the depths of the countryside and placed them in an unlikely spot on top of a hill behind the Zeniarai Bentei shrine. In one of these buildings, he has created a quality environment to show off a great variety of beautiful china, pieces of furniture and bamboo ware, as well as some fine lacquer, all of which represent some of the best of Japan's craft past.

With all its temples, shrines and oodles of charm, Kamakura is always worth a visit. And with so much to offer, there are always wider perspectives than may first meet the eye.



In cooperation with the  
JAPAN TRADITIONAL  
CRAFT CENTER