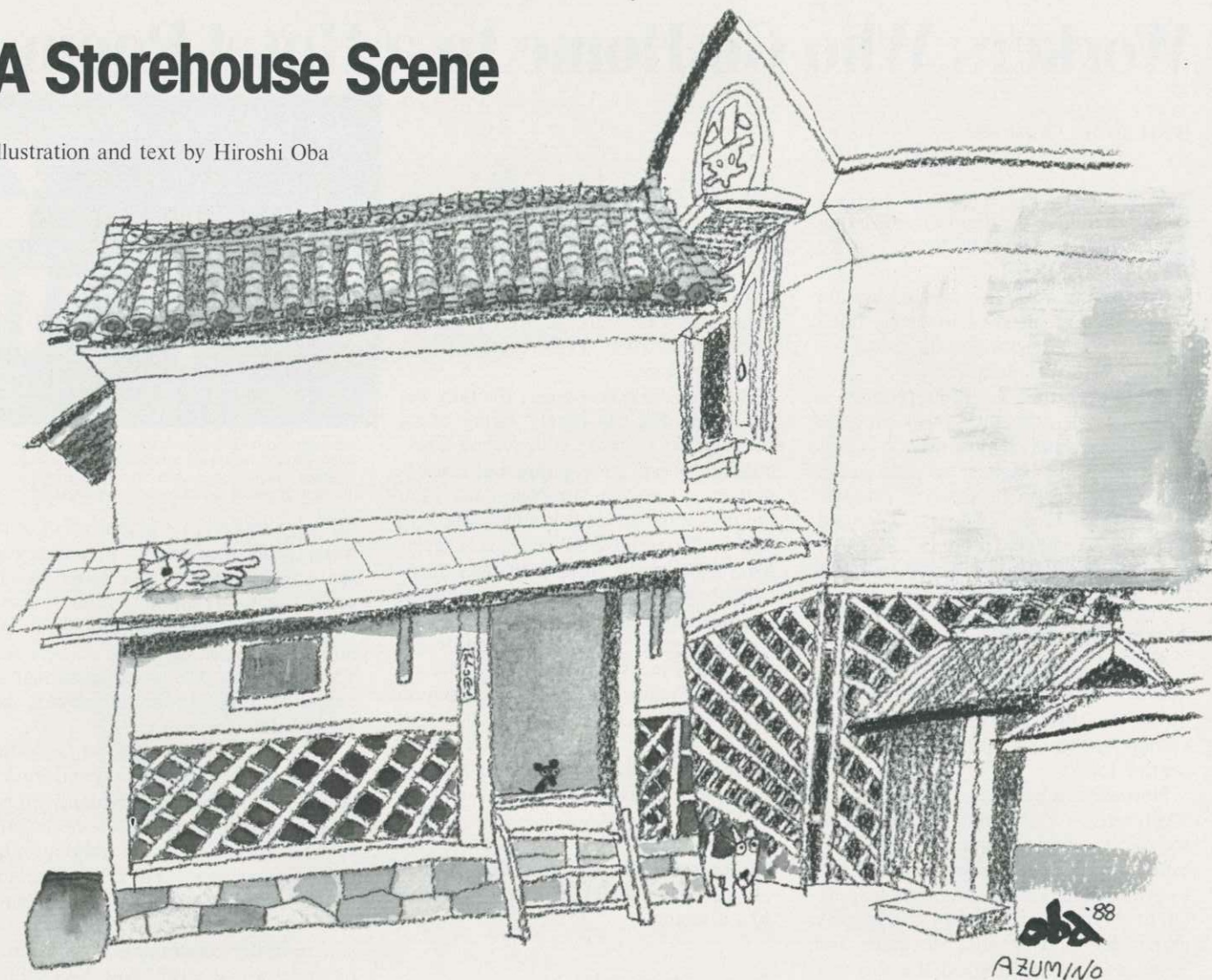


A Storehouse Scene

Illustration and text by Hiroshi Oba



Living in highly flammable wooden homes, the Japanese built storehouses of stone—*kura*—to protect their valuables. These white-walled storehouses, such as this one at Azumino village near the city of Matsumoto in Nagano Prefecture, come in a variety of designs, sometimes appearing to be extensions of the home and sometimes built at a considerable distance from it. They are an original architectural style.

Protecting one's valuables from a fire requires that the walls be thick and that the doors be heavy and fit snugly in their frames. Given these pedestrian requirements, I am amazed at what an attractive face these *kura* present to the world. A rich variety of styles can readily be seen in the many towns and villages throughout Japan.

Despite their functional unity, the building techniques used in different parts of Japan reflect each area's climatic differences, and each region has imparted its own distinctive flavor to *kura* construction. Just looking at these storehouses can give the observer a feel for the way the Japanese live.

Yet more and more homes have been built of concrete during Japan's postwar recovery, and even homes built of wood have had fireproofing added to their exteriors. At the same time that urban concentration was leaving less room for the *kura*, modern construction techniques were rendering them less and less necessary. All of these factors have contributed to a gradual decline in the storehouse's usefulness, and the end result is that they are no longer built today.

However, anyone traveling in Japan, whether Japanese or foreigner, can enrich his understanding of old Japan by taking the time to savor the beauty of these white-walled *kura*, which are a part of our national heritage.



Hiroshi Oba is one of Japan's leading illustrators. Among his many books are *Oranda kara no Iro-enpitsu* (Colored-pencil sketches from the Netherlands) and *Tsubasa no Gashu* (An airplane collection).