

## THE QUEST

Arriving in Japan as a neophyte  
Westerner with my newly acquired  
knowledge of textbook Japanese,  
I was all questions.



*The placement of stones in this kyusho garden is at once spontaneous and studied. Raked white sand echoes the shapes of the rocks, anchoring them visually in place, as well as creating a sense of fluid motion—like water around islands in the sea.*



*The simplicity of the Korakuen Garden in Okayama is both arresting and austere.*

My encounter led me on a quest for the other part of the term—*wabi*. This time my path led to the second of the three greatest gardens of Japan—the Korakuen in Okayama. There in that garden was a pond, and in that pond was an island of pure white sand. Growing in the sand was a solitary bonsai pine. The simplicity of the scene was arresting, and it embodied the spirit of what the Buddhist monk called *kanso*. It also represented the clean-cut beauty of the *wabi* concept.



*Open-armed doors  
of a Japanese inn.*

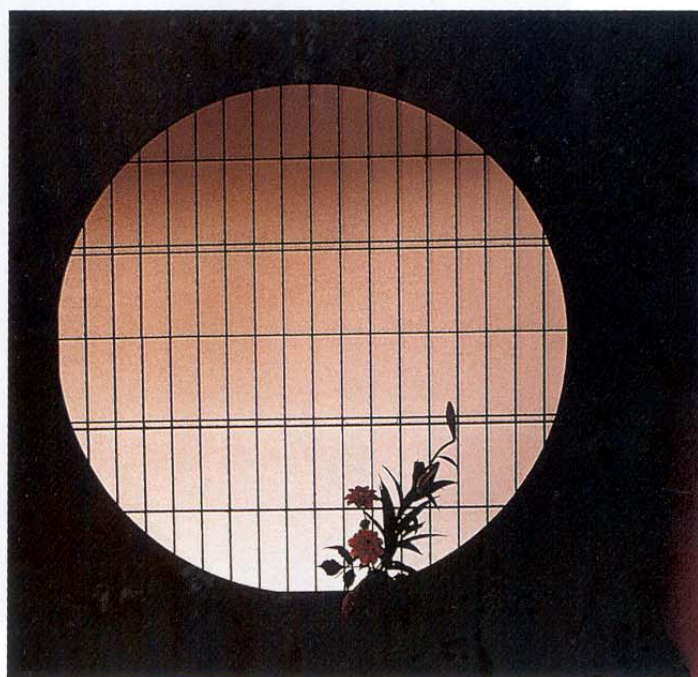
A further intriguing aspect was evident in the ever-present subtlety of most things traditionally Japanese. Seeking an answer to this

phenomenon brought me to a *ryokan* (inn) on the island of Shikoku, located in the inland Sea of Japan. Upon our arrival by boat in a torrential rain, the scene was

corners by vermilion felt, the color used by country inns. (City inns use blue felt and shaded blue netting.) The futon was prepared inside with a small *andon* (lamp) placed beside it. One entered this inner sanctum to sleep in peace and serenity after first receiving a massage from a blind masseuse. (In Japan, the blind are cared for their entire lives by inn owners in exchange for this service.) Once the masseuse departed, the maid brought a small cage filled with fireflies and released them inside the netted room. Then she extinguished the *andon* and the room was dark for a

few moments until the starlight illuminating the round moon window made its exquisite form subtly visible.

*The moon window provides the symmetrical contrast to the asymmetrical aspects of most Japanese art forms.*



After supper, I dressed warmly and returned alone to the shrines in order to observe them by full moon. The contrast of the deep black shadows and the light of the brilliant moon was breathtaking. This lonely experience was silent and eerie, made all the more so by a peculiar sense that overwhelms an individual when feeling the presence of another unseen human being. Standing in that ancient temple court, I recognized the Zen principle I was seeking—*seijaku* (solitude). The stillness and tranquillity of that place created a transcendent moment.



*Tall cryptomeria trees are protectively wrapped as a sign of respect.*

*The Japanese characters for seijaku*



*A Japanese garden is filled with symbols of all the Zen principles as well as ones relative to nature in the suggestions of cliffs, streams, and forest glades.*



Early the next morning as I descended through the mist into the village, I encountered a woodcutter chopping pine branches for a fire. The night before, he had seen me enter the temple court.

Since I was alone and a Westerner, he mentioned that he was concerned I might fall or become cold, so he had sent his young son

*The symbolism of rippling  
water can be seen in the roof  
tiles of a temple.*

to watch over me, advising him to stay out of sight so as not to disturb my tranquillity within that ancient place. Another seijaku moment had occurred.

It is fair to say "things Japanese" are often an analysis—a combination of complexities involving more than one principle or concept that is foreign to Westerners. Understanding these matters requires an enlightenment at a higher realm—one that is truly



cultural in its breadth. No wonder the gaijin is often perplexed at first contact with these complexities.



This scroll painting of sprouting bamboo is a seasonal reference to spring and the month of May.

The guests then proceeded through the *shiori-do* (inner gate) to the *koshikake* (arbor), where they were seated on round straw zabuton to await the host and the signal to enter the *chashitsu* (tearoom). At the sound of a gong, the guests entered through the *nijiri-guchi*, which required them to pass through the entrance by bowing their heads and crawling on their knees. Once inside, I *haikened* (appreciated) the tokonoma and its art objects—namely, the scroll and the ikebana.

## wabi FRESH

*Nageire*—Thrown-in style of ikebana

*Nijiri-guchi*—Teahouse door

*Niwa*—Japanese garden

*Notan*—Dark and light (chiaroscuro)

*Onsen*—Hot springs bath

*Otemae*—Preparation of tea

*Raku*—A type of pottery

*Roji*—Garden path

*Rosbi*—Zen monk/abbot

*Sabi*—Beauty in age and patina; venerable

*Satori*—Instantaneous enlightenment

*Seijaku*—Quietness

*Seika*—Modification of the temple-style Rikka arrangements of flowers

*Shakkei*—Borrowed landscape

*Shakyamuni*—The Buddha before his enlightenment (satori)

*Shibui*—Essence of Japanese culture and the ultimate in taste; controlled understatement. It can relate to both aristocratic and Mingei (folk art) levels of taste.

*Shiori-do*—Inner gate

*Shin*—formal

*Shinto*—Original spirit beliefs of Japan, which revere nature and natural forces.

*Shizen*—Naturalness

*Shoji*—Sliding paper-covered screens

*Shokyaku*—Lead guest at a tea ceremony

*Suitsuki*—Moon, water, grass

*Suki*—Artistic taste

*Sukiya*—Tearoom

*Sumi-e*—Ink painting

*Sutra*—Buddhist scripture

*Tatami*—Floor mats

*Tokonoma*—An alcove used to display a painting or another work of art and a flower arrangement. Literally translated it means "treasure room."

*Tsukubai*—Water basin in a garden

*Tsume*—Last guest at a tea ceremony

*Wabi*—Solitary; concept of less is better; fresh and new

*Yugen*—Subtle and profound

*Zabuton*—Floor cushions