

IKEBANA

Tradition and creativity in floral art

What Is Ikebana?

The word *ikebana* is usually translated as “the Japanese art of flower arrangement,” but the materials of *ikebana* can include freshly cut branches, vines, leaves, grasses, berries, fruit, seeds, and flowers, as well as wilted and dried plants. In fact, any natural substance may be used, and in contemporary *ikebana*, glass, metal, and plastic are also employed. As one of the traditional arts of Japan, *ikebana* has developed a symbolic language as well as decorative concepts, and the use of natural, ephemeral flowers and branches makes the dimension of time an integral part of the creation. The relationship between the materials; the style of the arrangement; the size, shape, texture, volume, and color of the container; and the place and occasion for its display are all vitally important factors. In its 500-year history, there have been a wide range of forms, from modest pieces for home decoration to vast landscapes and innovative sculptural works that can fill an entire exhibition hall. Along with the enormous variety of contemporary work, traditional forms continue to be studied and created. In addition, the practice of *ikebana*, also called *kado*, or The Way of Flowers, has been pursued as a form of meditation on the passage of the seasons, time, and change. Its religious origins and strong connection to the natural cycle of birth, growth, decay, and rebirth can give *ikebana* a deep spiritual resonance.

Origin and Development

The diversity of Japan’s natural landscape



Arranging flowers

Flower arranging is seen as an artistic attainment one practices in leisure time. (Photo courtesy of AFLO)

and ancient, agricultural way of life set the scene for the development of *ikebana*. A decisive influence was the introduction of Buddhism from China in the 6th century, and with it, the custom of floral offerings (*kuge*) to the Buddha and the souls of the dead. The offering took the form of a simple, symmetrical composition of three stems, but by the early 17th century it had evolved into a style called *rikka*, literally “standing flowers,”

Ohara school

The work in the photograph, an example of the traditional method of landscape depiction, is arranged in a large, shallow container (*suiban*). Lotuses alone are used to express a distant view of a pond in summer. (Photo courtesy of Ohararyu)



created by Buddhist monks of the Ikenobo school. This elaborate art form was done in tall bronze vases and required a high degree of technical skill. The main branch, symbolizing heaven or truth, was usually asymmetrical, bending out to the right or left before its upper tip returned to the central vertical axis. Numerous other branches, each with its own symbolic meaning and decorative function, emerged from the central mass, the core of an imaginary sphere. As a whole, a work of *rikka* was a microcosm that represented the entire universe through the image of a landscape. The chief characteristics—asymmetry, symbolism, and spatial depth—were to exert a strong influence on later developments.

In stark contrast to *rikka*, the austere *chabana*, literally “tea flowers,” originated as part of the tea ceremony (*chanoyu*) in the 16th century. Composed of one or two flowers or branches in a small container, *chabana* became the basis of a spontaneous style called *nageire*, meaning “to throw in,” which was done in a tall vase with few materials, and employed subtle technical means to produce a simple, poetic evocation of natural beauty. *Rikka* and *nageire* define a kind of counterpoint in the subsequent history of *ikebana*. On the one hand, there was an emphasis on elaborate technique, large scale, symbolism, and fixed styles. On the other, there was spontaneity, simplicity, suggestiveness, and respect for the natural characteristics of the materials themselves. The tension between the two would lead to all future innovations in the art.

During the Edo period (1603–1868), Japan enjoyed internal peace and steady economic growth. *Ikebana*, once the exclusive province of Buddhist monks and members of the court and aristocracy, came to be practiced more widely by *samurai*, wealthy merchants, and others, including women. During this period, the *rikka* style became rigid and formalized, and a simpler style called *seika* or *shoka* (both written with the same Chinese characters), meaning literally “live flowers,” emerged and gained increasing popularity. While still rather formal, *seika* employed a three-branch composition based on an asymmetrical, or scalene, triangle. Many new schools promoted their

own versions, but the three branches in the composition came to be known as *ten* (heaven), *chi* (earth), and *jin* (human being), respectively. Variations of this form have become the basis of all *ikebana* instruction, even in the most modern schools.

Another important development during this period was the emergence of literati arrangements (*bunjin-bana*), which reflected the sensibilities of Chinese scholars and painters. Japanese *bunjin-bana* arrangements had a strong influence on the *nageire* style which had developed from *chabana*. Since *bunjin-bana* was practiced as a form of personal expression, arrangements had an unorthodox, casual character that was quite different from the austerity of the tea house, or the formality of *rikka* or *seika*. In addition, the Chinese origins added a new richness of color and literary nuance.

Modern Ikebana

The opening of Japan to Western influence from the beginning of the Meiji era (1868–1912) brought great changes to all aspects of national life. In *ikebana*, the style called *moribana*, literally “piled-up flowers,” created by Ohara Unshin (1861–1916), founder of the Ohara school, totally revolutionized the art. Whereas in all traditional styles the materials were gathered to emerge from the container at a single point, Ohara used various kinds of supports to arrange cut plants over an extended surface in wide, shallow containers called *suiban*, literally “water basin.” This allowed for the use of new, imported materials that could not be accommodated to traditional styles. It also permitted the creation of landscape styles, *shakei*, that depicted scenes from nature in a naturalistic rather than symbolic fashion. Another important innovator was Adachi Choka (1887–1969), who adopted *moribana*, and described his work simply as “decorative.”

Ikenobo school

This school of flower arranging was founded in the 15th century by Ikenobo Senkei. It is the oldest among extant schools. The photo shows an arrangement by Ikenobo Sen'ei, current master of the Ikenobo school. (Photo courtesy of Ikenobo)



Sogetsu school

Sogetsu arrangements make free use of a wide range of shaped materials.

This large-scale work, titled "乾坤春" ("Kankonshun"), was created by Teshigahara Sofu, founder of the Sogetsu school.

Approximately 10 meters wide, it includes driftwood and wisteria vines. (Photo courtesy of Sogetsu Foundation / Fujimori Takeshi)



Innovations continued with the appearance of many other modern schools. Teshigahara Sofu (1900–1979), founder of the Sogetsu school, promoted *ikebana* as modern art that should encourage free, creative expression. In the postwar period, avant-garde works, or *zen'eibana*, vastly extended *ikebana*'s expressive powers, incorporating abstract sculptural and surrealistic approaches, and broadening the scale of works and range of materials employed. In addition, traditional schools such as Ikenobo, while maintaining their own classical styles and creating modern versions of *rikka* and *seika*, added more recent approaches, including *moribana* to their curricula. The contemporary scene is dominated by three large schools—Ikenobo, Ohara, and Sogetsu—each claiming over one million members, but there are also thousands of other schools large and small. Major schools have established chapters and study groups all over the world, and Ikebana International, an umbrella organization representing many schools, was founded in Tokyo in 1956 and promotes the art on a global scale.

Ikebana continues to be practiced by many ordinary people not affiliated with specific schools and is an intimate part of everyday life in Japan. Arrangements decorate homes throughout the year, and specific materials are associated with special occasions and festivals. Evergreen pine, symbolizing eternity, is the preferred material for the New Year, and is traditionally accompanied by bamboo, for youthful flexibility, and blossoming apricot branches, for venerable old age. On March 3, for the Doll Festival (Hina Matsuri), also known as the Girls' Festival, blossoming peach branches are displayed with traditional dolls. Japanese irises, symbolizing male strength, are arranged on May 5, Children's Day, and bamboo is part of the decorations for Tanabata, the Star Festival, on July 7. Japanese pampas grass, a typical autumn

material, is traditionally arranged when people gather to view the moon (*tsukimi*) in September.

Basic Approaches and Techniques

Plants must have enough water to remain fresh for as long as possible. A number of techniques are used to preserve the freshness of plants. These include crushing, boiling, or burning the base of the stems and the application of various chemicals. However, the most common method is to cut the base of the stems under water (*mizugiri*) and use them immediately. To restore vitality to wilted flowers and leaves, they are cut under water and the stems left submerged for at least 30 minutes.

Most contemporary *ikebana* are of two kinds: *moribana* and *nageire*. While *moribana* is arranged in a shallow container with a needle-point holder, or *kenzan*, *nageire* is composed in a tall vase with a variety of methods used to keep the materials in place.

When using a *kenzan*, thick branches are cut on a diagonal, and the cut end is split lengthwise so that it can be inserted easily into the needle-point holder. Flowers and other materials with soft stems are best cut horizontally, inserted directly into the needles in an upright position, and then slanted forward or backward to the desired angle. With materials such as grasses, which are thinner than the individual needles of the *kenzan*, an additional short piece of the same or a different material can be tied to the base for added thickness.

For arrangements in a tall vase, the bending method of stay (*oridome*) is employed for a variety of materials. The stem rests on the mouth of the container, the bent portion is placed against the inside surface, and the base may extend to the bottom of the

vase. The self-supporting method (*kiridome*) is used for flowers with thick stems. The base is cut on an angle and placed directly against the inside surface of the vase. In the crosspiece method (*yoko-waridome*), the base of the branch is split horizontally, and a stay is inserted at a right angle. The crosspiece should fit securely against the inside surface of the container. To use a vertical prop (*tate-waridome*), the base of the stem is split vertically, and a prop is secured within the split end. The base of the propped stem touches the inside surface or the bottom of the container.

Choosing an Appropriate Container

In principle, anything can serve as a container. Traditionally, bronze and ceramic vases, lacquerware, sections of bamboo, and even dried gourds have been widely used. However, the container does not merely contain, but is considered an integral part of the work.

When using a wide, shallow bowl (*suiban*), the subtle use of the surface of the water—its reflectivity and the cool impression it gives in summer—plays a major role in the success of the work. Containers made of stainless steel, glass, and various synthetic substances are common in modern *ikebana*, but when making an arrangement in a transparent glass vase, special care should be taken with the

portion of the work visible within the container. Whatever kind of container one uses, the base of the arrangement should be neat and concentrated. When using a tall vase, avoid filling the entire mouth with materials.

Highlighting Natural Beauty

While the mastery of any art requires long practice with a trained teacher, there are a number of basic points on which teachers of all schools are in agreement. First, one must realize that what plants look like in their natural state is the starting point for any work. Once they are cut and removed from nature (or a greenhouse), they become the materials for a composition with its own unique character. When examining materials, look at the whole form rather than the captivating details. With camellias, for example, it is the entire branch, and especially the leaves, that are most important, not the flowers, which can be removed from their natural position and reattached at a place where they will be more effective in the overall design. Bending can give branches a pleasing curve, but can also serve to straighten curved branches. The removal of unnecessary details is an essential skill, and trimming branches should aim at emphasizing the beauty of the line. The removal of some blossoms from cherry, plum, or peach branches serves not only to reveal the line, but also to highlight the beauty of those blossoms that remain.

All natural materials can be used as line, surface, color, or mass. A large leaf, for example, has a powerful surface, but can also be shown in profile to function as a line. All flowers have a “face” that is oriented in a specific direction. In placing the flower, one must consider whether to show it facing forward, in profile, or turning away from the viewer. Flowers are usually used with their leaves, but the leaves of an iris or narcissus are often separated from the stalk, reassembled into more pleasing groups, and then reunited with the flower to give an appearance that is both “natural” and effective as an element in the composition.

