
Title of Object

Teahouse

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Yasuimoku Komuten Company Ltd.

Country: Japan

Date of Object: 2001 (constructed)

File Created: 10/17/2016

Accession Number: 2001.204.1

Author of File: Jennifer Youngberg

Material/Medium: Various natural materials

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Department: Japanese and Korean Art

Last Updated/Reviewed: 2/16/2017

Culture: Japanese

Tour Topics

Group 2, Highlights 1600-1850, Ceremonies, period room, architecture, celebration, ritual, food and drink, entertainment, nature, spirituality, relationships

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

D: There is so much to look at in this space, what draws your eye?

I: Let's imagine that you have been invited to enjoy a tea ceremony in this teahouse. How do you think you would feel throughout the experience?

A: The tea ceremony brought people together for companionship and a shared experience while enjoying a special beverage. Can you think of times in your life when a beverage plays a role in a special occasion?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

The Teahouse is based on an 18th century example called Sa-an, or raincoat hermitage, within the Zen monastery of Daitokuji in Kyoto.

After partially completing these rooms in Japan, the Yasuimoku craftsman painstakingly disassembled the posts and beams, carefully packed them in crates, and sent them to Minnesota. In the summer of 2001, a team of craftsman spent three months, using traditional methods, reassembling and finishing the structure within the museum's Japanese galleries.

The architectural style of the teahouse is called *sōan*, literally "grass hut." *Sōan* teahouses were small and constructed from humble materials including: roughly milled lumber, bamboo, thatch, and earthen walls made of mud and straw, so that it looked like the teahouse was built from natural materials gathered from the surrounding forests. In its simplicity, *sōan* teahouses were meant to suggest a monk's retreat in the wilderness. The suggestion is that you've been wandering in the mountains and you've just happened upon this abandoned hut. Within the teahouse, all unnecessary embellishment is eliminated in an attempt to create a state of calm.

Every effort is made to make these structures appear rustic. Different kinds of wood are chosen, as well as bamboo and straw. Red pine might be used for the main pillar that holds up the *tokonoma* (alcove), while other types of wood used for other support posts. For the museum's teahouse, the pillar that holds up the eaves leading from the garden, for example, is a piece of pine that was soaked in water with its bark still intact until mold grew between the bark and the core. Afterwards the bark was stripped away, revealing the mottled effect of the mold. The resulting impression is of a very old, *wabi*, piece of wood. There are also different gauges of bamboo and water-reed and so on, so that it looks like this small hut has been put together with materials that were gathered from the surrounding forest.

A small, carved signboard under the eaves of the museum's teahouse reads "Zenshin-an," Hermitage of the Meditative Heart -- a name bestowed on the structure by Fukushima Keidō, the current abbot of Tofukuji temple in Kyoto.

The Garden: The Japanese believed that immersion in nature was an important part of life. Even though a small teahouse might be built only a short distance from a house or temple, the owner would create a dense garden to make it seem like it was located deep within the wilderness. An irregular stone path, devoid of showy flowers, invites a visit to the teahouse.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

Japanese teahouses served as a place where like-minded individuals could escape the ordinary world and enjoy a few moments of tranquility, precious art objects and a refreshing bowl of tea.

As tea masters like Murata Shukō (1422-1502), Takeno Jōō (1502-1555) and Sen Rikyū (1520-1591) began to advocate the practice of *wabi* (rustic) tea in the 16th century, separate, specially designed teahouses began to be built. *Wabi* was a term that they adopted from poetry that suggested poverty or wretchedness. But for tea masters, the *wabi* aesthetic meant that even simple ceramics and other tea utensils made in Japan could have their own humble beauty. Often the tea ceramics that were made in Japan were unglazed, a little rough, maybe a little misshapen, but tea masters appreciated these qualities as representing the *wabi* aesthetic. Consequently, they began to use both rare Chinese imported object and domestic Japanese objects for serving tea. The other important aspect of the *wabi* tea aesthetic is that the host began to perform the humble task of preparing and serving the tea himself, without the aid of servants.

The Tea Ceremony: Within the modest teahouse, a tea master prepares and serves tea to a small number of guests. This is a traditional ritual known as Chanoyu, or tea ceremony. In a tea ceremony, guests make their way to the teahouse on a stone path. Along the way, there would be a natural rock basin that's been filled with fresh water; guests wash their hands and wash their mouth out. Then they would make their way to the teahouse itself. The small entryway into the teahouse requires guests to express their humility by bowing low to enter into the space. The tea master will have chosen a simple floral arrangement or a work of art, usually a hanging scroll, for his guests' enjoyment. This is displayed in a small alcove. After sliding into the teahouse the guest reverently examines this prized object before taking position. The sound of boiling water in the tea kettle and the pouring of water into the tea bowls provides a subtle music to the proceedings since the tea ceremony is conducted in virtual silence. The bitter taste of tea is balanced by traditional sweets served beforehand. In receiving a bowl of tea, the guests carefully cradle the ceramic bowl in their hands. They may enjoy the warmth of the hot tea through the walls of the bowl, or the texture of the bowl itself. Often, the tea bowl is a prized object from the host's collection, passed down through generations of tea masters who may have written their comments about the aesthetic qualities of the tea bowl on the bowl's wooden box. In this way, the guest partakes in the history of the tea bowl through the sense of touch. Guests have the rare chance to examine treasures from the tea masters collection in the form of antique tea bowls, and ceramic and lacquer tea caddies that he has specially chosen for the gathering.

Typically tea ceremonies are conducted almost totally in silence, with only a few formal exchanges between the host and guests. But there's a certain sound that comes from the iron teakettle. It's a slight pinging or ringing sound as the water boils. And when the kettle reaches a certain pitch, the tea master will pour a bit of cool water into the kettle to bring the temperature back appropriate level for brewing tea, and the sound diminishes or disappears for a time. So it's the very subtle song of the kettle that provides music for the sense of hearing.

Tea ceremonies are held for any number of reasons. Basically, most tea aficionados follow a carefully proscribed calendar of tea events. Beyond these, tea gatherings can be celebratory—to commemorate the New Year, to honor a special guest, or to mark the promotion of a tea student to a new level of mastery. They can also be memorials for someone who has died. They can be organized to commemorate the beauty of the seasons, the cherry blossoms, the autumn moon, and so on. There are many, many reasons for conducting a tea ceremony, but the subtext is always this aesthetic experience.

Concerning the tea: The spirituality of tea is a very interesting topic. Tea was originally brought from China to Japan by Zen monks. So it starts with Zen monks drinking tea in monasteries, in a very ritualistic and decorous way, as a means of staying awake through long hours of meditation. However, tea soon began to be served during at opulent gatherings among Japan's wealthy military and aristocratic elite. These were occasions to show off rare objects imported from China, and tea was simply an exotic beverage. In the late 16th century, however, several renowned tea masters adopted something of the decorum and formality associated with monastic tea as they began to formulate new procedures for staging tea gatherings. As a result, there is often a meditative, or spiritual, aspect to the tea ceremony even though it is not overtly religious.

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Japan's ruling warrior elite first held lavish tea gatherings in their formal reception halls. As tea masters like Murata Shukō (1422-1502), Takeno Jōō (1502-1555) and Sen Rikyū (1520-1591) began to advocate

the practice of wabi (rustic) tea in the 16th century, separate, specially designed teahouses began to be built. Shukō introduced an architectural style called sōan, literally "grass hut." Sōan teahouses were small and constructed from humble materials including roughly milled lumber, bamboo, thatch, and earthen walls. In its simplicity, soan teahouses were meant to suggest a monk's retreat in the wilderness. The low entranceway required all participants to humble themselves as they entered the tearoom from the garden. Although a built-in alcove for the display of art was adopted from more formal structures, its size was greatly reduced--sufficient only to display a small painting or simple floral arrangement.

The museum's teahouse is based on the Sa-an, an 18th century teahouse within the Zen monastery of Daitokuji in Kyoto that is now designated as one of Japan's "Important Cultural Properties." A small, carved signboard under the eaves of the museum's teahouse reads "Zenshin-an," Hermitage of the Meditative Heart -- a name bestowed on the structure by Fukushima Keidō, the current abbot of Tofukuji temple in Kyoto.

Audio clip:

So a teahouse is sort of an ideal setting in conducting a tea ceremony. What the tea master is trying to do is suggest that you've been wandering in the mountains and you've just happened upon this abandoned hut, that's really the artifice of all of this. In the tea garden there would be a natural rock basin that's been filled with fresh water, and so you would wash your hands and wash your mouth out, and then you would make your way to the teahouse itself, lowering your head to get through the very small door. It is purposely designed this way to suggest humility. Once inside, ostensibly it has been constructed with bits and pieces of wood and bamboo that have been collected from the nearby forest, but, in fact, nothing is further from the truth. Tea masters and specialized tea architects in Japan go to great lengths to gather a variety of materials so that, in fact, it creates really marvelous patterns.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Mia website - Object Description

Mia Audio Clip

Mia Video: Art of Asia: Architecture - Four Asian Rooms, Part 1 (relevant portion)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3L23_wCt8s&feature=Playlist&p=427D204B4E7C73BC&index=0&playnext=1

Mia Video: Art of Asia: Architecture - Four Asian Rooms, Part 2 (relevant portion)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6F6JZsOB8U>

Archived information, interview with the curator: <http://archive.artsmia.org/art-of-asia/architecture/japanese-teahouse.cfm>

And <http://archive.artsmia.org/art-of-asia/architecture/japanese-teahouse-interview.cfm.html>

