

Aria

WABI SABI

SHIRASU MASAKO ON WABI SABI

There is an antique dealer in Ogaki, Gifu Prefecture, known as Nagazen. His real name was Zenzo. A gentle, refined man, he was well known to other antique dealers in Japan. He died five years ago at age 99.

Some time ago, he invited me to eat wild thrush at a country house in the Kiso mountains. The last part of the mountain road was not passable by car and we had to walk. The cobbled road was quite steep and I was afraid it would be too much of a strain for a man almost in his nineties. But he proved to be more fit than me and led the way, his tall frame erect and dignified.

The color of winter chrysanthemums and spirea leaves enlivened the bleak scenery along the road. Winter was on its way to the Kiso mountains and the first snow was imminent.

I do not know how the thrush were obtained—"mist netting" of wild birds was prohibited—but they were delicious. Seated round a large fire pit, we passed the time pleasantly, eating and drinking from noon to nightfall. After

resting a bit after the meal, Nagazen said, "Well then, shall I make tea?" From a cloth-wrapped bundle, he took out a hanging scroll and placed it on the wall behind the fire pit. It was just the right size, and the calligraphy, by Jiun, went

perfectly with the sooty wall. With this touch, the hearth-side atmosphere was instantly transformed. I felt as if we were enjoying a relaxed drink with Jiun.

Nagazen brought out some winter chrysanthemums and spirea which he had picked on our way up without my noticing. He nestled them in a jar from the old kiln of Echizen, adding a subtle accent of color to the dark, earthen-floored room. Then

he took his tea utensils out of a box and began preparing tea with gentle movements. His demeanor was natural and humble. There was no hint of formality or ostentation.

My eyes were fixed on each of Nagazen's gestures. He was born near Nagoya, so it was not surprising that he had practiced at tea ceremonies. But what impressed me about his way of making tea had little to do with experience. I could not help

but think that this was how Takeno Joo and Sen no Rikyu must have served tea. He seemed to be completely indifferent to the conventional forms of the tea ceremony.

He had actually made his own forms.

"I forget whether this is done first or whether it comes later. Oh well, it doesn't really matter so

long as you enjoy it."

Perhaps he was just help

ing me relax since I was not an expert on the tea ceremony. If so, it would have made his performance even more remarkable. The moon had already appeared even though it was early evening.

I was a little drunk and the late autumn breeze seemed to waft through my body, lifting me up to the ceiling.

Much has been said about **wabi** and **sabi**, the rustic simplicity, quietness, and solitude which are the core esthetic principles of the tea ceremony. As long as people indulge in theorizing, however, they show a lack of true understanding. The ultimate meaning of the tea ceremony is achieving the playful state of mind, empty and without purpose, demonstrated by this old man. This state of mind is close to Zen enlightenment.

わびさび

STRIP OF THE WEEK



POEM OF THE WEEK

Along this path
There are no travelers...
Autumn evening

— Basho

One of the great catalysts in Basho's life was the premature death of his close friend when the budding poet was just twenty-two. To recover from the grief and desolation felt on the passing of his friend, Basho started on his first pilgrimage to contemplate the meaning of life and the reasons for its unavoidable transience. It was at this time that the element of *sabishisa*, or loneliness, first became apparent in his work. As with other wabi sabi expressions, there is no sentimentality, no superfluous adjectives, just a devastating imagery of solitude. The use of autumn, a *kigo* (seasonal word), implies the coming of old age and the sense of existential loneliness felt in our solitary journeys.

At the age of twenty eight, Basho decided to renounce the world to focus his considerable energies on the practice of Zen. The influence of his Zen teachers left a deep impression on the young Basho, and through his rigorous spiritual training he was able to further attune his mind with the rhythms of natural surroundings. It was this great love of nature, coupled with a keen awareness of the evanescence of life, that provided the melting pot for some of the world's finest poems.