

HISTORY OF IKEBANA

Ikebana, one of the traditional arts of Japan has been practiced for more than 600 years. It developed from the Buddhist ritual of offering flowers to the spirits of the dead. By the mid-fifteenth century, with the emergence of the first classical styles, Ikebana achieved the status of an art form, independent of its religious origins, although it continued to retain strong symbolic and philosophical overtones. The first teachers and students were priests and members of the nobility. However, as time passed, many different schools arose, styles changed and Ikebana came to be practiced at all levels of Japanese society. The practice of Ikebana is called "kado", or The Way of Flowers.

The beginnings of Ikebana can be traced to the sixth century when Buddhism was introduced in Japan. Part of the worship involved the offering of flowers at the altar in honor of Buddha. In India, the birthplace of Buddhism, the flowers were placed very informally and sometimes only petals were strewn around. However, by the time of the tenth century, the Japanese were presenting their offerings in containers. The altar offerings were the responsibility of the priests of the temple. The oldest school of Ikebana is the Ikenobo School. Headmasters of the school became famous for the very formal rikka style arrangements. These arrangements could be massive. At the great Buddha located in Nara, Japan in 1693 two arrangements made in seven foot tall vases reached forty feet in height. This very precise formal arrangement is still taught today. 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.

At about the same time, the tea ceremony made its appearance. The tea ceremony's emphasis on rustic simplicity contrasted sharply with the ornate rikka. This led to the thrown in style called nageire. In the seventeenth century, the merchant class grew very prominent and they asked for a simplified version of rikka which became the shoka style. This new style offered limitless possibilities for variation. This style is

characterized by a tight bundle of stems which form a triangular three-branch asymmetrical structure. 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.

With Meiji period (1868 - 1912) modernization, ikebana went into eclipse. The Meiji government, however, had early committed itself to educating women and later decided that this should be defined as training women to be "good wives and wise mothers". The government literally decreed that, as part of this character formation, ikebana, once a male art form, was from now on to be a standard part of women's education. This decision established the basis for the revival of ikebana and also, in one generation, made it pass from being a male practice to one open to women though women were forbidden almost by law to innovate in any major way. (From Sogetsu website)

Starting in the late 19th century the merchant class increased influence in society. At the same time, new schools began to appear each with its individual interpretation of shoka. The first school, Ikenobo pointed the base of the stems directly down using a komi or forked stick to hold them in place. The Koryu school placed the komi on an angle, the ends of stems were cut with a slant and propped against the side of the vessel. The Enshu school exaggerated the curves of the branches by cutting slits in them bending them and inserting triangular plugs into the slits so the branches held the desired curve.

The opening of Japan to Western influence from the beginning of the Meiji era 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. In 1897 Mr. Unshin Ohara, an Ikenobo professor in Kobe, initiated a form of ikebana done in a low bowl using some of the shorter stemmed Western flowers that had been introduced with the beginning of the Meiji Period. He asked the Ikenobo School to include this design in their curriculum. The school refused but he was so highly regarded that

they gave him permission to teach his new form in his own school “if” he could get pupils. It seems clear they doubted he could. However, his exhibition in a department store in Kobe was an immediate success and the Ohara School was on its way. Ohara called his new form moribana meaning piled up, in the sense that it was not like the upright shoka style. The moribana style became so popular that by 1915, most ikebana schools had added it into their own curriculum. Of course, it is still popular today.

Another important development during this period was the emergence of literati arrangements (bunjin-bana), which reflected the sensibilities of Chinese scholars and painters. Japanese binjin-bana arrangements had a strong influence on the nagiere 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. Originated by Issotei Mishikawa, it led the way to free creative arrangements.

The leader of the free style was Sofu Teshigahara who founded the Sogetsu School in 1926. Sofu began his study of ikebana at the age of seven in the school of his father, Wafu. He brought a new approach to ikebana and was known as the Picasso of Japanese flower arranging. After learning basics, students were free to arrange free style. Then comes abstract, objet, and avant garde. Free style is interpreted as any arrangement of good design created outside of the basic patterns established by respective schools. Abstract is an expression in form and design showing no resemblance to natural objects. Objet is a style created in metal, stone or wood rather like sculpture which may or may not use flowers. The school is considered to be avant garde, which generally defines very new trends in the modern style.

There are many, many schools of ikebana. Others in the modern movement which resulted in ikebana being placed elsewhere than the tokonoma include the founder of the Ichiyo School, Meikof Kasuya. The Ichiyō school of ikebana was founded in 1937. It was the first school to

simplify the rules of arranging for foreigners, with an English text book. The school is a modern one, and does not adhere to the traditional form of an asymmetrical triangle according to several web sites.