IKEBANA

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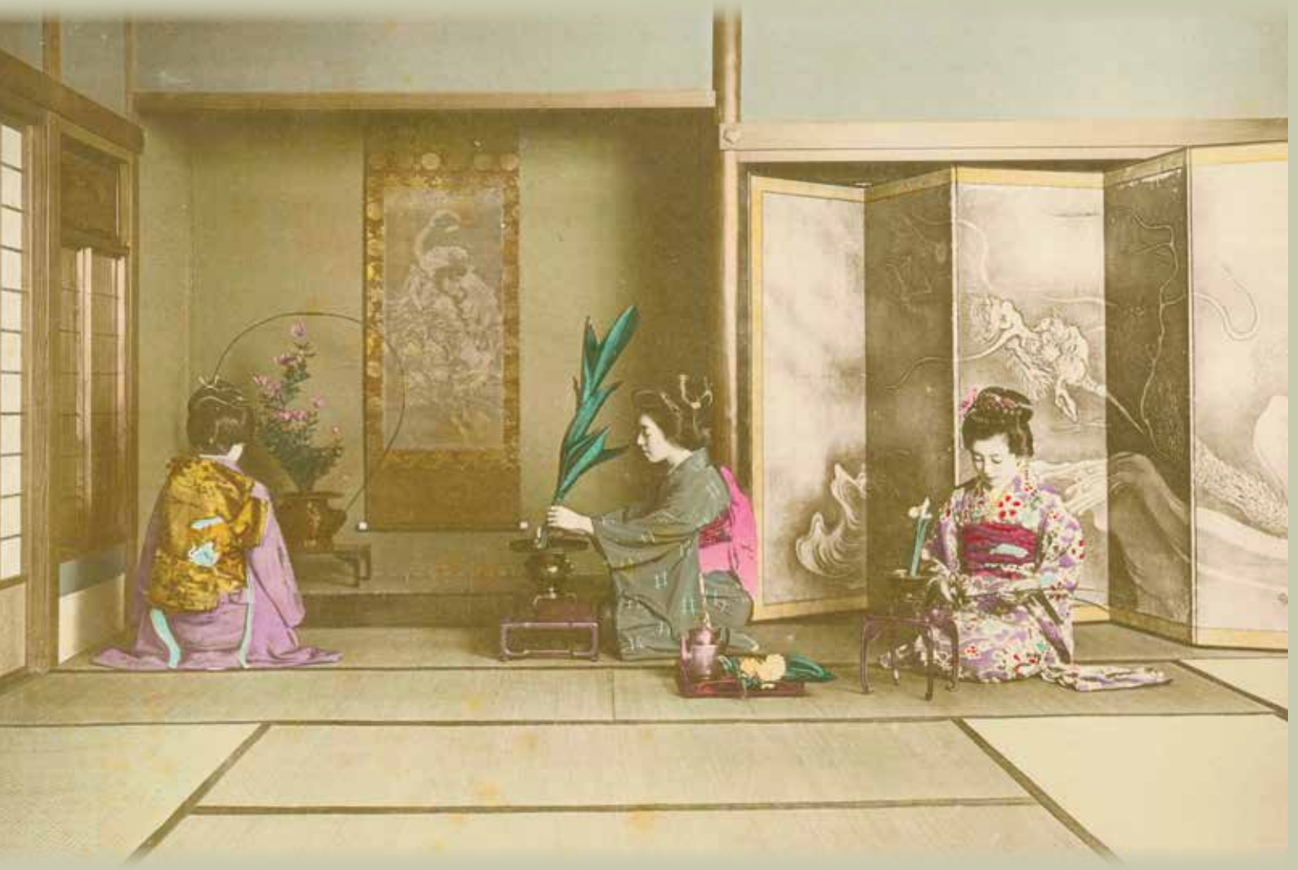

IKEBANA INVOLVES PARADOXES, THE most obvious one being that by cutting "live flowers"—the literal translation of ikebana—in order to re-create, in a vase, the setting from which one has cut them, one is actually hastening their death. Another paradox is that, although the Japanese love perfection, they also love a touch of imperfection—a crack in a vase, a well-worn gate, an irregularly thrown pot. Even in the most perfect arrangement, balance depends on three main elements rather than the four one might assume when balance is under consideration. In traditional ikebana, an even number of branches is rarely used because, while balance is valued, a certain asymmetry is also appreciated. That is, one has to achieve balance and asymmetry at the same time. When it comes to balancing branches, four is considered an unlucky number in Japan, since *shi*, the pronunciation of the word for "four," is the same as the word for "death."

Yet another paradox is that although the finished ikebana reflects the state of the practitioner—every time you place a branch, it is like a mirror showing you who you are—often the material available demands, by its shape, that it be used in a certain way; students have to subdue their own desires for the arrangement's desires and let it have its own way. So ikebana is not just about bringing nature into the home but also about creating a link between human beings and nature, a balance between desires and reality.

Doing ikebana is somewhat like construction sculpture in that elements—plant material rather than metal, wood, or stone—are assembled and then set in the desired relationships to one another. Once constructed, the inessentials of the ikebana are clipped away, just as carving sculptors chip

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away at their stone or wood to reveal an essential shape that they have seen within. Just like sculpture, ikebana is concerned with size, shape, line, texture, volume, and, perhaps most importantly, negative space. The arrangement, as in the best sculpture, goes beyond mere attractiveness, for it is concerned with the emotion that has given rise to the piece. Again, just like sculpture needs its plinth to set it off, in ikebana the vase and even the base for the vase to stand on are integral parts of the whole design. Avant-garde ikebana is actually almost indistinguishable from sculpture, since plant material is often all but eliminated in its arrangements.

Each of the many schools of ikebana has its set rules, and here is another paradox: In some strange way, the rules allow students greater freedom to be able to offer a fresh way of viewing the material and, by extension, a fresh way of viewing life. Ikebana is concerned with our relationship with nature (plant material), and through that exploration we can examine our relationship with all things.

Any material is open for use in ikebana practice, so, paradoxically, one has to learn to discriminate among the many elements available and yet be non-discriminating, in that dead or wilted plant material may be just as suitable as the freshest.

Perhaps one of the biggest paradoxes in the history of ikebana was that in the seventeenth century—the golden age of the grand style of ikebana, called *rikka*—courtiers and influential samurai showed off their wealth by the immense size of their floral arrangements at the same time that they used simple tea rooms and the *nageire* style of ikebana, which supported spiritual solace.

When the tea ceremony developed fully in the sixteenth century, the flower arrangements for the tea room were much simpler than the rikka ones. Often only one flower was used. These simple ikebana were known as *chabana* (tea room flowers) or *nageire* (thrown in a pot) because they were much more relaxed when it came to rules of design and didn't need artificial supports, as did the large branches of the rikka arrangements. The vases for *chabana*, therefore, had narrow mouths to keep the material upright. Still, while simple, much care had to be given to *chabana*, as to the choosing of just the right container for the right flower, which should be set to be viewed at just the right angle.

The Japanese culture does seem to be riddled with paradoxes. Perhaps paradox is the essence of Zen—the ability to hold and blend two opposite ideas in one's mind at the same time.

Although the rules are complex, the actual tools needed for ikebana are of the simplest: a vase, a *kenzan* (pin holders, essential in low-dish-style ikebana), shears, wire cutters, and a syringe. Even for large outdoor ikebana when a chainsaw might sometimes be used, often a pair of Japanese scissors is sufficient. Any good book on ikebana will indicate how and when the flowers should be picked and prepared before the arrangement is started, such as cutting them in the early morning or early evening when the stems are full of sap. Books will also discuss the kinds of vases for each type of arrangement and the variety of bases that can be used in order to complete the display.

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Please allow me to consider seriously the benefits of ikebana for its practitioner:

- The art of ikebana is an artistic exploration of space, proportion, line, color, and the balance of these factors.

- Ikebana originated as a way to placate the gods with floral offerings, and it has become a discipline to calm the destructive forces inside us. Ikebana, which is practiced in absolute silence, has a calming effect on the psyche. Worries have to be put aside as the arranging demands that the whole of one's being be focused during the process.

- The practice of art forms in Japan is often also a form of meditation, a way of stilling the ever-chattering mind. The state of mind achieved while practicing is as important as the art form.

- Ikebana is a way of communicating without words. One's emotions and ideas can all be conveyed by the way one chooses to do the ikebana.

- All Japanese arts are a way to give form to the formless, and ikebana certainly takes one beyond surface expression to a deeper kind of reality.

- Ikebana teaches the ephemeralness of all things, for the moment the stem is cut, the flower starts to fade.

- Working with the scents of the plant materials is a healing practice.

- Matching the arrangement to the season, one gets into the rhythm of life's cycles . . . the coming into being and the passing away. It helps one live in harmony with nature rather than at odds with it.

- As one learns the characteristics of each flower used, one develops an interest in the wonder of plant life.

- I suppose enlightenment may be the aim of some ikebana masters. Stella Coe, a pioneer of the Sogetsu school in the West, described enlightenment in this way: "It is thinking about who you are that prevents you from seeing inwardly that you are. When you see with your inward eye that you are and that the world is beginning again and again, you are enlightened." If you can sort that quote out, you will have dug to the essence of ikebana and, indeed, to the essence of all Japanese cultural disciplines.

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