



sharing arts

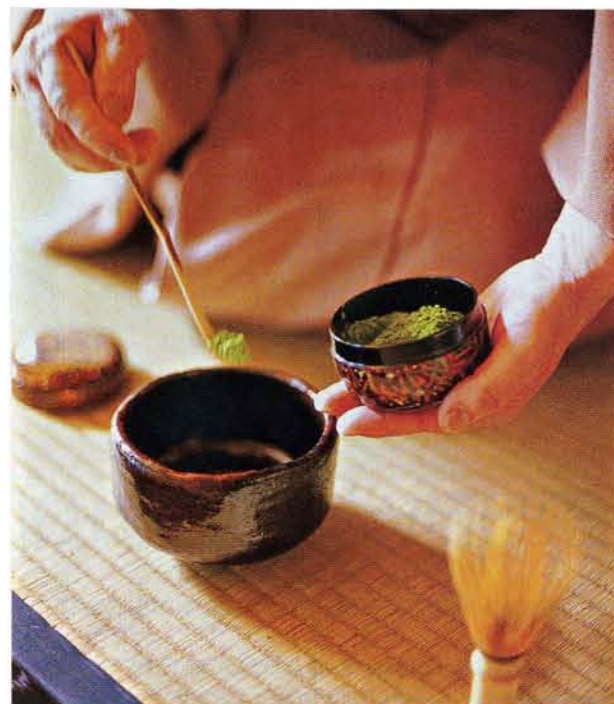
Thanks to Michi Ogawa, visitors to Japan can learn such graceful customs as flower arranging in private homes. Her successful Women's Association weds tradition to modern enterprise.

text by PAULA RICE JACKSON photographed by TOSHI OTSUKI produced by ELIETTE MARKHBEIN

AS A YOUNG WOMAN VISITING LONDON with her husband, Michi Ogawa remembers looking down from her window one morning into an exquisite English garden and thinking, "Oh, if only someone could show me how to do that kind of gardening!" Now, decades later, she has created a remarkable business based on showing visitors to her own country "how to do it." Since 1997 her Women's Association of Kyoto has been a thriving network of housewives who introduce beginners to a variety of arts considered among the glories of Japanese culture. And many of them have been sustained for centuries by women.

Whether for a day, a half-day or even an hour or two, one can experience wood-block printing, ikebana (flower arranging), the tea ceremony, traditional dance, home-style Japanese cooking, sumi painting with India ink, or calligraphy, to name only a few. One can learn just how to wear a kimono or begin to make music on a koto or samisen.

"It occurred to me that I had some very talented neighbors whose skills weren't finding an outlet; they just took



MICHI OGAWA PLAYS THE KOTO, top, a stringed instrument she began learning at age three. Middle: A long-handled spoon ladles the powerful, powdered green tea used in the tea ceremony into a bowl, where it will be whipped with hot water until frothy. Right: The ceremony's precise preparations help induce a contemplative and humble state of mind in the guests.



WOODEN DIPPERS, right, draw pure spring water to fill kettles used in the ancient tea ceremony. Below: Each tea master has her own dipper. Left: The obi, a kimono sash, is often ornately embroidered. It emphasizes the waist but also supports a woman's back when she is kneeling.



their traditional abilities for granted. They had no business training and never dreamed they were fit for business," says Mrs. Ogawa. "We started—just twelve of us—by teaching the Japanese language. I asked each one if she was willing to let me organize the fees and schedules." The town's business leaders were enthusiastic, and "soon we were really busy. Then I thought, 'Why stop there?'"

With no financial assistance from her husband (his real contribution was his tacit permission to go ahead with the project), Mrs. Ogawa's group has grown to forty teachers, some qualified as masters. And surely part of the charm of this time-honored style of hands-on learning is that it all takes place in the teachers' private homes—to which strangers in Japan are rarely invited.

Given that few tourists skip the historic temple town of Kyoto, those who sign up for courses come from many nations. But most are from the United States and Canada. "And among our teachers are many who speak English and other languages." Mrs. Ogawa sees the Women's Association of Kyoto as a person-to-person form of international exchange, a way to make friends while helping preserve the ancient, contemplative arts in fast-paced modern Japan.

Perhaps closest to her heart is that her venture creates "new respect for the initiative of women." Indeed, her own initiative has inspired Japanese women in other areas of the country, "and some foreigners have told me they'd like to introduce the idea to their countries. Which is wonderful," she says. "It's about sharing."

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THOUGH MANY visitors to Japan are tempted to purchase a gorgeous obi, there is an art to tying it correctly for wearing—almost impossible to do by oneself, owing to its weight and the precision required to do the back folds.