

Meimei-an Teahouse

Meimei-an (Bright Clear Retreat) is an exquisite teahouse (*chashitsu*) built in 1779, designed by Matsudaira Harusato (1751–1818), the seventh Matsudaira lord of the Matsue domain. Harusato was a renowned tea master and student of Zen Buddhism, and was known as Fumai. The teahouse, its garden, the tea implements that have been handed down over generations, and the sweets served here all embody the subtle, unconventional sensibility of the tea-ceremony school that he founded, which is known as Fumai-ryu.

Object of Desire

Meimei-an has a convoluted history, largely due to its aesthetic value and desirability and the ease with which it could be dismantled and moved. Originally constructed on the grounds of the main residence of the Arisawa family near Matsue Castle, it was dismantled after a few generations and brought to the residence of Count Matsubara Shinnosuke (1853–1916) in Harajuku, Tokyo. It was moved again, to the property of Count Matsudaira Naoyuki (1861–1932) in the Yotsuya area in Tokyo, and then to a hill on the outskirts of Matsue in 1928. It gradually fell into disrepair after World War II, but thanks to local support, it was restored at its current location on Matsue's Akayama Hill in 1966, 150 years after the death of Fumai.

The Intimacy of Teahouse Design

The interior design of Meimei-an centers on a two-mat (*nijodaime*) tearoom, an extremely intimate size. It is entered from the outside through a small hatchway called a *nijiriguchi*, which requires crawling in humbly on hands and knees. A hanging rack for swords was nearby, as even the most high-ranking lords were required to enter the teahouse without weapons. Small windows covered with translucent paper screens (*shoji*) are set at various heights, and can be adjusted to suffuse the room with gentle light. A simple raised tokonoma alcove displays hanging scrolls of calligraphy or paintings, as well as flower arrangements or decorative objects. It is framed by a small post of pine from which the bark has been partly removed, increasing the aura of rusticity. One of Fumai's teahouse innovations was to eliminate the column called a *nakabashira*, which functioned as a design accent that articulated the tiny space, separating the host's seat from those of his guests. Without it, the space is simpler, and host and guests are brought physically and mentally closer.

A small preparation room called the *mizuya* (water room) adjoins the tearoom, with simple shelves and storage space for utensils. A low sliding panel connecting the two spaces allows the host of the ceremony to easily reach implements prepared inside the *mizuya* to bring them into the tearoom. A larger sheltered entrance and waiting room on the opposite side of the teahouse, intended for the use of high-ranking guests, can be entered normally. This room, which has its own *mizuya*, can also be used for larger tea ceremonies. A small third entrance at the very rear is intended for assistants and others involved in preparing for the tea ceremony.

The Humility of the Exterior Design

Meimei-an has a high, gabled roof of thatch, a feature known as Fumai-konomi (Fumai style). Its design and construction closely mimic those of a farmhouse, conveying associations of poverty and humility, while the steep slope of the roof is a practical measure to prevent snow from accumulating during the heavy winter snowfalls of the region. A faded wooden tablet inscribed with the characters “Meimei-an” is sheltered by the deep gable recess. The teahouse is set in a small inner garden paved with gravel, with a path of rhythmically placed stepping stones of various sizes, shapes, and colors. Trees around the perimeter give a sense of shelter and separation from the surrounding environment. A small roofed pavilion serves as a gate to the inner garden and contains a bench where guests wait to be called into the teahouse, as well as a decorative toilet. This toilet is symbolic of cleanliness and hospitality, and was never intended to be used.

The expansive outer garden is designed in Izumo-landscape style, with a surface of raked white gravel and a pathway of large stepping stones. A screen-like line of trees and carefully pruned shrubs, which together evoke a mountain landscape, separates this space from the inner garden and obscures the view of all but a corner of the teahouse roof. Another large gravel-paved garden in front of the neighboring Akayama Sado Kaikan offers a prized view of Matsue castle.