

Jo-an

The creation of Jo-an is considered Oda Uraku's pinnacle achievement, and its design expresses both his personal tea aesthetic and his individuality of spirit. In many ways, Jo-an's design is a departure from the conventions of tea house architecture laid down by tea masters like Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591). But in spite of this (or perhaps because of it), Jo-an was considered a masterwork. The acclaimed artist Ogata Kōrin (1658–1716) so admired the tea house that he commissioned a copy for himself, which is now at Ninnaji Temple in Kyoto. It is said that Jo-an has been replicated more often than any other tea house in the world.

Early History

After Uraku's death in 1621, his estate ultimately passed into the care of Kenninji Temple. The temple maintained the estate through donations until 1872, when the new Meiji government took measures to decrease the power and influence of Buddhist institutions across the country. The temple's land and other holdings were forcibly auctioned off, and ownership of Uraku's residential complex—including the Shōdenin Shoin, Jo-an, and its attached tea garden (*roji*)—was transferred to Kyoto's Gion district. The complex was renamed “Urakukan” (literally, “Uraku Hall”), and its buildings were used for various purposes, such as processing tea leaves. In 1908, the district sold off the buildings to various buyers from different parts of the country. One of those buyers was a man named Mitsui Takamine.

The Mitsui Family

Mitsui Takamine (1857–1948) was the tenth-generation head of the lead branch of the Mitsui family, one of the most prominent and wealthy merchant families of the late nineteenth century. Mitsui was a lifelong student of tea and a connoisseur of traditional architecture. He purchased the Shōdenin Shoin along with Jo-an and its tea garden, and in 1908 he had them moved to his residence in the Azabu neighborhood of Tokyo. In 1938, Mitsui decided to retire to the family villa at Ōiso, in Kanagawa Prefecture, and he had the structures moved there. Mitsui wished to devote more of his time to the study of tea during retirement, and he was worried about the ever-present danger of fire amid the densely clustered neighborhoods of Tokyo. Thanks to him, the buildings were no longer in Tokyo when the city was leveled by firebombing during World War II.

The Move to Inuyama

In 1951, not long after Mitsui Takamine's death, Jo-an was designated a National Treasure. In 1969, Meitetsu (Nagoya Railroad Company, Ltd.) acquired rights to the Mitsui family's Ōiso estate along with many of the structures and artifacts there. This set the stage for the creation of Urakuen.

The preparations to move Jo-an to Inuyama began in early 1971. First, the building was closely studied. Its walls and supports were X-rayed to determine their condition—an innovative technique at the time. As disassembly began, careful drawings and measurements were taken, and the pieces were numbered. Each piece was wrapped in padding and waterproof coverings, and the entryway section (the earthen vestibule and its surrounding walls) was then set inside a timber framework for further structural support. Workers loaded the sections onto large trucks equipped with vibration-dampening devices. At 1:30 a.m. on March 31, 1971, Jo-an departed Ōiso with NHK reporters in tow.

The journey had one notable incident: at a highway toll gate along the way, one of the trucks was stopped because the top of its cargo had very slightly grazed the clearance barrier. No harm was done to the tea house, but the toll gate employee refused to let the truck through until one frustrated Meitetsu employee finally persuaded him.

Reconstruction and Restoration

Jo-an arrived safely in Inuyama, and restorers began the work of reassembling it. Some repairs to the tea house were necessary, primarily due to water damage from roof leaks, but great effort went into preserving the original building. Damaged structural components, like the partially rotted support posts, were reinforced with synthetic resin that was textured and painted to look like wood. Anything that had to be replaced, such as the roof's shingles, was remade using the same methods and materials as the original.

Restorers took the opportunity to undo changes that had been made to Jo-an over the years. In contrast to how the buildings had been positioned at Ōiso, Jo-an and the Shōdenin Shoin were rejoined in accordance with historical accounts of how they had been arranged at Uraku's Kyoto residence. At Ōiso, the buildings had been connected by an exterior walkway that extended from the southeast corner of the Shoin. At Urakuen, workers removed this walkway and positioned the buildings close enough that Jo-an could be entered directly from the veranda of the Shoin.

Architectural Features

Guests attending a tea gathering at Jo-an would enter from the covered vestibule on the building's southwest side. Before entering, samurai would remove their long swords and

place them on a rack in the alcove behind the papered sliding doors. All guests would remove their footwear and crawl through the small, low entrance (*nijiriguchi*) into a narrow room. Jo-an's main room has only 3.5 tatami mats of floor space (about 6.2 m²). This is larger than the two-mat rooms Sen no Rikyū is said to have favored, but still within the limit of 4.5 mats that defines a "small" tea room (*koma*). Uraku's emphasis on the comfort of the guests can be seen in the more spacious design of his tea houses.

Uraku also preferred tea rooms to be comparatively well lit. To this end, Jo-an has a hinged panel in the roof that can be propped open like a skylight. It also has two windows on the eastern wall called *urakumado*, or "Uraku windows," that are unique to Jo-an. The windows have square, semi-translucent panels made of thin, vertical bamboo branches that are closely spaced together. When the windows are open, light enters through the space between the branches, and sliding the paper shoji closed produces an elegant shadow effect on the paper.

Another type of window can be seen on the front wall and opposite the low *nijiriguchi* entrance. These are *shitajimado*, meaning "understructure windows." These windows are made by leaving a section of the wall unplastered, exposing the bamboo-and-reed lattice underneath.

One highly unusual feature of Jo-an's decoration is not visible from the outside. The bottom third of the tea house's walls are papered in old calendars, some of which date back as far as 1629. This decorative technique, called *koyomibari*, is intended to evoke the rustic simplicity of a hermitage, where common objects are repurposed and nothing is wasted.