

## Building a Hermit's Retreat: Tea Houses and *Roji*

### Wabi-cha: An Aesthetic of Simplicity

In the sixteenth century, Japan's most powerful elite began to use the narrow, rustic confines of tea houses to meet with fellow warlords and broker alliances. Men who could afford every luxury crawled through low doorways and sat around tiny hearths inside rooms built to resemble the crude huts of woodland hermits. These powerful leaders were pursuing an aesthetic called *wabi-cha*.

Until the sixteenth century, the ritualized drinking of tea was mainly practiced by priests, aristocrats, and high-ranking samurai. Tea gatherings were held in the luxurious reception rooms of high-class residences or in temple halls, and the preference was for ornate tea utensils imported from China. *Wabi-cha*, however, emphasized simplicity and austere refinement—humble craftsmanship using plain materials and minimal ornamentation.

The movement first arose with a priest named Murata Jukō (1423–1502), whose ideas were adopted by the wealthy Osaka merchant Takeno Jō-ō (1502–1555) and passed on to his student, Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591), who would go on to become one of the most influential tea masters in history. Perhaps through Rikyū's powerful samurai patrons, the popularity of *wabi-cha* spread to the samurai class and today it is the dominant aesthetic in the practice of tea.

### Tea Houses: Rikyū's Ideal

Rikyū and other tea masters believed that a tea house should evoke the atmosphere of a cottage in the mountains. For this reason, the suffix *-an* (庵), meaning “retreat” or “hermitage,” is used in the names of many tea houses. Rikyū favored a design concept called *yamazato*, or “mountain hamlet.” To replicate this rustic setting, Rikyū created tea gardens that would surround his tea houses, integrating the two as a single conceptual space.

Rikyū's ideal tea house was a tiny, free-standing hut. Guests entered by crawling through a small, square opening. Inside, the low-ceilinged room was unfurnished and minimally decorated. The entire structure was made of largely unprocessed natural materials, and the roof was humble thatch.

The garden, too, played a role in Rikyū's aesthetic vision. He believed that detached tea houses should have a *roji*—a small garden with a path of stepping stones. Before the start of a tea gathering, which in formal settings would follow a multicourse *kaiseki* meal, guests would assemble in the outer area of the garden beneath a covered waiting

area called a *machiai*. Once it was announced that the host was ready to begin (often with the sound of a gong or another signal), the guests would approach the tea house along the *roji* path. The path typically led past a washbasin (*tsukubai*) where they would stop and rinse their hands.

### Uraku's Tea Houses

As a student of Rikyū, Uraku was influenced by his mentor's preference for *wabi-cha* and small, detached tea houses. On the other hand, Uraku's style retains some of the hints of luxury that are associated with tea styles practiced by samurai. In addition to being larger than many of Rikyū's tea houses, Jo-an and Gen-an are roofed with shingles, not thatch. Inside, the tokonoma alcoves of both tea houses have black-lacquered framing that Rikyū would have considered too ornate.

### Jo-an's *Roji*

The stepping stones, washbasin, well cover, stone lanterns, and other substantive parts of the *roji* were sold to the Mitsui family together with Jo-an in 1908. Architect Horiguchi Sutemi used a 1799 illustration of the Shōdenin complex to reconstruct the position of each element. He also planted black pines and Japanese maples to match trees shown in the drawing.

The round well cover in the southwestern corner was made as an homage to one owned by *wabi-cha* progenitor Murata Jukō (also known as “Shukō”). Uraku greatly admired Jukō, and he had helped to restore Jukō's original well cover; afterward, he created a replica for his own garden and inscribed it “1615, ninth month, second day, Uraku.”

Another notable object in the *roji* at Jo-an is the stone *tsukubai*, or washbasin, which is named Fuzankai—the Japanese name for the Sea of Busan. The name comes from the stone's origin, the coast of Busan (southern South Korea). In 1592, when Toyotomi Hideyoshi's forces invaded Korea, the unusual stone was brought back and given to Hideyoshi, who then gave it to Uraku. The central hollow in the stone was formed naturally by waves, making it an ideal washbasin in the *wabi-cha* aesthetic.

### Gen-an's *Roji*

The *roji* at Gen-an was reconstructed based on a diagram from the mid-Edo period (1603–1867). It has a covered waiting area (*machiai*) south of the tea house. From there, stepping stones lead to a small, cubic washbasin. According to the diagram, the original washbasin was carved with images of the Buddha on each side. Washbasins of this type

were called “four-sided Buddha washbasins” (*yohō-butsu-chōzubachi*) and were made from the bases of disassembled stone pagodas. Horiguchi was unable to find a suitable washbasin of this type for Gen-an, so he chose one that was simply cube-shaped. He also surrounded the basin with small oak trees and nandina, as it was in Uraku’s day.

Please note: In some areas of the garden, pathways may be blocked by rocks tied with black rope. These are *tome-ishi* (“stop stones”), and they indicate that the area beyond is off-limits to visitors.