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The Art of Ikebana

See a masterful demonstration of the centuries-old art of Japanese flower arranging

An Ohara *ikebana* demonstration is a cultural experience. It is performance art where the medium is flowers and plants. It is contemporary art where the lines and forms of minimalism are shaped by an acute understanding of and reverence for nature. Moreover, it is traditional art honed by centuries of spiritual meaning and created in an atmosphere of respectful quiet and calm.

On September 14, the Womens Council of the Cleveland Museum of Art, in collaboration with the North American Ohara Teachers Association and the Northern Ohio Chapter of Ikebana, presents one of the leading artists of the Ohara School of Ikebana, Professor Ko Morishita, vice president of the Council of Professors. Assisted by Associate Professor Akihiro Nishi, he will create arrangements that demonstrate how this evolving form has expanded its scope from traditional art into the realm of environmental art. Wakako Ohara, chief executive of the Ohara School, will interpret the creative process on stage, so that admirers of Japanese culture and ikebana can deepen their understanding of both.



Autumnal Arrangement An ikebana creation

Ikebana, which is at least six centuries old, developed from the Buddhist ritual of offering flowers to the spirits of the dead. By the middle of the 15th century, with the emergence of the first classical styles, ikebana achieved the status of an art form independent of its religious origins, though it continued to retain strong symbolic and philosophical overtones. The first teachers and students were priests and members of nobility, but as time passed many schools arose, styles changed, and ikebana came to be practiced at all levels of Japanese society.

The varying forms of ikebana share certain common features, regardless of the period or school. Any plant material—flowers, branches, leaves, grasses, mosses, fruits—may be used. Withered leaves, seedpods, and buds are valued as highly as flowers in full bloom. While a work may be composed of only one or of many different kinds of materials, the selection of each element demands an experienced eye, and the arrangement requires considerable technical skill in order to create a kind of beauty that cannot be found in nature.

What distinguishes ikebana from simpler decorative approaches are its asymmetrical form and use of empty space as an essential feature of the composition. A sense of harmony among the materials, the container, and the setting is also crucial. Ikebana shares these characteristics of the Japanese aesthetic feeling with traditional painting, gardens, architecture, and design.

The natural setting of Japan, a nation of islands and mountains, provides inspiration for the traditional Japanese arts. Much of the land is covered with dense green forests and laced with rivers, ponds, and lakes. The changing pageantry of the four seasons, each with its own distinctive beauty, finds perfect expression in the art of ikebana. The ancient Japanese believed that deities dwelled in nature, in flowers, trees, stones, rain, and wind. Early records show that flowers and plants played an important role in religious rituals and festivals.

Based on the Buddhist triad image of a large central Buddha flanked by two smaller ones, floral offerings consisted of three stems tied tightly together at the bottom and rising out of water. Eventually a three-branch, asymmetrical scalene triangle became the basic form



Paulownias and Chrysanthemums (detail), late 1700s–early 1800s. Sakai Hoitsu (Japanese, 1761–1828). Two-fold screen; ink and color on gilded paper; 152.7 x 154.9 cm. Gift of the American Foundation for the Maud E. and Warren H. Corning Botanical Collection 1964.386

that underlies the styles of most of the schools of ikebana. Buddhists viewed the flowers' beauty as less important than the symbolism of the virtues assigned to specific flowers and branches. In the museum's gilded paper screen *Paulownias and Chrysanthemums,* the paulownia branch symbolizes nobility, the chrysanthemums simplicity.

During the Muromachi period (1392–1573), Buddhist priests were Japan's intellectual and artistic leaders. This era marked the beginnings of the classical traditional culture that includes ikebana, the tea ceremony, Noh drama, and landscape gardening. The earliest form of ikebana, called *tatebana* ("rising flowers"), was developed by the priest Ikenobo Senkei as part of the decoration for a new style of architecture favored by court nobles. The *tokonoma,* or alcove, evolved from a quasi-religious space to a secular space for the display of aesthetic objects, including ikebana. Great care was taken to place flowers in beautiful containers in harmony with painted scrolls and other art objects.

During the Edo period (1600–1867), ikebana developed into different styles relating to the various influences of the day, notably Confucianism and the Chinese literati. A number of schools of ikebana formed, each with individual headmasters. Beginning in the mid 19th century, Japan opened its doors to the outside world. American and European culture flooded the country, strongly influencing ikebana. New floral materials, species of flowers and plants never seen before in Japan, became available in quantity. The time was ripe for the development of new forms of ikebana. A bold innovator of that time was a man named Unshin Ohara, one of the pioneers of the form called *moribana* ("piled-up flowers"). He introduced the concept of arranging materials over a horizontal plane in a low, wide container called a *suiban*—and thus modern ikebana was born. The Ohara School of Ikebana was officially founded in 1912.

The school's second headmaster, Koun Ohara, further promoted the Ohara School to a broad audience by mounting demonstrations and exhibitions in department stores and other public places. He developed innovative practices such as standing behind a table to create an arrangement in full view of an audience—a practice that will be seen in the upcoming lecture demonstration at the museum.

Ikebana expanded globally after World War II. Third headmaster Houn Ohara systematized the educational organization by forming study groups and chapters throughout the world. Ikebana became a household word, and Clevelanders were at the forefront of this new exposure. The museum's collection of Japanese art inspired the growing number of those interested in ikebana flower arranging. Demonstrations featuring high-ranking ikebana artists were planned for the public to learn from and enjoy. In 1980, Houn Ohara's son, Natsuki, posthumously named the Ohara School's fourth headmaster, performed a demonstration at the museum's Gartner Auditorium. In 1989, Professor Kazuhiko Kudo of the school was invited to give a demonstration as a Womens Council benefit to raise seed money for its Flower Fund Endowment. Under the leadership of the late Jo Talbott with Ingrid Luders, a grand master of the Ohara School of Ikebana, this event raised the funds needed to provide fresh flower arrangements every week in the north lobby.

This September's lecture demonstration is not only a rare opportunity to experience the creative process by Japanese masters of this art form, but will again benefit the Flower Fund Endowment. Moribana arrangements will depict the natural beauty of landscapes and the beauty of color and plant forms. Ikebana cognoscenti will recognize traditional forms, such as *bunjin, heika,* and *rimpa,* as well as newly created *hana-kanade,* a contemporary design by the school's present headmaster, Hiroki Ohara. Each arrangement will emphasize the use of seasonal materials, some selected from local gardens.

In anticipation of the museum's 2013 reopening of the Asian collection in the west wing, the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Womens Council are honored to present this cultural experience to the Cleveland community. It will serve to renew our appreciation of the noble simplicity of Japanese culture and art forms. And the funds raised from this special event will continue to underwrite the visually stunning arrangements in the north lobby that provide a special welcome to museum visitors.

IKEBANA
Friday, September 14, 5:00–7:00, Gartner Auditorium. A lecture demonstration to raise funds for the Flower Fund Endowment. Tickets available August 14.