

Lesson for Intermediate and Advanced Learners

Shoka

Work and commentary :
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[Lesson 87]

Senjo Shoka and Shoka Shofutai

The 40th Headmaster Ikenobo Senjo was known as a painter and poet, besides his career as an ikebana expert. From childhood he took painting lessons from the painter Ganku, and developed expert knowledge of *renga* (linked verse) and *waka* (31-syllable Japanese poems). He is said to have treated a flower as if painting a picture and created a work as if composing a poem. Among his great achievements are establishing the structures of *shoka* and introducing one hundred simple and distinct *shoka* arrangements in his anthology “*Soka Hyakki*.”

During the Kansei Era (1789-1800), Headmaster Senjo established the basic structure of *shoka* as composing “*shin, soe* and *nejime*.” He states, “A *shoka* work should be composed in line with the principles of *in-yo* (yin-yang) and *hyo-ri* (inside-outside). A work must be composed of *shin, soe, nejime* and water, in which, *shin, soe* and *nejime*, respectively, represent *jin* (man), *ten* (heaven) and *chi* (earth).” Headmaster Senjo continued reforming *rikka* and studying *shoka* until yielding his positions as Ikenobo Headmaster and as chief priest of Chohoji Temple to his younger brother Ikenobo Semmyo in 1815. Five years later, in 1820, he published his anthology “*Soka Hyakki*.”

The anthology contains illustrations of a hundred *shoka* works composed using plants of all seasons that were selected by Headmaster Senjo himself and then drawn by the painters Matsumura Keibun and Yokoyama Seiki. Their drawings detail the *shoka* works composed by Headmaster Senjo and convey his philosophy of *shoka* creation. Every one of the elegant and dignified works contained in the anthology serves as a model for succeeding generations.

The works contained in “*Soka Hyakki*” are composed with

balance between *ten, chi*, and *jin* in mind. Yet, the Headmaster does things such as intentionally arranging some branches taller than prescribed to enhance the appeal of the plant or omitting a particular branch to create blank space that adds strong impression to the work. He also pays due attention to the balance between the plants and the vase. These works embody the teaching in *densho* (book of flower traditions), that reads, “If a single flower is arranged as beautifully as multiple flowers, a work with fewer flowers appears to have been given deeper thought.” Flexibility beyond the prescribed constraints is carried through the anthology.

In the Meiji Era (1868-1912), during the tenure of the 42nd Headmaster Ikenobo Sensho, circumstances surrounding *shoka* study changed markedly. Ikebana study was no longer the privilege of a limited social class, but anyone who wish could learn it. To prove this, ikebana was officially adopted as a subject taught at girls’ schools across the nation, resulting in young women becoming a plurality of ikebana learners. These increased the number of ikebana learners, and it became necessary to systemize *shoka*’s floral patterns. Moreover, the purpose of study was focused less on developing ikebana skills than on cultivating elegant manners and etiquette as well as on developing cultural refinement via the study of ikebana.

The term “*shofutai*” indicates the ikebana style that is formal and elegant. Looking back, each of the successive Ikenobo headmasters created *shofutai* works according to their own taste. Aiming to create models for *shoka* beginners, Headmaster Sensho organized the subtle and profound beauty of *shoka* floral patterns, indescribable in form or words, establishing basic patterns. This is the perfection of “*shoka shofutai*,” an ikebana style that is fundamentally elegant and gentle. Although there are forms to follow, the principle behind all arrangements of *shoka shofutai* is to convey the vigor of plants. Thus, structures vary depending on the *shussho* (intrinsic, specific properties) of the plants used.

The sample work employs the technique of *soe-hazushi* (a technique introduced in the *densho* “*Shoka Betsuden*”). This technique eliminates the *soe* branch, leaving a work structured with two elements representing *in* (yin) and *yo* (yang).