



DESIGN WITHOUT BORDERS: THE JAPANESE EXHIBITION

By Ronald Naversen

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DESIGNS

without



PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR



The Japanese Exhibition

By Ronald Naversen

Japanese student delegate assembles geodesic chopstick tower. Ink drops from IV bottle intermix with visitors' messages and handprints in the sand garden box.

Model for a Kabuki play.



Mitsuru Ishii's model for *Yojimbo*.

My best friend, while growing up, was a Japanese American whose companionship immeasurably enriched my life through exposure to the foods, arts, traditions, and ceremonies of Japanese culture. Many years later I had the opportunity to explore the Japanese way of life further when I taught, directed, and designed at a Japanese university. As a result of these past experiences I have always looked forward to visiting the Japanese Exhibition at the Prague Quadrennial to see what aspect of their culture they choose to reveal. The Japanese exhibit at the first PQ I attended displayed the virtuosity of their technical ingenuity with multi-media video and slide presentations. Their next exhibition was a multi-story confusion of models, renderings, and costumes mirroring the controlled chaos of life in their great cities. In a calculated response to that seeming chaos, the following exhibition was an eloquently simple Zen garden with a fountain of black marble stones surrounded by model stands made of natural pine, lacquered framed designs and photos mounted on rice paper panels. This year, in keeping with the PQ's "Labyrinth of the World" theme, the Japanese constructed a series of black metal frames attached to rolling wagons on which wood panels were mounted and decorated with large brush-worked calligraphy. In the center was a free-form geodesic tower made of chopsticks glued into triangles and bound to each other with small rubber bands. At their opening ceremony the Japanese student delegation passed out more triangles, which we helped link to the surrounding metal frames. At the top of this structure was an IV bag filled with calligraphy ink, which slowly dripped black ink down the frame staining the chopstick construction and creating random patterns in the white sand in a box below.

Their opening ceremony included the traditional toast of sake, a demonstration of their formal Tea Ceremony, an avant garde Butoh dancer dressed in "Salary Man" clothes (the plain white shirt, black suit, and narrow tie worn by Japanese office workers), as well as a competition of

B O R D E R S



Geodesic chopsticks tower above Japanese exhibit.

“rocks, paper, scissors” for “omiagi” or presents for the visitors that were purchased at one of their “100 Yen” shops (similar to our dollar stores).

The twelve exhibited designers were selected because of their international collaborations and interest in synthesizing foreign influences and materials with their native style. The designs displayed were in themselves a metaphor of the labyrinth that comes from the blending of foreign textures, materials, and styles. Kimonos for the production of *Nijuniya-machi* or *The Vigil of the Twentysecond Night* were adorned with brightly colored feathered boa collars, cut velvet sleeves, western styled patchwork quilts of Japanese fabrics and rough macramé embroidery. The set models and renderings also reflected a fusion of Japanese, European and American styles and techniques. Mitsuru Ishii's Bunraku and live actor production of *Yojinbo* included numerous small sets on wagons that shift in and out like a formula Broadway musical. The exhibit brochure appeals “once again that the theatre arts can transcend the borders of countries” and that the conflicts of our contemporary society may be mitigated through a blending of styles and techniques that transcend the “borderlines” of “racism and nationality.” Japan is arguably the country that has been most successful at assimilating foreign influences into their culture without losing sight of their native traditions and style. Perhaps this is a lesson the rest of the world can learn from them.

While the Japanese exhibit clearly offered further insights into their culture, it also confirmed the difficulties each country is experiencing in this increasingly global society. While the exhibitions were filled with excellent examples of design and craftsmanship, most national exhibits were considerably smaller and more restrained in their conception and presentation than in previous Quadrennials. In this way the PQ as a whole may be viewed as a microcosm of our current world Zeitgeist. ❖

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Butoh dancer dressed as “Salary Man.”

Exhibit coordinator Mitsuru Ishii hands out “omiagi” presents.



Masako Morita's westernized Kimonos for *The Vigil of the Twenty-second Night*.

blended styles