

**Ronne Hartfield**

Director of Museum Education,  
Art Institute of Chicago

Chicago, Illinois

It was Saturday evening, seven days since I had left Chicago for Tokyo and entered another world. We arrived in Kanazawa, amidst the justly fabled snowfall that westerners have seen imaged in Hokusai prints. These were amazing snowflakes—five times as dense as their Chicago counterparts, falling from a dark sky in straight unremitting lines to cover the sculptured branches and black tile roofs of Kanazawa. This city was not bombed during World War II, we were told, and the small, orderly houses conveyed a little of what Japan was like in the pre-Toyota, pre-Toshiba age. This was to be our first vision of that world, and we talked a lot about the confluence of old and new in modern Japan.

The next morning we spent some time in Kenrokuen Garden, one of the most famous public gardens in this part of the world. We learned of its samurai history, beginning with Lord Maeda: We learned of the philosophical and aesthetic principles informing the structure of the garden, and of the importance of the small bridge; we viewed, with some wonder, the elaborate and elegant manner of tying tree branches to preserve them from the weight of the fabled Kanazawa snow; and walking in the late January chill, we saw ahead of us a cache of plum trees, already showing their purple/pink blooming. We were astonished.

For me, this seminal experience in snowy Kanazawa serves as a powerful metaphor. Our experience in Japan presented us with an intensive introduction to the cultural situation, present and historical, of Japanese women leaders. It also presented us, intermittently but insistently, with radical challenges to a tendency to formulate facile assumptions.

My overall—and very preliminary—summary statements about the trip reside within that framework. From the moment we entered the Akasaka Tokyu Hotel, everything reflected the storied Japanese efficiency. Lost bags were retrieved within minutes, and accommodations were wonderful—much more modern than I anticipated, including a television set with innumerable translation capabilities. The room was equipped with a small refrigerator that included Coca Cola as well as Japanese drinks, and, of course, a lovely tea service.

Our morning meeting was one astonishment after another, as I met not only our impressive American delegation, but an assortment of Japanese women leaders,

all of whom seemed to me extremely smart, poised, knowledgeable, and overwhelmingly impressive. I characterize them, without negative overtones, as a sort of Asian *Überfrau*. Some things that were surprising were the number of them who had gone to US colleges and universities and their accompanying capability for speaking and understanding English.

Immediately it became apparent that the women knew and appreciated their own talents, but were culturally conditioned to make room for the males of the group. The male journalist presented an interesting counterpoint to the women, and made visible a certain inherent tension that I only began to understand later. By the time we left Tokyo, I understood the sharp corner being turned by these women, who were not only bright, but vocal, formerly not a necessarily admirable characteristic in their society. Nonetheless, speaker after speaker was highly articulate, competent, and self-assured. What emerged fairly quickly was the personal empowerment of these women, rooted in a sort of triumph over cultural obstacles. What accompanied that, however, seemed to be a lack of group gestalt. I think we are fortunate in the United States in that our women's movement was built on the shoulders of rap groups—women's talk-cells—which allowed us a welcomed mutual network and a means of contextualizing ourselves within a larger social movement. I think this is one area in which we have some models to offer the Japanese.

As we moved to Yokohama, with its state-of-the-art women's center, a more highly articulated centrality of women's purposefulness was evident. It was in Yokohama that we learned of some of the problems of the new Japan, with its rapidly diminishing birth rates; little present planning for an aging population; few structures for elderly caretaking or for adequate childcare; severe space shortages/housing shortages/growth problems. All of these seemed to us problems of a perhaps too-rapid cultural change. It was here that we first heard about "internationalization," a term that appeared and reappeared many times in different translations. It seemed that these women were anxious to take their place on the global scene, but perhaps ambivalent about how much westernization they were willing to adopt in order to do so.

It was also in Yokohama that we had the opportunity to listen to some women activists very much involved in community development. They seemed to us not terribly unlike their American counterparts. However, when we visited the soap factory, with its cooperative community of women entrepreneurs, we were entirely impressed. Here were women operating at the grassroots, in a culture with little or no historic referent for such activity, and operating with a thriving capability and a powerful sense of their importance as initiators with a present and potential impact in society.

In Fukuoka, a trip to the 21st century, state-of-the-art museum synthesized old and new Japan. The museum exhibited ancient artifacts and artworks in a pristine, high-tech environment. This city, so close geographically to Korea, illumined close

interchange between the two countries. It also afforded us a beautiful seaside lunch/reverie in contrast to the thriving industrial city center.

In Kanazawa, we had the opportunity to extend our dialogue with women who are operating at the grassroots. It was here that we met, for example, a local volunteer woman who runs "tea times" in her home, providing a regular space for women to come together to discuss their own lives, the society, and frequently to initiate social action. Their interest in two areas, the environment and translation, held particular excitement for our delegation. It was here that I first became powerfully aware of the importance of translation in allowing these women access to the thought and experience of women in the west.

Also in Kanazawa, we had the opportunity to visit an elementary school and a daycare center, introducing us to the deep concern of these women for children. One of the most fascinating models was the Zenrinkan, a senior citizens' daycare center occupying the same space with a childrens' daycare center, with significant interchange between the generations. We were completely impressed with this idea, and would like to see it extended to the United States. We were amazed by the outpouring of volunteer effort in Japan, particularly in Kanazawa. The United States has adopted, sometimes to our own detriment, a posture that meaningful work should be remunerated by a salary or fee for service. Observing the quiet commitment and deep gratification of the volunteers in Japan, one must call this notion into question. Also in Kanazawa I had one of the most exceptional experiences of the entire trip. The visit to the Ohi home and studio, with all of us clumsy Americans shaping our individual tea bowls, is an unforgettable memory. As a museum person, I treasured this excursion into the Japanese idea of art, with its particular dimension of value in that culture.

Finally, we welcomed our wrap-up workshop back in Tokyo, with the opportunity to share with representatives from other parts of the trip. We also welcomed the opportunity to share our own experiences, and I think all of us felt a tremendous degree of energy and excitement that developed throughout the day. It seemed to us that we had much to share with one another from our own experience in struggling with problems of the longer versus shorter school day; quality daycare in a context of long working hours and long commutes; care for aging parents; and other family-related issues. The United States perhaps places some less profound expectation on its women in these areas and allows more sharing and responsibility on the part of men. Perhaps the Japanese have something to learn from us in these arenas. On the other hand, their sharp awareness of the rapidly polluted planet and the need for radical changes in the way we live offers us a revelation which is only dimly perceived in our country at most levels. It seemed to me very interesting that on entering Japan I brought with me a really quite pervasive US admiration for Japan, for its technological marvelousness, for its concern for its elders, for its lack of urban problems such as drugs, homelessness, and street crime. The Japanese women we met were not so aware of that admiration

across the ocean. On the other hand, we were not so aware, I think, of their own respect and idealization of the freedom that characterizes American society. It seemed to me that they were perhaps more aware of the freedom than of some of the costs that accompany those liberties.

In conclusion, it is clear that this kind of exchange teaches all of us important lessons and opens further possibilities for long-term dialogue and exchange of ideas. It was a marvelously illuminating experience, and one for which I am singularly grateful. I will not forget the plum blossoms in the snow, the abiding Japanese hospitality and courtesy, and the strength and power of the Japanese women.