

## Ikebana-A Language of Flowers

By

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### Abstract

This article introduces us to an art form of Japan-Ikebana; or simply put, the art of arranging flowers. Ikebana means living flowers and is considered an art form in Japan in the same sense that painting and sculpture are arts elsewhere. It dates back to the sixth century and was introduced in the Land of Rising Sun by the Chinese Buddhist missionaries, who used to pay floral tributes to Buddha in the traditional way.

### Keywords

Flowers, tradition, art, spiritual

### History

Japanese aristocracy appreciated nature and encouraged flower viewing throughout the year. The seasons were also expressed through flower arrangements, with flowers grouped differently, according to the time of the year. For example, in March, when high winds prevail to arrangements made of the unusual curve of the branches and stems were popular. In summers, broad-based vases were used, which held water till the surface and gave a cooling effect.

With Buddhism arriving in Japan, offering of flowers at Buddhist altars became a common practice. Seasonal flowers were offered at the temple by both the aristocracy and common people. The Buddhist philosophy of preserving life lies at the root of flower arrangements in Japan.

Ikebana was born out of this desire of viewing nature and humanity together. The spiritual aspect of Ikebana is considered very important to people practicing this art. Working in

silence while creating the arrangements, they believe helps a person become more calm, patient, and tolerant of nature. It helps in providing relaxation of mind, body, and soul and allows him to appreciate beauty in all forms.

In the beginning, Ikebana was very simple, made from a few stems, flowers, and evergreen branches. Patterns and styles evolved and by the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, arrangements had reached the homes of common people and not just restricted to the imperial family and its retainers. The art form was hugely appreciated by the Japanese and books were written about this art, transforming this practice into an art form with fixed instructions. Ikebana became a major part of traditional festivals, and exhibitions were occasionally held to display the creations.

### **An Art that Speaks**

More than simply putting flowers and greens together in a container like the west, Ikebana is not just a flower arrangement, it is a disciplined art form in which nature and humanity are brought together with the help of blossoms, leaves, branches, stems, and even broken leaves and dying buds. Ikebana symbolizes the Earth, Sky, and man through its arrangement and uses asymmetry, space and depth to create a visual treat. It is more subtle, more sensitive, and more sophisticated than the methods of arranging flowers usually employed in other cultures.

Ikebana is also about the other areas of the plants and stresses about the shape, line, and form in the arrangements. It is an extreme form of creativity, where the arrangement suggests the occasion. For example, leaving home is announced by an unusual arrangement of flowers and willow branches, which are considered auspicious and indicate long and happy life; the length of a branch in an arrangement signifies a safe return from a long journey and a branch made to complete a circle indicates long parting but return to home.

For a house warming occasion, white flowers are favored, as they suggest water to quench a fire; traditional Japanese houses were built of wood and were particularly susceptible to fire. To celebrate an inheritance, evergreens or any flower long-living flower-like chrysanthemums are favoured to convey that the wealth and riches should remain forever. To mark death in the family, the Japanese turn to an arrangement made of dead leaves and

branches and white flowers to express peace and serenity. Evergreen plants such as *kadomatsu* (gate pine) are a traditional decoration of the New Year and are placed in pairs in front of homes to welcome their ancestral spirits

As mentioned earlier, the Buddhist philosophy of preserving life lies at the root of much of Ikebana's practice and rules the flower arrangements. Therefore, the shapes of the vases are carefully chosen for the creations. They come in a large variety and are considered not only beautiful in form, material, and design but are made to suit the use, so that a flower can always be placed in an appropriate vase, and in one especially designed for that particular sort of flower.



**Image 1: Ikebana**

The surface of the water is always exposed, alongside the surface of the earth from which the grouping of flowers springs. This aids in creating the effect of representing a complete plant growing as nearly as possible in its natural conditions.

Vases that can prolong the life of the flowers are preferred. For this reason, vases are wide at the mouth to hold the flowers and also to allow it to get oxygen directly from water as much as from the environment. The vase is not used only to hold the flowers in position but also so that the water remains fresh for a longer period of time than the small necked vases, favored in the west.



**Image 2: Vase**

Besides offering longevity to flowers, the low, flat vases, more used in summer than winter, make it possible to arrange plants of bulbous and water growth in natural positions. As for the color of the vases, the soft pastel shades are common, especially bronze. To the Japanese, the color bronze seems most like mother earth, and therefore best suited to enhance the beauty of flowers.

Another aspect of Ikebana is its minimalism. Some arrangements are made of only a minimal number of blooms interspersed amongst stalks and leaves. Some arrangements are based on a scalene triangle delineated by three main points, usually, twigs, considered in some schools to symbolize heaven, human, and earth, or sun, moon, and earth. As expected, the container is a key element of the composition.

### **Schools of Ikebana**

Each school teaches the art of Japanese flower arranging in its respective manner, and each teaches several of the various ikebana styles in their own way too. Among the many schools, the three that currently dominate are **Ikenobo, Ohara, and Sogetsu**. Ikenobo is the oldest of the three and still retains the classical concepts of Ikebana. The Ohara School of Ikebana was founded in the late nineteenth century by Unshin Ohara. A particular specialty of this school is landscape-Moribana, which focuses on the various elements that can be found within nature to represent natural landscapes.

In 1927, when everybody believed practicing Ikebana meant following established forms, Sofu Teshigahara recognized Ikebana as a creative art and founded the Sogetsu School. It is based on the principle-“anytime, anywhere and by anyone” Less restrictive, it does not have iron-clad rules and can be created using any material. You can place Sogetsu Ikebana at your door, in your living room or on your kitchen table.



**Image 3: Ikebana**

Sogetsu is the most modern form of Ikebana and emphasizes self-expression.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, Ikebana is more than simply a method of arranging flowers. It is a mystical and spiritual art where man becomes one with nature, and expresses it through flower arrangements. It proves that the search for harmony with the world of plants keeps stimulating the creative human nature and is an undepletable source of inspiration for man’s artistic endeavors.

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### About the Author



An optimist to the core, Vaishali Chandorkar Chitale always sees the glass half full. She firmly believes in the saying, *“Hope is the most exciting thing there is in life”*. An alumna of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (Journalism), New Delhi, she is a freelance journalist, an editor, a poet, and a writer. Her poems and stories have been published on various online platforms and she has won many certificates for the same. She has successfully edited and released three anthologies on issues as diverse as women empowerment, martial world, and second chances in life, till now.