

The art of ikebana

Local chapter of Ikenobo Ikebana Society of America challenges members in traditional art form

By Beth De Bona
Times-News Correspondent

Using a Lazy Susan, Emiko Suzuki spun around a large arrangement of blooming forsythia, noting the relative merits and drawbacks of the way the leggy branch rose from the container.

Suzuki, a Senior Professor in the art of Ikenobo Ikebana — the oldest school of the traditional Japanese discipline of flower arranging — led a workshop at the March 15 meeting of the Blue Ridge Chapter of the Ikenobo Ikebana Society of America.

“Through taking lessons, you can enjoy the simplicity of Japanese floral art and learn more about natural beauty by paying a lot of attention to the characteristics of individual plants,” Suzuki said.

Before the workshop at the chapter’s most recent meeting — held in the fellowship hall of the First Congregational Church — Suzuki first demonstrated the shoka shimputai style, which stipulates use of only three distinct materials.

“This doesn’t have a lot of rules, except you can only have three materials — but you could have a hundred stems,” Suzuki said, challenging her students to grasp what might seem like a contradictory statement.

To illustrate the shoka concept of the style’s “one stem” rule, Suzuki volunteered three students to stand in a line facing the gathered students. With arms, heads or legs flared out in any direction, their lower torsos — or “stems” — remained “as one” in the grouping.

“This is shoka shimputai!” she said as the students teetered in formation.



Ikebana instructor Emiko Suzuki critiques a floral arrangement at the March meeting of the Blue Ridge Chapter of the Ikenobo Ikebana Society of America. [PHOTO BY BETH DE BONA/SPECIAL TO THE TIMES-NEWS]

Both local and tropical plant materials were available for the workshop, to combine in the tradition of the shoka shimputai style. For example, a pussy willow branch could be combined with chocolate anthurium and a small sprig of pine.

Suzuki noted that in Japan, instructors make you complete an arrangement within 10 seconds. She laughed off that particular rule, yet stressed the importance of spending a lot of time looking at the material before starting.

“Pick out the best side of the plant...that makes it easy because this is a very simple arrangement,” she says, examining the leggy branch of flowering yellow forsythia. Her students agreed with her that one side had more “movement.”

Suzuki also expanded on the concept of “mizugiwa” which, loosely, refers to

the “waters edge” or the portion of the stem from the edge of the water, up to approximately two fingers’ width in the shoka shimputai style.

“Just above the mizugiwa area you want to have a suggestion of ‘emerging life,’” said Suzuki. Beyond that stipulation, she added that all arrangements should have “drama.”

Lifetime of study

A native of Japan, Suzuki has lived in the western North Carolina since 2007. She started her study of ikebana in 1986, though for the initial five years she was limited to “freely” arranging flowers. She then undertook 16 years of lessons in traditional Ikenobo, the oldest school of traditional flower arranging.

Suzuki also has two Master’s degrees, in education and in fine arts, from

Want to go?

What: Meeting of the Blue Ridge Chapter of the Ikenobo Ikebana Society of America

When: 10 a.m. Thursday

Where: First Congregational Church of Hendersonville, 1735 Fifth Ave. W.

Information: 828-696-4103 or blueridgeikebana.com

What: Fine Art + Flora ikebana demonstration

When: 1:30-3 p.m. Saturday

Where: Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, S.C.

How much: Free and open to the public

Registration and information: gcma.org

Western Carolina University. Unlike Western institutions, ikebana is not a discipline one “graduates” from — Suzuki continues to study through the Ikenobo headquarters in Kyoto.

Because she travels to Japan several times a year, Suzuki’s knowledge and what she passes on to her students is always up-to-date, said Beverly Barbour, president of the Blue Ridge Chapter.

Suzuki is also an instructor in the Japanese art of tea ceremony.

“I think that I not only developed a lot of perseverance and concentration throughout 30 years of ikebana lessons but also I have learned how wonderful nature is,” Suzuki said.

As a member of the Blue Ridge Chapter, Suzuki serves as advisor as well as a translator for visiting professors from Japan.

Monthly chapter meetings include demonstrations and sometimes workshops, when members can test their chops with a teacher present. Members often take private lessons, as well.

To advance to the level of teacher requires at least

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