

Master calligrapher Shotei Ibata in his studio with his largest brush. OPPOSITE: Kiyomizu-dera temple, in east Kyoto.



# National Treasures

In Kyoto, Japanese crafts are evolving from traditional pieces to modern art. *TOM DOWNEY* meets the calligraphers, kimono dyers and kettle makers who are redefining artisanship.

**SAMPLE**

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In a small studio in the foothills of northeast Kyoto, Shotei Ibata, master calligrapher, picks up a giant paintbrush half his height. Ibata is a reed-thin man pushing seventy-four, but, wielding the horsehair brush like a saber, he seems to grow younger, taller and more powerful by the minute. Pausing for a moment of meditation, Ibata stands before his canvas, an enormous sheet of thick, rough *washi* paper that covers the floor, then dips the brush into a bucket of deep black *sumi* ink.

Steve Beimel, an expert on Japanese arts and crafts who has led me to Ibata's studio, whispers, "This kind of artwork is like exposing your heart to the world. Calligraphy experts can read the soul of a person in his brushstroke." Ibata removes his brush from the ink, then, in a set of swift, complex motions that are more like dance steps than strokes, he drags the wet brush

across the fibers, forming an ideogram that means "cloud." The painting is completed in these few seconds of supremely focused and creative motion. The *sumi* is so concentrated that it won't run, even when the canvas is submerged in water to be mounted. To balance his composition, Ibata selects an empty space and stamps it with a small red character, his personal seal.

Ibata's predecessors hardly thought of themselves as artists; they were artisans working for hire, producing calligraphy to decorate teahouses, temples and stately homes. But after World War II, once he'd viewed modern art and imagined a life outside the constraints of his craft, Ibata conceived a performance that dramatized what he did with his brush, ink and paper. In 1969, when he began to travel the world and create his paintings as performance art, other calligraphers in Japan were caustic in their criticism: this wasn't what Japanese calligraphy was supposed to be. Even today, few artists practicing traditional Japanese disciplines dare move beyond the exacting confines of their specialties. But those who do are some of the most interesting figures in the country, and the people I want to meet.

Most foreigners come to this city in search of a mythical Japanese past: a sighting of a geisha clicking down an alleyway in

wooden shoes; a bite of a *kaiseki* meal cooked the same way it has been for centuries; a soak in a warm bath at a *ryokan* (inn). Since A.D. 794, when it became Japan's capital—a reign that would last more than a thousand years—Kyoto has served as the guardian of time-honored Japanese customs. This is the birthplace of the tea ceremony and its related crafts, headquarters of the creators of the country's finest kimonos and home to people who take age-old practices seriously, so it makes sense that visitors expect to find a city untainted by modernity.

But I'm here for something different. I've spent a long time in Japan exploring the periphery of its culture, from the cutting-edge architecture in Kyushu to the American-style cocktail bars of Osaka. In my relentless search for the new and unexpected, it has become obvious to me that in Kyoto a quiet revolution is

