

”Hatsuyuki”



First snow of the year

Text: Peter Warren
Photography: Bonsai Europe Studio

Befitting a tree of such abstract shape, the following *tokonoma* display breaks many of the formal rules, but it does so very successfully, explains Peter Warren, apprentice to Kunio Kobayashi. Look at the tree — a Japanese mountain persimmon — as it was during the summer, and you’ll see nothing of interest, only large leathery leaves hiding a strangely shaped trunk. But when the leaves have turned and the ripened fruit can be seen hanging from its sagging branches there is an abundance of beauty

A view of Kunio Kobayashi’s garden towards the rooms where his *tokonomas* can be seen



Persimmon, or *Kaki*, is one of the symbolic autumnal fruits of Japan. Ripening at the start of November, they announce the beginning of the cold winter ahead. This theme is continued in both the scroll and the accompanying *suiseki*. Both represent the idea of *hatsuyuki*, the first snow of the year. Although difficult to see, the *kuzuya-ishi* (hut stone) has a very faint seam of white on its roof, an image repeated in the scroll where there is a small lakeside village nestled in for the winter under the shadow of the freshly snow-topped mountain. The fishing boats are moored, the autumn fruits have been harvested and dried, all that is left is for the villagers to wait until the harsh Japanese winter has passed.

One of the formal display rules broken in this display is the use of the *waki-doko* (the shelf) for positioning the main object. The *tokonoma* is considered to be a revered place in the room, an altar where objects are formally displayed. By taking the focal point out of the *hon-doko* (alcove) and placing it on the raised shelf to the side, the display has immediately lost all formality and becomes pure artistry, concerned only with the line of the tree and its flow into the space of the *tokonoma*. On looking at this display, a purist will shudder, but the informality of the tree and the rustic appearance of both the stone and the mountain scene negate any lofty classicism.

Looking at the *tokonoma*, it appears to be monochromatic; the only colour the eye is drawn to is the pale orange of the fruit. Everything else is a dull, ascetic and sombre shade of brownish grey. Austerity and subdued feelings are at the heart of the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic, which this display epitomises with a distinct lack of colour and extravagance, the harshness of the coming winter, and the astringent fruit of the *kaki*. Etymologically, the word used to describe both the bitter taste of the *kaki*, and this display is one and the same: *‘shibui’* — a simple adjective for ‘the highest form of beauty’.

See the following pages for the *tokonoma* with the mountain persimmon □



