

APRIL 23, 2001

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 an affair to
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Plus
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 guide to
 the best
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The wild and the woolly

How the art of Japanese living is invading the UK

There are no doubt many levels on which we should prepare for Japan 2001, the unparalleled, year-long celebration of Japanese culture upon which Britain is about to embark. The East is deep, as we know. But two of these many levels are unmissable. The first is the basal one: the bonsai level. Yes, it's time to check if the little tree is still alive, so get in some flowers for the flower-arranging and some paper for the organs, to practice your kimono-folding skills and clear the desk for calligraphy, because just as the modern Japanese are good at inventing catchy little gadgets to make modern living more fun, from the Sony Walkman to 151 types of Pokémon, so the ancient Japanese were amazingly skilled at coming up with catchy, pocket-sized cultural traditions that made ancient living more complicated. Without this delicious ancient Japanese genius for complication, the evening classes of contemporary Britain would have huge holes in their schedules.

But the splendid thing about the ancient Japanese art of inventing ancient Japanese arts is that the supply of them appears to be endless. After many years of picking yourself up nightly from the mat of the dojo, you have finally turned yourself into a multi-talented champion, but all this really means, in endemic Japanese martial-arts terms, is that you are not yet a master of yashoume, the ancient Japanese art of horserack archery, and that this too will take many years of dedicated discipline. So hey that horse today, Now does being excellent at karabana, the art of displaying cut flowers, prepare you in any meaningful way for excellence at oshibana, the art of creating pictures from pressed flowers. So that's another course to enroll on.

The busy schedule for Japan 2001 is packed with dates and venues at which embassies of tea and modern ancient arts may escape themselves into an eastern no-man's-land over the next year, up and down four-and-a-half-curved Britain. On May 19 and 20, Hyde Park is going to be given over to a spectacular market — the traditional Japanese art of mounting a festival — the largest free festival in the park this year. I suspect it will be packed. So why not track down instead the Japan Day organised by the Essex Anglo-Japanese Society "in a large field in one of the major towns in Essex". I hope they get Blandford. Other such days are planned for Bungeo, Bifford, Reading,

Petersmouth and a medium-sized town of some sort near you.

All these pan-British markets should make for excellent opportunities to nibble at stranger things. However, I am going to give the lot of them a miss, because my plans are to avoid instead the bonzai level of Japan 2001 and to prepare instead for the festival's second unmissable stratum of relevance, the deep and complex entanglement between us and them that is such a crucial defining aspect of our present, and upon which much of our future will surely depend. Let's call it the Hello Kitty level.

The first thing to face up to is the fact that no other culture could have, or would have, mounted the equivalent of Japan 2001. It's unimaginable for, say, the Russians to have organised something on this year-long scale. They could not have afforded it. And, let's admit it, we would not have wanted them to. The Americans would not have bothered, either. Their genius is culturally dynamic enough, but they have no past. The Chinese boast a notably picturesque past, but their cultural present is a tiny sliver in our modern lives. The Germans would not have been able to find enough British Testostrophes to run the stalls and give the talks. The French would have insisted that we go there. You can scout the atlas from pole to pole and you will not find another nation that might have attempted this global act of cultural intercourse with us. Or one that we would have invited in so enthusiastically to attempt it.

Of course, there are a lot more Japanese living in Britain today than ever before. In particular, the spectacle of small, giggling huddles of barely-recognisable Tokyo girls wearing Hello Kitty badges and dangling with Dracoin pendants, shuffling through our streets on the end of a mobile phone, has certainly become a familiar one up and down Britain, from Edinburgh to Exeter. The Tokyo girls are here because they are trying to escape from the strict patriarchal society they have been brought up in, and because they imagined Britain to look like Candyfloss Street in 1968. Once they get here, Birmingham comes as something of a shock to them. But they've burnt their cultural badges, so they stay. They marry a local. And whenever Britain decides to mount a serious national celebration of Japanese culture, they volunteer to run the stalls, teach the calligraphy and work the phones hard to find somewhere in Essex with a field big enough to hold a Japan Day in.

However, anyone wishing to sample and understand the present-day cultural importance of Japan would be better advised to avoid the market and the tea ceremonies altogether, to say no to the Noh theatre, and head instead for Sellfidges, on Oxford Street, where not only will they be able to acquire all the Hello Kitty merchandise they can stagger into the street with, they will also be able to visit an ambitious trans-cultural event called Tokyo Life, which has been organised for May and beyond.

Tokyo Life promises a deliberately seamless mix of shopping with art. As an gallery is being built in the area. An intriguing assessment of cutting-edge Japanese art is being imported to fill it. I'm delighted to see that the show will include Tatsuro Osumi



▲A gang once chased Omotomato, mistaking him for a square meal!

one's peculiar transformations into the Breadman (above). These weird slices of performance art involve Omotomato giggling himself in a bowl of bread and marching along sleeping streets, encouraging conversations with passers-by. He did it in the Brewery in New York once, and a gang of local down-and-outers chased him across Manhattan, having mistaken him for a square meal. I'm not kidding.

Also on show will be Masato Nakamura's abstract neon logos, based on the glowing signs you find outside the ubiquitous Japanese one-stop convenience store, a type of shop we don't have over here yet, but at which you can buy everything you need to lead a basic daily life, from pins to pornography.

The convenience store has something of the British corner shop about it, except that the food on sale is inevitably fresh and normally priced. Sellfidges is going as far in its pursuit of authentic Japanese authenticity as to build a replica of a convenience store as part of the Tokyo Life display. Another replica to look forward to is the ultimate karaoke setup, designed by Haretsuki Matsushige, in which you not only get to sing on a 10-metre-wide stage, complete with spotlights, but the machine also provides you with an eclectic audience of 200 happily screaming Japanese girls.

But the actual art on display in Tokyo Life is not as important as the fact that Sellfidges is building a gallery in order to show it. In Japan, there is a long tradition of department stores running art galleries. When the Mona Lisa went on a tour of Japan, it went on show in a department store. Sellfidges obviously hopes that the same can happen in Britain. And we'd be fools not to believe them. Whenever the Japanese shopper goes, the rest of the world soon seems to follow. Japanese retailers are never guilty of underestimating the richness of their shoppers. Just as we've ended up buying bunches of flowers at petrol stations, so shopping for art at Japanese shops may soon seem increasingly reasonable.

The fact, though, that the Japanese have proved themselves to be wondrously precise at living out the future rather than the rest of us does not explain why Britain is more exotic than anywhere else at celebrating Japanese culture in festivals and the like. What unduly trans-cultural bond attracts us to them, and then to us, across such huge expanses of land and sea?

A Month Fuji of material pertaining to the Japan 2001 festival has now formed at the centre of my study, and perched on its summit is a delightfully wacky collection of photographs of Japanese fashion victims, taken by Koji Mizutani in Harajuku, the Tokyo equivalent of London's King's Road. The book is called Merry. Every already acted babe in the book is grinning crazily, as if she has just been asked out by a singer from Westlife. On the cover is a message from Paul Smith, a popular Tokyo smiling these days, who tells us that "The energy of the 'street' makes me happy." Smith has drawn a little smiley face alongside his exclamation to emphasise his point.

Big on Japan

A cultural tsunami is on the way. Grab a Hello Kitty badge and get ready for an oriental invasion, says WALLEMAR JANUSZCZAK

The girls and their wardrobes collected in Merry look perfectly uncool. There must be actual people in there somewhere, with the usual human array of complexities and feelings. But from the evidence displayed before you, you have to take this on trust. Provocative hair was big in Japan last year, so many of these Merry pages are filled with untidily Japanese blonde. Some are wearing Texas steppers. Several sport disconcerting heavy-metal messages on their T-shirts, which don't seem to go with their Bunsen burner hairdos. The modern Japanese street wardrobe has been cut and panted together from an extraordinary array of dissimilar sources.

Looking through Merry, I was reminded immediately of those photographs of King's Road punks that used to fill our colour supplements at the end of the 1970s, and at which we giggled and gawped. The same ridiculously uncool hair colours and cuts. The same cut-and-paste approach to fashion styles. The same crucial belief in the centrality of the fashion statement. Here was more evidence of something crucial, yet rarely remarked upon, about the relationship between Britain and Japan: that these are two unexpectedly similar cultures.

Consider the facts. Both are tenuous island kingdoms anchored off either end of the Euro-Asian landmass. Both are small countries that have turned themselves into world powers on the strength of their inventiveness and the vigour of their cultural warring. Both find it easier to form economic relationships with distant empires than they do with near neighbours. Both have had, for most of their recent history, heads of state who are also their religious leaders. Both worship tradition with an unbridled ferocity, yet both also count themselves among the world's leaders in innovation. Both are small cultures with a huge reach. Indeed, Britain and Japan got on festivals devoted to each other because they are, I suggest, two sides of the same coin. □

WWW
www.japan2001.org.uk
 11 months of events around the country



Tokyo roadshow: top left, the Tokyo Life convenience store at Sellfidges, computer graphics by Nagao Davidson; centre, Tatsuro Osumi as the Breadman; right, Masato Nakamura's Family Mart, 1994; far right, a photograph from Koji Mizutani's Merry