

THE MERCHANT POTTER

Samuel O. Nicholson

Soon after we got to Japan, my wife and I went down to Kyoto. When we went to see the Kiyomizu Temple, rather than taking the wide, main path up to the steps, we cut off to the narrow side street, where all the more expensive shops were. Near the top left-hand side was a small display window next to a door. In the window was a round porcelain platter with the final picture of the ox herder series. The herder is playing his flute and the ox follows on its own. Peg was attracted to the plate because she had studied this story in a college class. We went in and there was an older lady on the tatami near the entrance. She explained that this piece was very special, as it was the first time the potter had been successful in throwing, decorating and firing a platter with a perfectly flat top. Also, the top was only six inches above its base.

The shopkeeper explained that it was displayed in the window because it was such a prized accomplishment. It was five thousand yen. That was a lot of money for that time, but Peg persuaded me to buy it.

We lived in Japan for six years, and shortly before leaving we took a trip to Kyoto and places beyond. While there we returned to Kiyomizu, and went back to the store to tell them how much we enjoyed the plate. This time there was a young attractive woman in the store. She told us that her mother had let her know that we had bought the plate that her father had made, and she was glad that we had come back. Her family had been Kyoto merchants for several generations, and they still lived in their Kyoto Fortified Merchant's House, though of course they no longer had to defend it. If we came at four o'clock that afternoon, she would be glad to show it to us.

When we showed up, she gave us a most interesting tour. I learned later that the house is a National Heritage Site, and it is still well preserved. It is located at the entrance of the first narrow street west of the main road north of the station. It is a short way below Nijo Castle. At that time, this area was still one of the wide firebreaks which had been made out of concern for the massive American firebombing of so many Japanese cities, which took place during the later stages of the war.

When we got there and knocked on the door, the young woman opened and greeted us. She started by showing us that if she opened the door wider than normal, there was a second separate and much narrower entrance leading to the family living quarters.

Then she took us to the fortified section of the mansion, which was much larger. On entering, you came to a wide, inviting staircase leading to the second floor. There you entered a dark, narrow hallway leading to the left, with a ceiling which was fairly low and was made out of solid wooden boards. This meant that the samurai following the servant could not attack him from the rear, as he could not raise his sword to attack.

A short way down this hall there was an opening, again to the left. It opened onto a narrow secret stairway down to the first floor. If you went straight ahead, you would come to the other main stairway down to the main floor. After descending, the stairway turned to the left, and at this turn there was an overhead cupboard. When you opened its sliding door to the left, there was room for a man to quickly jump in and disappear. This was accomplished because there was just enough space behind this sliding panel for a man to crouch, and if the enemy looked in the cupboard it would be empty. If instead the retainer decided to duck into the narrow secret stairway, the samurai would start down these secret stairs. What he did not know and could not see, was that there were no treads after the first three. He would fall in a small secret space behind the tokonoma of the room below, and he would be easily captured. The retainer would have used a small foothold on the floor above to let him slip by.

When a Daimyo or his representative came to make a deal, he would always come with a number of his samurai to protect him. The merchant's men were thought of only as his servants. When a delegation came requesting a loan, the procedure was that they would be met at the entrance by a servant male, who would lead them up the main staircase and across the length of the second floor. Then he would lead them down the main back staircase, which had two left turns so it opened onto a very large room in the back, where the merchant would be seated with two retainers and negotiate his deals. Since the Daimyo who came felt he had more men, who were also better warriors, he would think he had the situation under control.

Above this main living room, with an impressive high ceiling, was a secret space where more of the merchant's men would be hiding. They would be around the center of the room where the negotiations were going on. There was an area of loose boards, around which these men would sit. They would be aware of all that was going on below, and if there was a problem, they could jump down and take charge. The element of surprise and the larger numbers made a good defense.

Although there undoubtedly had been a number of such mansions in the past, this may be the only one still in existence. What I am sure of is that no two of them ever had the same secret passageways, because the element of surprise was the one feature that made them a Fortified Mansion.

Samuel O Nicholson