

A person stands in the center of the frame, holding a large, light blue curtain that fans out in a semi-circle against a plain white wall. The person is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, black trousers, and black shoes. The curtain is gathered in the center, creating deep vertical folds that radiate outwards. The floor is a light-colored wood.

THE KINFOLK HOME

INTERIORS *for* SLOW LIVING

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AN ANCIENT APPROACH

A few of Japan's most revered domestic gurus—from 14th-century monks to modern-day interior-design aficionados—share some wise words on how to bring an element of Zen into our home environments.

The Japanese are celebrated for their talents in many art forms, yet the art of Japanese homemaking doesn't seem to garner the same level of appreciation as others. There's an intrinsic serenity, cleanliness and functionality to many Japanese homes: the neat alignment of shoes in the *genkan* (the home's entryway), the discretion of sliding screens in *ryokan* (the homely inns), the quietness of minimalist decor—these signature details are all elemental in achieving this art.

The foundations of Japanese home rituals are rooted in the centuries-old ruminations of spiritually (and domestically) enlightened monks, tea masters, warriors and philosophers. Today this innate domestic wisdom lives on in the nation's modern-day homeowners, who prepare intricate bento-box lunches (complete with panda faces made of seaweed) before sunrise and craft flower arrangements that reflect the passing of the seasons.

But what is the essence of these harmonious households, and how can dwellings elsewhere achieve the same kind of Zen? The answer seems to lie in a precise mix of keeping things simple, clean and tidy, with a hint of nature thrown in for good measure.

Here, a few of Japan's celebrated domestic gurus offer some advice.

The Minimal Home

Masaharu Anesaki's seminal 1930s work, *Art, Life and Nature in Japan*, delves into the *wabi-sabi* concept of simple imperfect beauty in the home and highlights the way that minimal items and a sense of open space can create a deeper serenity than a room crammed full of objects. "The Japanese room then, though to the Western eye bare and devoid of artistic decoration, is nevertheless the product of a refined artistic sense and a place of sincere aesthetic enjoyment or serene meditation," he wrote.

The Flower-filled Home

Flowers go hand in hand with traditional Japanese residences, from asymmetrical ikebana displays in the *tokonoma* alcove (a sacred space showcasing items of appreciation) to garden blooms arranged on the kitchen table. But they're not there simply because they're pretty: Their presence taps into a deeper Japanese consciousness of the harmony

between man, nature and the infinite cycle of life. As Sōfu Teshigahara, the founder of the early 20th-century Sōgetsu School of Ikebana, once said: "Ikebana will fail if its ultimate goal is the imitation of nature, even if the imitation is more or less perfect. One cannot just take a piece of it and try to re-create it—one takes a piece of nature and adds something that was not there."

The Unfussy Home

Yoshida Kenkō, the 14th-century monk who penned Japan's medieval masterwork *Essays in Idleness* (*Tsurezuregusa*), believed that simple antiques, a penchant for tidiness and a lovingly overgrown garden can help create the perfect domestic abode: "The man is to be envied who lives in a house, not of the modern, garish kind, but set among venerable trees, with a garden where plants grow wild and yet seem to have been disposed with care, verandas and fences tastefully arranged, and all its furnishings simple but antique," he wrote.

The Clean Home

Masako Ito, a popular young stylist and homemaking guru, encourages people to rid their homes of *moyari*, which she interprets as "unwanted air." Masako suggests paying careful attention to areas that are prone to creating *moyari* by regularly cleaning the space underneath a chair, the base of a toothbrush holder and even the back of the fridge's vegetable tray. "Basically, the air is in the places you don't really look at or ignore," she explains. These areas should also ideally be cleaned using a *zokin* cloth made from old T-shirts to avoid disrupting the domestic harmony of a home.

The Tidy Home

Marie Kondo became famous with her best-selling book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*. The gist of her "KonMari Method" is simple: Get rid of anything that doesn't spark joy in your life. The book is filled with tips from rolling up T-shirts like sushi to thanking unwanted items for their service before discarding them. The result could be a space as serene as a Shinto shrine.