

1950s Kyoto (Hans Brinckmann)

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Guest speaker, Hans Brinckmann

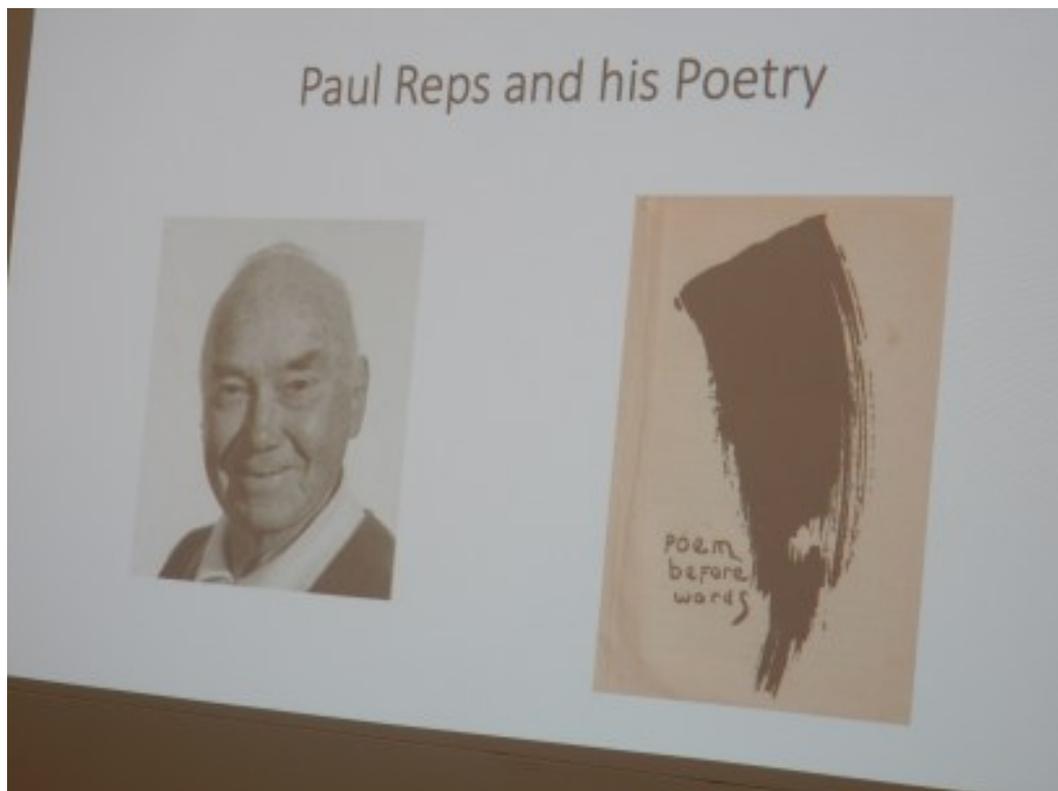
What was it like in Kyoto in the 1950s? You hardly ever saw foreigners, for one thing. If you did, you stopped to say hello. That was the Kyoto a banker from Holland called Hans Brinckmann got to know and love. Though he lived in Kobe, he visited whenever he could at weekends. As he got to know the town, he fell in love with it.

Hans Brinckmann arrived in Japan in 1950 to work in a bank in Kobe. He started learning Japanese despite the warnings of his sub manager that it would damage his mind. In 1954 he was transferred to Tokyo, where he missed his outings to Kyoto, so he was glad to get back to a post in Osaka. His favourite places included the bamboo grove in Imagumano Shrine; Tofukuji where he made friends with a monk who complained of ills from the rigorous regime of the Zen monastery; and a ryokan called Takeya,

which he got to like despite the austerity of conditions there and the perishing cold.

Like others before him, he went through cultural conundrums about how to reconcile East and West, coming out on the Japanese side of things. The world was not simple black and white, right or wrong, as the Western ego insisted, but a more modest grey made up of maybe, sighs and silences.

One key event was attending an exhibition by [Paul Reps](#) of *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* fame. He had done wonderful freehand calligraphy of whimsical words on Japanese 'washi' paper. "Drinking a cup of tea, I stopped the war," was one of the verses. Later Hans got to know him in his Ohara home. (Reps is now considered one of America's first haiku poets.)



A more important friendship was with the poet Shimaoka Kenseki, who introduced him to all manner of artists, potters and monks. One of the most

colourful was a poet and personality called Ichida Yae san, an heiress who wore her kimono in defiant mock Heian style and was known as the second Ono no Komachi for her beauty. She is said to have been the model for one of Tanizaki's heroines.

Hans was closely involved in setting up Kyoto's first Dutch restaurant, though alas it went out of business after two years. He also took part in the English edition of a Japanese poetry publication called *New Japan Pebbles*, but it too only survived six editions. All the while he enjoyed networking with Shimaoka, who was not only a poet, but a teacher and columnist with a wide range of friends – a gynecologist, an obi maker, a building contractor. One person Hans befriended was the potter, Katoh Sho, who dealt in tea ware.



A rapt audience hanging on to the well-crafted words of Hans Brinckmann's memoirs. (Photo Ken Rodgers)

But the most significant of the encounters in Kyoto came through an unexpected and unrequested *omiai* he had, with just two hours' notice. It turned out the couple shared the same literary and pottery tastes, and when she happened to brush his arm he 'flexed his banker's biceps in acknowledgement'. The pair married and spent a happy life together until her death in 2007.

Hans has published many articles and books, covering poetry, fiction and non-fiction. Asked about his writing process, he said it was different for each genre. Fiction he could see unfurling in his imagination, non-fiction required constant fact checking. He confessed to being a slow writer, though the volume of publication would suggest he's a hard worker.

And what does the great lover of Kyoto think of the city now? You hear more Chinese than Japanese in the streets, he says. It's difficult to even recognise some of the areas. But notwithstanding he remains a strong admirer of the city and its people because of their modest dignity and pride in upholding tradition. For personal reasons Hans now lives in Fukuoka, but he still makes an effort to revisit the city he fell in love with all those years ago.

For a listing of Hans Brinckmann's work, both in English and Japanese, take a look at [this amazon page](#). Of particular note here is the collection of short stories, [*The Tomb in the Kyoto Hills*](#).



Hans Brinckmann in white shirt and his translator, Hiromi Mizoguchi, left in white shirt