Japanese
Things

TOKYO

A DIFFERENT SORT OF PUBLIC ART

Story & Photographs by Tony McNicol

By the time I arrive, Toshimitsu Hayakawa has already set out the tools of his trade. A row of ragged brushes lies on a long plank. Five ancient metal containers are arranged next to them, so encrusted with paint that they have taken on a near organic appearance. His working platform is set up: a wooden plank propped on two columns of aged soft-drink crates, everything splattered with paint like some three-dimensional Jackson Pollock canvas. Now the 70-year-old mounts the rickety structure, and I watch a little nervously. The planks creak under his scant weight, and with dull thuds he thrusts the first paint onto his huge canvas.

As one of only three bathhouse mural painters still at work in the city, Hayakawa is a master of a rapidly disappearing Tokyo folk art. At the end of the 1960s the city had close to 2,700 public bathhouses (*sento*). Few people had baths at home so sento were a place to wash and to socialize. Today, of course, nearly everyone has their own bath, and there are just 929 sento left. Like the bathhouses, Hayakawa's work has been slowly drying up.

18 HOLES ON THE WALL

He works with almost frantic energy. Sento murals have to be done before the bathhouse opens for business, normally around 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon, so there is no time to waste. He uses fast-drying oil-based paint and is busiest in summer, when the paint dries quickest. Once, when most sento owners would commission a new painting each year, he used to paint two a day.

Perhaps today's haste is more habit though, because the sento is closed for a holiday. The 50-year-old wooden bathhouse is as chilly as it is impressive; only the tubs are warm with a lingering reminder of the previous night. After unceremoniously scraping off the old painting, and sending a shower of powdery debris into the bathtubs below, Hayakawa begins with the sky.

Hayakawa, one of three Tokyo sento muralists, finishes Mt. Fuji snow (opposite) from a palette of oil-based paints housed in recycled sardine tins (above right) on a board resembling a Jackson Pollock canvas.

After half an hour there are specks of sky-blue paint under his eyes, and when he stops for a cigarette break, I ask about his tools: the battered paint-cans and forlorn brushes. "They are like my children," he says laconically. Forty years back the cans contained sardines and saury. The brushes are deliberately old and ragged; they paint better that way, he says.

With Hayakawa's prodding brush strokes and little grunts, the picture takes shape; it's the sento painter's stock in trade, a view of Mount Fuji. Hayakawa has 30 versions of Japan's favorite peak in his repertoire—each a real location at an exact time of year. This one is Miho No Matsubara, a scene often pictured by Edo-period woodblock print artists. From the bathtubs below it will look spacious

and relaxing, says Hayakawa. The colors may seem a little garish in the winter sunlight, but through the bathhouse steam they will be just right.

These days most sento owners ask for a traditional view of Fuji, says

Hayakawa. But back in the 1960s and 1970s, when sentos were being built everywhere to accommodate crowds of families, he used to get all sorts of commissions. To please the kids, he might add a steam train. Other times it would be Godzilla or a TV superhero; perhaps even Superman zipping across a renowned view of Fuji. I get the impression that Hayakawa is relieved to work on more conventional subjects these days. (Although he did get one unusual commission recently from a golf-loving owner who wanted a Fuji vista complete with 18-hole course).

NEVER PAINT MONKEYS

Like most sento, this bathhouse is a large hall separated into men's and women's sections by a high wall. (It is possible to shout across to the other side, as some elderly couples are wont to do). By noon the men's half of the painting is done and Hayakawa laboriously hefts his paint, brushes, scaffolding, and tarpaulin over to the other side.

In the women's changing room, there is an antique massage chair and an equally venerable hair-dryer—the kind women would sit under in 1950s hair salons. Both are still in use, but I suspect the two wicker baby cots in the corner are for nostalgic effect. Nannies once worked in the sento looking after babies as their mothers bathed. The women's changing room is noticeably plusher than the male side, although egalitarian-minded Hayakawa has painted his Fuji so that the peak is viewed equally well from both sides.

As the mural nears completion, Hayakawa dabs in fine details: boats by the seashore, pine trees, and brilliant white surf. I ask why Fuji is the subject of so many sento paintings. Apparently, sento owners like it for its auspicious shape—the stable foot of the mountain signifies steady business. Customers like it because, well, just about everyone in Japan likes looking at Fuji.

There are a few things Hayakawa will never paint though: monkeys, for instance. The Japanese word sounds the same as that for "leave." He never paints autumnal scenes, the falling leaves are bad luck. Sunsets are inauspicious for a similar reason: symbols of sinking. Landscapes are definitely the best, especially those with water: seashores, rivers, lakes. "If you paint something exciting, the children will be pleased, but people will get fed up of looking at it," says Hayakawa. "You never get tired of a scenic view." So saying, he adds the finishing touches to

one high flank of Japan's most famous peak—and the day's painting is done.

A BRUSH TO THE HEAD

A couple of weeks later, we meet again, this time at a small bar near Hayakawa's home. As the landlord plies me with tofu stew, and Hayakawa with *shochu* (a potent Japanese spirit), Hayakawa tells me about how he became a sento painter. His hometown is in Fukushima, a sparsely populated prefecture some way north of Tokyo. His father had a bicycle shop there.

One day Hayakawa was so impressed by the new mural that appeared like

magic overnight at a local sento that he resolved to make the art his career. The painter had grown up nearby, but worked in Tokyo, so Hayakawa wrote to formally request a position as an apprentice. The eagerly awaited reply came back two long months later, and Hayakawa traveled to Tokyo to live and work with his master's family. That was 1954, and Hayakawa was 17.

It was tough work: early mornings, stiflingly hot in summer, freezing cold in winter. Sento painters were busy in those days. Even a typhoon was no excuse to skip work, and Hayakawa enjoyed few holidays other than the annual New Year's break. There were two other apprentices, both older and stronger, so his master expected him to be the first to quit. In the end though, he was the only one who lasted.

He trained with his teacher for 10 years, cycling to sento in the early morning to set up, mix paint, clear up, and watch. As befits a traditional Japa-

nese master, his teacher was strict at work but kind at home. In the muggy Tokyo summer, when the young apprentice nodded off, he would get rudely awakened by a handle of a brush applied to the back of his head. Hayakawa quickly learned to nap surreptitiously in the toilet. Other times, though, his master would treat the impecunious Hayakawa to meals out and day trips with his family.

The first time he got to paint a sento on his own was about seven years into his apprenticeship. On seeing his student's debut, the master told him to be ashamed of taking money for his work. Hayakawa began to practice every day on a fence behind his master's house. He says he is thankful for his teacher's strictness today. "If my teacher hadn't been strict, I wouldn't be who I am now."

Nor did his life become much easier after the 10-year apprenticeship. His ¥1,000 monthly apprentice wage increased to ¥3,000 when he started off on his own, but Hayakawa watched his friends in company jobs take home ¥14,000 or ¥15,000 a month. "I couldn't smoke or drink because I couldn't afford to buy cigarettes or alcohol." When he got married, he and his wife could only rent a room the size of three tatami mats (one mat measures about 1 x 2 m). Their only furniture was an apple crate table.

At first, Hayakawa still didn't have the speed or technique to paint the larger Tokyo sento, so he began to work on smaller bathhouses in the pre-

Fast-drying paint (opposite, left) means quick moves (opposite, right), even in the clouds of an unfinished Fuji scene (page top). Roof wings and signature chimney (opposite, center), entrance (left), and manager's friendly face (above) welcome one and all to the public bath. Cost? Around 400 yen.

fectures outside the Japanese capital. To get there in time, he would leave at 2:00 in the morning, his paint, brushes and ladders loaded precariously on a motorbike. Sometimes he would be so exhausted on his return that he would nap near the side of the road.

WHERE HAVE ALL THE APPRENTICES GONE?

Yet, more than half a century and approximately 10,000 murals later, the one-time drowsy apprentice finds himself almost a celebrity. The interview requests started coming some years back. They have grown as the bathhouses and painters disappear. In the bar where we are drinking, Hayakawa keeps his own bottle behind the counter; it has a picture of him and a famous TV personality pasted on it. Everyone here calls Hayakawa *sensei*, the Japanese term of respect for teachers and artists.

But his modest fame must be an equivocal pleasure, owing as it is to the imminent extinction of his art. Some 150 sento still offer him work now and then, but he doesn't know what they will do when he packs away his brushes for the last time. Perhaps they will replace his murals with economic, durable and boring painted tiles. The other painters can't be long off retirement either, and there are no apprentices. Many years ago Hayakawa had one, but he only lasted a month. Local art school students occasionally turn up for a day or two, then Hayakawa never sees them again. "Who is going to train for 10 years to do this, these days?" he asks.

I can't help recalling how simply, yet how carefully, he brushed his name into the corner of his mural a couple of weeks ago. He says for decades he didn't bother with that. After all, he'd probably have to paint over it a year later—and sento paintings weren't the kind of art you signed. Then one day a sento owner told him that customers had been asking about the mural. Now he always signs his work… and I get the feeling he is glad that he does.

You can almost hear the splash of white-capped waves in the completed Fuji scene (page top) seen earlier, p. 33, as distant bath mural adds color to the rest/locker area (left) and Hayakawa's signature (above) sheds a new light on creator and creation.