

**IN MEMORIAM:  
JOHN JOSEPH TOOMEY (1945–2021)**



**John Toomey at Ueno Park in Tokyo,  
Japan, photographed by his good friend,  
Mr Shima Motoi (Fall 2019)**

John Toomey, the offspring of Irish emigres to Illinois, USA, was born on 3 January 1945 in Chicago, and attended a rural school in Wilmington, Will County, about an hour's drive from downtown Chicago. His father was a railroad laborer, his mother a homemaker. John was the eldest, but his younger brother predeceased him.

One of his father's avocations was to breed and raise horses that he rented to dude riders on weekends. While reminiscing about feeding the horses oats and water as a youngster, he acknowledged the fear they might bite off his fingers.

Eventually, John even broke in young colts. During summers, he became a part-time rodeo hand. Although feisty old steeds threw him off several times, John never gave up and continued to teach dudes how to ride and shovel manure into the compost heap and/or throw hay into the stalls.

John's formal schooling took place in a Catholic parochial environment where earnest Jesuits drummed catechism into him. By dint of this repetitive routine and strict discipline, John developed a wide repertoire of facts and figures he could expound at will.

As a member of the US Department of Defense Overseas, John qualified via correspondence courses to teach world history, art, and the humanities. Therefore, for twenty-one years, he was a high school teacher of military offspring for US Department of Defense Overseas Dependents Schools in three locations: (1) Würzburg, Germany (1982–1984); (2) Okinawa and Yokohama, Japan (1985–2001); and (3) Seoul, South Korea (2002–2005).

While posted to Japan for sixteen years, John simultaneously pursued a master's degree in art history and specialized in Far Eastern art at Sophia University in Tokyo. He studied both Japanese and Korean. Over time, he earned a teacher's certificate in "The Way of Tea" and Japanese traditional music, specializing in the *koto* (箏).

John became a fully certified teacher of the tea ceremony in Japanese (his personal tea name: Sofu, 1988), and Korean tea etiquette (personal tea name: DaMi, 2000), in the Urasenke (裏千家) school tradition. Thus far, John has been the only foreigner appointed head of tea schools in Seoul, 2003–2005, and subsequently in Thailand, 2005–2021.

On a recent visit to his former house in Pathum Thani, north of Bangkok, eight different *koto* instruments were counted, each in its individual case. John's musical aptitude probably stemmed from his father's second avocation: playing the guitar at weddings in a small country-western band on weekends.

When John opted to take early retirement at sixty, he scouted around to identify a less expensive locale than Japan. After pragmatically assessing various options, he recognized Thailand's

benefits. John found congenial accommodation in Pathum Thani province and settled into a three-bedroom double-storied house in a gated housing estate.

With the assistance of a Thai friend, John's corner plot became an exotic oasis. Sparing no expense, over the course of nearly sixteen years in this exclusive community, John transformed his spacious, albeit boxy, two-storied Italianate house into a vibrant museum that focused on exquisite works of fine art. John filled its rooms with a choice collection of original paintings and sculptures, ceramics and vintage photographs, handwoven textiles and wooden furniture from Japan and Korea, and other locations. John cultivated interesting people in tandem with collecting a wide array of artwork. His outstanding *objets d'art* gained the reputation of being a veritable museum of unique collector's items. John served as its sole curator until the COVID-19 pandemic hit Thailand.

Before early 2020, if a visitor asked John about a certain piece, he would give a lengthy account of where he bought it, its original provenance, perhaps the artistic school or craftsman that fashioned it, who might have owned it previously, and more. Hardly any of this invaluable information was written down, except for a few notations scribbled on the plywood box containing the artwork. John stored all the details in his head.

As a certified tea master or *chajin* (茶人), he converted the driveway and carport into a custom-built double *chashitsu* (茶室) or two-part tearoom with woven *tatami* mats, wooden alcoves for hanging scrolls, and shelves for

floral arrangements. He installed the prerequisite coal-burning hearth sunken deep in the floor to boil the spring water required for preparing green tea known as *matcha* (抹茶).

The surrounding landscaped grounds were in harmony with the inner peace of the tearoom. The garden set the mood for a once-in-a-lifetime tea ceremony. John guided his art form by four basic principles: harmony 和 (*wa*), respect 敬 (*kei*), purity 清 (*sei*), and tranquility 寂 (*jaku*). His every movement, step and moment were precisely defined.

During John's active retirement, he devoted himself wholeheartedly to the study of art. He tirelessly promoted and disseminated knowledge, news, and research findings on a wide array of topics pertaining to Southeast Asia and the Far East. One of his online platforms was the website *Japan Today* (launched in 2000).

He single-handedly launched and wrote for the *Thai Textile Society Newsletter*, for which he contributed knowledgeable articles. John likewise supported Dr Roxanna Brown (1946–2008) in setting up the Southeast Asian Ceramic Museum in 2005 at Bangkok University, Rangsit campus. Even after her untimely demise, John continued to contribute features in its *Southeast Asian Ceramic Museum Newsletter*.

John also played a major role in the National Museum Volunteers (NMV began in 1969). He delivered lectures (videotapes of some presentations and tea ceremony demonstrations are posted on YouTube) and wrote prodigiously for its publications, including the *National Museum Volunteers Newsletter*.

He received a special Heritage Award, comprising an illustrious certificate and pin, from HRH Maha Chakri Princess Sirindhorn on 3 January 2014 (his 68th birthday) on the lawn of the Bangkok National Museum. According to MR Chakrarot Chitrabongse, a great-grandson of King Rama IV and former Permanent Secretary for the Thai Ministry of Culture, this Thai award is the highest that can be conferred on a foreigner in recognition of achievements in the conservation, preservation, and promotion of art and culture of the Thai National Heritage.

In addition, John delivered lectures and contributed articles, conducted study tours, and gave tea ceremony demonstrations at The Siam Society in Bangkok (he was a Life Member) and at his personal tearoom in Pathum Thani. John also represented The Siam Society at the 2012 International Conference organized by The State Museum of Ethnology in Warsaw, Poland, entitled, "Korea: Art and Artistic Relations with Europe/Poland".

Owing to his association with the world's only lacquerware museum (Der Museum für Lackkunst in Münster, Germany), in 2010, John initiated the First International Conference on Lacquerware in Bangkok; five years later, he spearheaded the Second International Conference on the Study of Oriental Lacquer in Bangkok. John was also affiliated with the Southeast Asia Library Group (SEALG) and The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

John likewise maintained close ties with the National Museum of Singapore and the National University of Singapore.

Of course, his closest associates were in Japan (such as at the Tokyo National Research Institute for Cultural Properties [Tobunken]) and South Korea (Cho-Am Tea Culture Association in Daegu, Seoul).

During his final six years, John suffered from physical exhaustion, stress, and what he euphemistically dubbed “over-volunteering”. After John died on 27 August 2021 at the Thammasat University Hospital in Rangsit, Thailand, due to complications from COVID-19, his many friends and associates turned to assisting Mr Tanarat Luangaphiban, the beneficiary of John’s estate. The latter plans to convert the Pathum Thani house and its impressive art collection into a private museum.

Annual memorial services, featuring a tea ceremony, are conducted by John’s devoted friends and disciples. John Toomey was a remarkable individual, truly a congenial and generous person who enjoyed sharing whatever he knew. If he did not know something, he knew where he could find the answer, or who to ask. Few academics possess this kind of humility.

John often concluded his emails with, “If one hasn’t time for a cup of tea, why speak of enlightenment?” He then would advise: “Put the kettle on and rest in the mind that abides nowhere”.

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