

2006 Technos International Study Tour

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yūdachi ni utaruru koi no atama kana

summer rain –
it drums on the heads
of the carp Masaoka Shiki (1867 - 1902)

atozama ni kouo nagareru shimizu kana

the little fish
carried backwards
in the clear water Kitō (1741 – 1789)

Medieval Japanese drama, poetry and prose as well as Japanese gardens and aesthetics have long fascinated and puzzled me. So, being offered the chance to represent Hobart and William on the 2006 Technos International Study Tour was for me the realization of a long-held dream. The incredible generosity and kindness of the Tanaka foundation, the students and faculty of Technos College added the depth of a moving human adventure to the cultural stimulation of our journey. My students, Neil Wakeman and Laquita Washington were also moved by the friendships they developed during our trip and by the emotional exchanges that took place between the Japanese students and their guests. Each day brought new discoveries and surprises. It would be impossible to describe the charm of all the wonderful sights and experiences, whether it the majesty of the Japanese Alps, the peace of Midori-No-Mura spa, the art of Ikebana or the humor of simple street signs.



Neil Wakeman, Latiqua Washington, Laurence Erussard



“Wait right here!”

Closed? Earthquake?

“No smoking! No parking!”



The hot spring at Midori-No-Mura

day breaks on the spring
sounds of insects, calls of birds
inhabit the steam

We had come from eleven different colleges and universities and from three different countries. Thanks to our shared experiences, the contagious love of our hosts and the amazing sense of organization, generosity, efficiency and knowledge of Stephen Fleming, we left as friends who now visit, exchange pictures and write to each other.

Japanese aesthetics and the concept of space

I applied to the position of faculty representative to participate in the 2006 Technos International Week in Japan because my intention was to understand better the culture better, so that I might enrich some of my courses on the middle Ages by adding of a Japanese component. This fall, in my course on *Iconoclastic Women in the Middle Ages*, the students and I will compare and contrast *The Tale of Genji* and two Old French texts, Marie de France's *Lais* and the *Romance of Silence*. We will also compare the lives of medieval court ladies in Japan and Europe by reading the poems of female troubadours and passages from *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams*.

Two traits of Japanese female medieval prose and poetry are the ubiquitous personification of nature as metaphor to express mood and feelings and the focus on aesthetic details.

You promised to return.
How long must I still wait till you fulfill that vow?
Spring did not forget the tree
Whose branches once were white with frost.

It is their scent alone
That tells me what those scattered orange blossoms are.
Else I should have thought they were
Untimely flakes of snow.

(11th century, from *As I Crossed a Bridge of Dreams*)

As I arrived to Japan, I wondered if I would be able to still find manifestations of these characteristics in the daily attitudes of 21st century people. My research led me to the Kichijoji Botanical Garden.



Kichijoji Botanical Garden: Azalea path.

This rather small area of the Kichijoji Garden is enhanced by the winding of the path around groups of vegetation and trees of different sizes. The illusion of distance is created by the positioning of a shorter, darker and slender evergreen tree at the center of the passerby's line of vision.

One of the greatest achievements of Japanese landscaping is to create the illusion of space in "no space." This is particularly obvious in the view of the waterway at Kichijoji Botanical Garden and in the tiny iris garden of the hydrangea temple in Kamakura. The iris garden appears through a circular window within the temple. This opening works as a lens: there seems to be a host of distant irises. In fact, the optic illusion creates this sense of space, distance and infinite number of blooming plants. The same phenomenon is obtained by the effect of the floating irises in Kamakura.



Kichijoji Botanical Garden: a waterway.



Kamamura: the floating irises.

on the iris pond
the garden moves with the wind
to follow the fish

Kichijoji Botanical Garden: a Sunday afternoon.



blue and gold iris -
Summer storm to be measured
with a paper fan



beckoning to dreams
the drawings of summer blooms
to warm winter time



early in summer
fireflies and red roses
tangled on a fence



by the yellow rose
complete strangers there are none
joy and smile are one

As I observed people painting portraits of flowers in the gardens, sketching a single rose, tending to bonsais and growing as many plants as possible in the most reduced spaces, I realized that the cultural trait that inspired medieval poets to build metaphors on natural images is still part of the Japanese sensibility. I was not surprised to discover that the pavement of sidewalks was decorated with these tiles:



This metaphorical continuity may be seen in poetry, as in these two poems:

Pushing and shoving
voices of the cherry blossoms
cross the ocean Tenko Kawasaki (1927 -)

Could I see the blossom as other blossoms,
Then would there be no dew to cloud my heart.
Murasaki Shikibu (first quarter of 11th century)

The Japanese inclination towards creating metaphors based on words indicating plants, natural phenomena and small animals probably came from religion; it may indicate the permanence of animism; it reflects a deep cultural respect for and identification with the natural world. The following pictures of rabbits reflect the continuity of purpose (ornamentation used in daily life,) as well as the same detailed observation of nature (the movements of the white rabbits are exactly the same) and a predilection for what Western culture would define as “cute.” I am looking forward to researching further these hypotheses and observations and to sharing them with my students.



21st century lawn art

18th century screen: ink, color, gold leaf.

Meigetsu ya usagi no wataru suwa no umi

the harvest moon-
rabbits go scampering
across Lake Suwa

Buson (1716 – 1783)

The Technos International Study Tour was a deeply moving and inspiring experience. Many faces and moments remain present in my thoughts. I am infinitely grateful to Hobart and William Smith colleges for this opportunity and to all the members of the Tanaka foundation for their generosity and friendship. *Kizuna*¹ is a word I will not forget.

¹ Kizuna means feeling the bond of friendship and mutual trust with those close to us.