

‘Mists of Time – Views of Omi’

Masako Yasuki

The pandemic raged, travel restrictions were put in place around the world, and war broke out in Europe. Due to the trials of our times, my overseas research was suspended, and my attention shifted closer to home – to Omi, an area bordering Lake Biwa northeast of Kyoto. I began by standing in places where long ago people would have painted the "Eight Views of Omi". I took time to observe the landscape, finding out what I could see in my surroundings, before finally starting to draw it.

I went first to see the sacred black pine that appears in Hiroshige's "Night Rain at Karasaki". This huge and beautiful but bizarre-looking tree had held an especial fascination for me for a long time. The actual pine I encountered was shockingly old. Broken and bent, it appeared to be crawling across the ground – a bewildering tangle of branches supported by a complex frame of wooden pillars, all exposed to the winds blowing off the lake.¹ When dusk falls, the tree fades into a silhouette before melting into the darkness of night, and it is at this time of day that I really became tangibly aware of its presence. On one such evening, after reflecting upon my feelings, I finally felt ready to start drawing it for the first time. From then on I returned upon many occasions at the same time of day to continue the work.

During my many visits to Omi, I often waited in hope of seeing the "Katata no Rakugan" ("Descending Geese at Katata"). But none ever came. Neither could I see Mt. Mikami from the bridge depicted in "Seta Yusho" ("Sunset at Seta"). In the end, I went looking for a view of Mt. Mikami in different spots. "Yabashi", which nowadays is lined with large shopping malls, confused me, but my time spent wending my way and nosing around here was not wasted. I felt a quiet joy in drawing as I strolled through places that I knew with all certainty had been here since time immemorial, notwithstanding the changes in surface appearances. This gave me an invaluable sense of wandering into the 'Mists of Time',² from which arose not only a feeling of connection with those who had painted here before me, but also with those who would come in the future – a connection through the memories I was making today. This was to me like a little prayer that humanity will overcome the trials of times yet to be.

Although it is not one of the canonical "Eight Views", I visited Mt. Ibuki many times, which at higher altitudes is often shrouded in fog. As I walked through these shifting veils, where the boundary between the visible and invisible is constantly in flux and the scenery drifts in and out of sight, I got a sense of the faith humanity puts in the common sense notions of physical place and observable phenomena.

My wanderings through the 'mists of time', and the things I saw there, gave me a feeling of connection with the times of other people, and thereby to a kind of universal memory. This is similar to what I am seeking through painting. The act of seeing always involves time. And seeing takes time.

¹ After several visits, I learned that this particular pine was planted about 150 years ago, and that according to records it was the third generation in a line of Karasaki pines dating back to the Nara period.

² As my work on the 'Mists of Time' project drew towards an end, it struck me that the scenery depicted in each one of the Views of Omi contains water. Water is a source of life, and I wondered if on some level this might have inspired the mists motif. Mists, like liquid water, are all around us. They cloud our vision of the past, present and future. But they are also forever in motion, and at times part to allow a glimpse of what lies hidden.



Night Rain at Karasaki (Utagawa Hiroshige)



Karasaki Pine, 2023