

The Culture of Writing in Nagoya

by Dennis Kishere

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Nagoya is situated about half way between Tokyo and Osaka and lies on the route of the old Tokaido road. Nagoya used to be part of the former Owari Domain 尾張藩 and is close to the sites of battles which lead to the establishment of the Tokugawa Bakufu 徳川幕府.

Nagoya has always been an important centre of culture and commerce. This city provides many cultural experiences to those who have the time and interest to explore its diverse districts.

Historical literary and cultural figures associated with the Nagoya region include the writer and painter Kuwayama Yoshiyuki 桑山義之, the actress Kawakami Sadayakko 川上貞奴 and the playwright and novelist Kishida Kunio 岸田国士. The writers Tsubouchi Shōyō 坪内逍遙 and Edogawa Rampo 江戸川乱歩 both attended school in Nagoya. Contemporary writers and artists are too numerous to mention here. There are many cultural and religious institutions with holdings of valuable and unique works of art and old books of historical importance.

During my recent stay in Nagoya I was able to savour some of this rich heritage by attending several events relating to the culture of books and writing.

An exhibition about the history of writing in Eastern Japan was held in January and February at the Nagoya City Museum. The exhibition was entitled 文字のチカラ: 古代東海の文字世界 (the power of writing : the world of writing in the ancient Tōkai region). The exhibition brought together a wide range of unique cultural treasures which would not otherwise be so easy to access and view. Some of the items were from the collection of the museum while others were on loan from institutions in Aichi and surrounding prefectures and also from Nara and Tokyo.



Photo: Nagoya City Museum

The display started with early Chinese coins and bronze mirrors of the second and third centuries as well as Japanese pottery of the second century onwards. These items, all inscribed with kanji 漢字 were discovered at various sites in the Tōkai region.

These archaeological finds were followed by exhibits of block printed and hand-written books as well as wooden writing slips (mokkan 木簡) held by nearby temples, shrines and universities. The books included historical documents of the former Owari Domain 尾張藩. Many of the books were on loan from the Hōsa Bunko 蓬左文庫 which has inherited the vast library of the Owari Tokugawa clan. Interesting exhibits included a 14th century handwritten Kojiki 古事記 from the library of the Ōsu Kannon Temple 大須観音宝音院 and a 14th century handwritten Nihon Shoki 日本書紀 from the Atsuta



Photo: Hosa Bunko Entrance

Shrine 熱田神宮 (This shrine in Nagoya holds the sacred sword Kusanagi no tsurugi 草薙劍 which is described in a story in the Nihon Shoki. The book was opened at the part where this story is related). Another important exhibit was a Hyakumantō 百万塔 (miniature pagoda) originally from the Hōryūji Temple 法隆寺 together with a block printed Daranikyō 陀羅尼經 of the eighth century.

This most important exhibition has been recorded in an illustrated catalogue which can be purchased from the Nagoya City Museum. This is their web site:

<http://www.museum.city.nagoya.jp/>

A few days later I visited an exhibition of 20 leading Japanese calligraphers. The exhibition was held at the Matsuzakaya Art Museum in the downtown Sakae district in late January and early February. It was entitled Kosei no Hana : Dentō wo Mirai e 個性の華 : 伝統を未来へ (individual brilliance : taking tradition to the future). Exhibitions in this series have been held many times since 1957. The works on display included breath-taking calligraphy in kanji and kana, beautifully rendering lines from Japanese and Chinese poems. I was particularly impressed by the powerful interpretation of the difficult character utsu 鬱 in a poem by Ryōkan 良寛. (鬱陶心無康)

The exhibitors also displayed their various seals (tenkoku 篆刻) skillfully and imaginatively carved so that they could beautifully complement their calligraphic works. The calligraphic works were mounted in tastefully designed frames or mounted on scrolls. A poem about snow was affixed to a shining silver scroll mounting.

The web site of the Matsuzakaya Art Museum can be viewed here:

<http://www.matsuzakaya.co.jp/nagoya/museum/>. An illustrated exhibition catalogue has been published by Asahi Shimbunsha 朝日新聞社.

A few days later I attended another exhibition of calligraphy, carved seals and Japanese and Western painting. This was the 45th Nitten 日展 exhibition for the Tōkai region, held at the Aichi Prefecture Art Gallery. One of the exhibitors showed me around and explained the intricacies of the different calligraphic styles and the inked impressions of carved seals. The calligraphy on display consisted of extracts from Japanese and Chinese poetry. Most of the calligraphy was mounted in glass frames. Some exhibits were rolled scrolls of whole poems, opened at a particular passage.

The exhibition included calligraphic renderings of verses from poets like Natsume Sōseki 夏目漱石, Saigyō 西行, Ryōkan 良寛, Wordsworth (in Japanese translation), Li Bai 李白, Su Dongpo 蘇東坡 and Tao Yuanming 陶淵明.

An illustrated catalogue of this exhibition, entitled Nitten Dai 45 Kai-Tōkai Ten 日展第45回-東海展 has been published by the Chūnichi Shimbun 中日新聞 newspaper.

From 31 January to 2 February a huge book sale was held at the headquarters of the Nagoya Old Books Association, the Nagoya Kosho Kaikan 名古屋古書会館 in Naka-ku 中区. The sale stock was grouped into sections from various Nagoya second-hand book sellers. There were traditionally bound wahan 和本 books from the Meiji period, runs of old illustrated magazines, replica hanga 版画 and books from the Taishō and Shōwa periods. Prices ranged from 100 Yen to many thousands of Yen for one book. I was able to buy some dust-free, well preserved wahan about calligraphy and kanbun for a few hundred Yen. However I had arrived 40 minutes after the opening time and there were already people walking out with bags full of interesting books, some of which I would have liked to buy.

There is no convenient place to finish this narrative because I have not finished my adventures and exploration. Nor am I sure where my travels will lead to next. If you would like to give me your thoughts or impressions about my report or suggestions for future themes, please contact our helpful editor. So this is a just a pause until next time. Please enjoy the photos which I took of the Hōsa Bunko entrance gate, the book fair and the Nagoya City Museum.



Photo: Nagoya Old Books Fair