

Chapter 3-7

Culture and Scenery of Lake Biwa

Abstract

The scenery of Lake Biwa has been the frequent subject of works of literature such as anthologies of classic Japanese poetry, tales and essays since roughly the 8th century. In the 16th century, the “Omi Hakkei” or the eight most scenic views around the lake were selected inspired by the “Eight Views of Xiaoxiang” depicting the scenery around Lake Dongting in China.

Keywords: Lake Biwa, Omi Hakkei

1. Composition of Poems on the Beautiful Scenery of the Lake

Lake Biwa has played an important formative role in the history and culture of the Omi region (the former name of Shiga Prefecture).

During the Jomon period that began approximately 13,000 or 14,000 years ago and lasted until 2,000 years ago, there were already 200 historic ruins around the lake, bearing witness to the close relationship of Lake Biwa to human beings. During the second half of the 6th century, many Japanese poets including Kakinomoto-no-Hitomaro composed poems that incorporated the lake and its beautiful scenery. From that time, these poems have appeared in many works of literature including anthologies of Japanese poetry, tales and essays. The scenery of the lake was also depicted on traditional Japanese

folding screens. Among these, the “Omi Meishozu Folding Screen” or “Folding Screen depicting Scenic Views around the Lake” was produced during the latter half of the Muromachi Period (14th – 16th centuries).

2. Establishment of the “Omi Hakkei” or “Eight Scenic Views in the Omi Region”

The scenes depicted in the “Omi Hakkei” were selected at the end of the 16th century. At that time, India-ink paintings from China had already found their way to Japan, among which the “Eight Views of Xiaoxiang” depicting the scenery around Lake Dongting in the northeast of the Hunan Province was particularly admired.

Inspired by the “Eight Views of Xiaoxiang,” Konoe Nobutada (1564 – 1614), a Jap-



Fig. 3-7-1 “Omi Meishozu Folding Screen”
(Property of the Museum of Modern Art, Shiga.)

anese courtier known as a poet, painter and calligrapher, is said to have selected the following scenes.

Mii no Bansho
(The Evening Bell at Mii Temple)
Awazu no Seiran
(The Clear Breeze at Awazu)
Seta no Sekisho
(The Evening Glow at Seta)
Ishiyama no Shugetsu
(The Autumn Moon at Ishiyama)
Yabase no Kihan
(The Returning Sailing Ship at Yabase)
Karasaki no Yau
(The Evening Rain at Karasaki)
Katata no Rakugan
(The Wild Geese Returning Home at Katata)
Hira no Bosetsu
(The Evening Snow at Hira)

The first word of the Japanese names is the location in the surrounds of Lake

Biwa, while the last is identical to the titles used in the “Eight Views of Xiaoxiang.” Undoubtedly, Konoe selected these eight scenes from numerous candidates around the lake, taking hints from the “Eight Views of Xiaoxiang.” Surely, no other work so perfectly matches the names and format of the Chinese works.

The eight scenes also appear as themes in geographical booklets of historical remains, on folding screens, thick-paper sliding doors and ceramics. Among those who made use of the eight scenes in woodblock prints are the Ukiyoe artists Utagawa (Ando) Hiroshige and Katsushika Hokusai, and, by the end of the Edo Period, poems inspired by the “Eight Scenes of Omi” came to be composed in 112 places around Japan.

The name “Biwa” derives from the Japanese musical instrument called “Biwa” held by the statue of “Benzaiten,” or “Goddess Saraswati” on Chikubushima Island on Lake Biwa.



Fig. 3-7-2 “Seta no Sekisho (The Evening Glow at Seta)” by Utagawa Hiroshige, one of the eight scenic views in the Omi region [Uoei Impression] (Property of Otsu City Museum of History)



Fig. 3-7-3 Yabase no Kihan (The Returning Sailing Ship at Yabase)” by Utagawa Hiroshige, one of the eight scenic views in the Omi region [Eikyudo Impression] (Property of Otsu City Museum of History)

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