First Report from Japan

[January, 2001] Arriving Wednesday week we took a bus directly from Narita airport to Mito: late afternoon across Kanto plain, populated now with towns, but still rich in rice paddies, to remind that its agriculture was the power base for the Tokagawa shoguns that ruled Japan for 250 years (the famous closure), before the emperor Meiji claimed power & renamed Edo Tokyo. At first there were dark ridges cedars, with golden tucked in between, but then the plain: neat vegetable gardens by houses, onion tops knotted, cabbages, even lettuces, kale, orange trees, & everywhere those sculpted, umbrelliferous pines.

In Mito next day the four sights/sites: from early c19 aristocratic school, the matted floors & screened partitions, peaked roofs, garden with gnarled trees, a plum grove, closely planted, symphony of interlacing branches & sinuous trunks, near ruined castle; the civic art museum, elegant & spacious new building with show of early works by Edward Hopper, with early c20 sculptor's studio in garden; then across town to great public park, another plantation of plums, some coming into flower, more sculpted pines, also a great Shinto shrine almost like a fair, stands selling food lining the paths, a priest dancing & carrying great ears of grain, drumming; finally fourth site, the new Art Tower, civic arts complex infinitely more elegant than Lincoln Center, with the angled, faceted tower at center (cf. Liberty), web of girders inside a spectacle themselves, great view of mountains & sunset.

Friday, train back to Tokyo, fast train to Nagano in Alps, snow & beautiful mountains, changed to train for Matsumoto. Went to see museum of Ukiye-o (spell?) woodcuts, 53 stations on Tokkaido road: vignettes of daily life, comic, bright colors. Evening treated to a traditional Japanese New Year's dinner: many, tiny courses served on varied porcelains: lots of wasabi, horseradish.

Saturday local train to see Rokuzan museum: classmate of Hopper at New York School of Art, knew Rodin, lived with Fairchild family in New York, introduced western style bronze sculpture to Japan, died of consumption aged only thirty.

Sunday visited feudal castle in Matsumoto, wonderful hinoki cypress, tsuga (hemlock), and matsu (pine) in massive beams: nearly froze, it was so cold. Found a used bookstore with piles of floppy, stiched hand-written & painted books. Blizzard arrived at supper time, eaten in a yakitori, chicken barbecue joint.

Monday up at 5, still snowing, traipsed through streets to station. The 6:03 left on time, but kept jerking to halts, finally stopped altogether. Announcements kept coming through. A doctor's wife, just back from two years in Minnesota (husband at Mayo's) explained that a matsu had fallen on the track. Two hours late we got to Tokyo, dragged through snow to our hotel in an incredible suburb called
Tachigawa, close to the mountains, but an hour or so from the action in Tokyo. After unpacking we managed to catch a train to town (the rail-subway network is wonderful: announcements in English as well as Japanese) & went to Asak'sa, in old lower town (Shitamachi), craftsmen, merchants, all the services for the court & still lively, with crowds making New Year's vows at great Kannon shrine. Ate wonderful little waffles with heart of sweet bean paste, pressed out on a great press.

Tuesday got a slow start, but then walked through part of Imperial Gardens, collected some seeds of ligularia & toad lily (tricyrtis): walls of palace grounds massive & chiseled stones like nothing ever seen anywhere else (Cyclopean walls in Italy not so neat). Plum trees coming into flower here, too. Even saw a sidewalk market with bonsai plums & oranges: huge fruit on tiny tree. Amazing variety of cyclamens & orchids. Back to hotel for dinner with our main host, professor of art history, & his wife: another spectacle of textures & colors, sea urchin au gratin our favorite.

Wednesday Gail to her first lecture, I to explore used book district, conveniently concentrated in a hundred or so shops at Jimbocho: two first class collections of western literary scholarship & literature, only two shops with antique Japanese, one superb shop with c16 & c17 Latin & Greek classics: I found a rare & important Virgil. Dinner meeting Japanese scholars at home of cultural attache in American Embassy compound.

Thursday my lecture at university, so not venturing out. Friday last day here, then down to Nara, Kyoto, etc.

To be continued,

jvs