

Inspiration and a Visual Feast await visitors to Arte Piazza, Bibai

by Mark Brazil

Hokkaido offers pleasant surprises to art lovers and one of the finest sites to visit, Arte Piazza, Bibai, is barely an hour from the island's administrative capital and gateway city of Sapporo. Once a thriving mining town, Bibai languished, but it is now renowned for its extraordinary pioneering vision of combining art with nature. Through the spectacular sculptures of Kan Yasuda situated in the beautiful parkland of the Art Plaza, visitors may investigate their own inner and outer spaces, they can admire, wander, moreover they may touch and feel the art, and relish freely in the landscape. This project is truly inspirational, inviting guests to explore their own feelings in a very special environment.

Exit the highway from Sapporo and turn east, and you will find that narrow route 135 winds gently into forested hills by way of a lush valley. The rice fields of the Ishikari plain are now but a memory and ahead the valley seems to narrow towards nowhere in particular. Then, suddenly, on the right of the road a modest sign announces Arte Piazza Bibai. It seems an odd setting for an Italian sign, but beyond it a delightfully old-fashioned and well-maintained traditional wooden school building appears in beautifully kept park-like grounds, just begging for picnickers to descend on its grass lawns and park benches, for young lovers to stroll around distractedly, for families to play, and for snow lovers to romp in deep winter powder. That this attraction is free is astonishing, because this perfect picnic venue is just the first layer of the onion; that it is open 24-hours a day and year round is nothing short of amazing. This is truly accessible inspirational arte.

Enter the park and peel back the next layer of the piazza, for this is a site with hidden treasures. Climb the little raised knoll to your right and there you will find nestling in its top a sunken outdoor auditorium at the centre of which stands a great marble shape, smoothly surfaced, sensuously rounded, and gently curving as if begging to be stroked, or even caressed. This is just the first of many astonishing pieces scattered intriguingly around the grounds. As with each of the other pieces, that slowly reveal themselves as one wanders the 17-acre park and along woodland trails, this one is not labelled.

Nameless, it invites silent contemplation. Lift your line of sight from the hollow where this piece sits and enjoy the rounded, wooded hills beyond and be reminded that the siting and setting of each piece invites not only admiration for Kan Yasuda's work, but also for the great work beyond – Nature. Wander uphill towards the woodland and trace the course of a short, broad stream that emerges and disappears miraculously. Here stand Celestial Appreciation and Celestial Purification but for the many children who visit it is the water between that invites play, splashes, chuckles and laughter. Further on, trails into woodland and clearings offer sudden vistas of pieces standing amidst trees or open to the sky. One large bronze nestling amidst conifers will always represent to me a dragon's egg, it seems timeless, waiting to hatch. My imagination runs riot. In winter the site is magically transformed by deep snow through which trails are groomed allowing access to key areas. Deepening snow steadily transforms the pieces, then as spring approaches and snow begins to retreat they slowly emerge suggesting a miraculous



rebirth, it is hard not to expect them to sprout anew and grow fresh spring-like forms.

Viewing these grand sculptures in an outdoor setting, I find myself thinking not so much of the artist, nor of what his creations might represent to him, but of the delightful juxtaposition of creative art and their surroundings, the evolving, natural beauty of the shifting seasons. That some of the pieces resemble the heavy wave-washed granite boulders I was tempted to carry home from the beaches of Okushiri Island, or the river boulders water-polished in the mountain streams that form the headwaters of the Ishikari River, may merely be coincidental, but like those boulders they are intensely tactile, textured and inviting touch, encouraging one to sit on them, to pause and reflect on their natural surroundings, even to recline on them and sky-gaze; what is more, there is a wonderfully harmonious relationship between the unchanging solidity of the sculptures and the ephemeral seasonal nature of their surroundings.

Separate megalithic studies in white marble and black bronze are the trademark of Bibai-born artist/sculptor Kan Yasuda, but though local and rural in his origins, his monumental sculptures now appear on permanent display internationally as far afield as Australia, USA, Spain's Canary Islands, Italy and the UK, and regularly in exhibitions such as *Touching Time* that is currently being held at Christie's New York. In Japan he is of course well-represented in Hokkaido, nowhere better of course than at the Bibai collection, which was opened in July 1992, but tantalizing individual pieces are on display across the country in: Tokyo, Yokohama, Hitachi, Kawaguchi, Sakata, Shirakawa, Niigata, Karuizawa, Okazaki, Naoshima and Miyazaki. Names for his pieces crop up repeatedly in catalogues; their names are the same, though their forms differ from location to location, and they seem named as if to entice imagination, reflection and focus on the scene and the setting more than to describe the sculpted entity. Thus *Shape of Mind*, *Key to a Dream*, *The Echoes*, *Interspace*, *Dragon*, *Secret of the Sky*, *Celestial Appreciation* and *Celestial Purification* are ciphers, but with no set key to unlock their codes. They alternate; some are massive, modern, geometric and powerful in form, while others seem essentially feminine, gentle and curving.



Strolling through the Arte Piazza Bibai, one encounters pathways leading to sculptures within woodland, in open spaces of green sward, within the sports gymnasium of the school where children love to climb on them and explore them by touch, while outside dark bronze shapes warm in the sunshine inviting one to recline and sky gaze, revelling in the warmth, imagining shapes in the clouds by daylight and contemplating the mysteries of the star-studded sky by night. In winter the marbles are shrouded in protected covers, while the bronzes are softened by snowy capes and deep snow surrounding them; the whole scene takes on a strange, crystal desert appearance – art shrouded by nature.

Antonio Paolucci, former head of the Artistic and Cultural Endowments' Office, and now Director of the Vatican Museums, Italy, wrote of Kan Yasuda that only two words are necessary to define his artistic aesthetic: minimalism, and animism. I agree and further feel that in experiencing his pieces in the "flesh" (so-to-speak), the philosophical and religious aspects of Yasuda's work speak loudly. They appear as if some minimalist haiku had been transcribed in marble or bronze. Their presence seems to create solitude and sacred space around them, just as a

revered rock or a totemic tree in the pantheon of Shinto animistic sacred sites is marked by ringing it with a plaited straw Shimenawa, or just as the Ainu mark their sacred animistic sites and send offerings and messages to the gods with sacred carved Inau. Kan's art somehow draws in the surrounding landscape, and it entices in people, so that it feels natural to explore the intimate views seen through his structures and keyholes, to sit awhile atop a sun-warmed sculpture, or to pose within their frames.

Born in rural Hokkaido in 1945, Kan received a master's degree in sculpture from Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music in 1969. Following a visit to Italy on a fellowship in 1970, he made his studio-home at Pietrasanta in the northern part of Tuscany, in the province of Lucca, close to the source of arguably the finest of all marble. Yet, the culmination of his life's work is to be in Bibai. Art critic Shibahashi Tomoo described Arte Piazza Bibai as "A Place to Find Inner Peace", and wrote of it that: "...this art square, which the sculptor, Yasuda Kan, is determined to make the consummation of his life's work, does not belong to the city of Bibai alone, but reaches beyond all national boundaries to transmit its message to the world..."

Now one of Japan's preeminent contemporary sculptors, Kan's works here inspire the modern



visitor, but hint at the region's past and its previous dependence on coal. With the closure of the two main mines in 1963 and 1973 decline and depression came to this once booming town, its mining community drained away to other areas of Japan, but even before the closures, the area was tinged with mourning for lost miners. As the population haemorrhaged, the sounds of playing children faded from the Bibai landscape and their erstwhile schools closed their doors. Sakae Elementary School was one of those scheduled for demolition, but its nostalgia-inducing brown wooden structure and its gymnasium were saved and new life was breathed into them with the placement of Yasuda's abstract sculptures within and around them.

In his dark bronzes I see echoes of the past, mourning for lost miners, for the town's lost children, indications of the pall of coal dust that must have pervaded the atmosphere of the area, but in the whiteness of the Italian marble pieces I see the beautiful pristine draping of winter snows bringing beauty to an industrial landscape. The setting here is so surrounded by nature that seasonal colours make repeated visits enticing, to see the pieces offset against a blue summer sky, against the vibrant oranges and reds of autumn, the fresh greens of spring, the deep lush greens of summer, and their



contours further softened by a fresh coating of powder snow.

While many pieces invite tactile perception, which engenders joy in children and tears sometimes in adults, other pieces suggest immersion or long-range viewing. The water aspects of the Arte Piazza are, in my limited experience, unique. Here there are no showy symmetrical fountains suggestive of engineering and artifice that one might find in a grand European-style garden, there are no Zen-induced representations of natural pond and stream perfection, as one might find in a small temple garden or grand strolling garden in Japan, instead there are invitations. A shallow pool, floored with white marble rocks, invites splashing and paddling. Or, when calm-surfaced, it invites absorption in the reflection of the school, and the sky. The nearby stream, picked out in white marble and well-seen through the frame on the hillside, is so designed as to present a soundscape that changes from the rushing, riffling of a mountain stream to the gentle chuckles of a lowland brook and the quiet murmurs of a pond, as one walks beside it. Like the three great strolling gardens of Japan, Kenroku-en, Kairoku-en and Koraku-en, Arte Piazza Bibai invites strolling; unlike those controlled strolling environments however, Kan's legacy in Bibai invites unfettered wanderings, literally and imaginatively.



How to reach Arte Piazza Bibai:

From Sapporo, Bibai Station can be reached by train in 40 minutes, and from there it is just 15 minutes by bus or taxi to the Arte Piazza. By car, take the Hokkaido Expressway getting off at Bibai IC, from where Arte Piazza is just five minutes away. The site is mostly outdoors, but has two indoor areas (in the school and the gymnasium), a small shop, and a beautifully placed coffee shop offering views to the grounds and several sculptures over a relaxing tea or coffee. Opening times of the indoor facilities are limited, so best to check ahead if the weather promises to be unkind.

And if visiting in person isn't a practical option, then take a virtual stroll through the grounds of the plaza by visiting the excellent website: <http://www.artepiazza.jp>

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