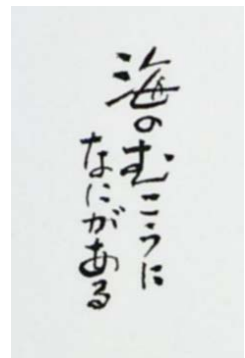


Warabe-e: Nostalgic Memories of Bygone Days



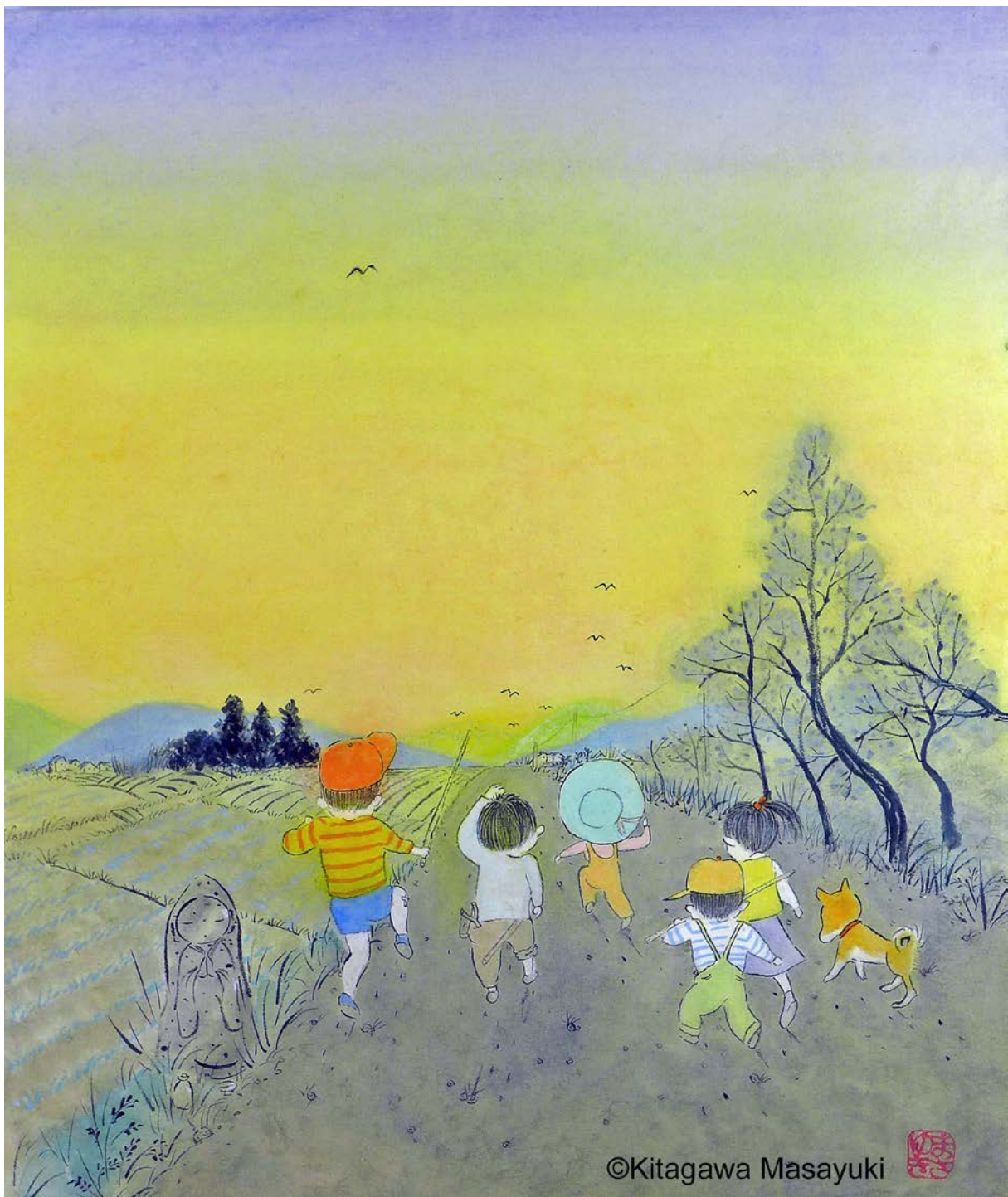
“Children of the Sea”

The picture above, together with a note by the artist muttering “What lies beyond the ocean?” shows a quintessential heartwarming scene of childhood, when every day is fresh and dazzling. It is a *warabe-e* (children’s picture) on show at a museum in Izu-Kogen in Shizuoka Prefecture run by the artist Masayuki Kitagawa and his wife. Recently I visited the museum, the Kitagawa Masayuki Warabe-e Kan (Masayuki Kitagawa Children’s Picture Gallery), and talked with them.



Warabe-e Featuring Children

In warabe-e, nostalgic everyday scenes centering on children are drawn with a gentle touch. Looking at the delicate, light brushwork, scenes of your own childhood from long, long ago unintentionally well up in your mind. It is somehow very soothing to spend time leisurely gazing at the pictures in this museum.

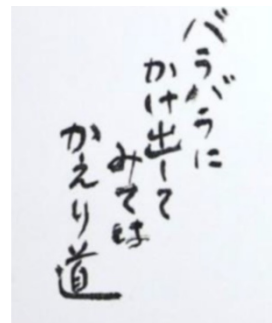


©Kitagawa Masayuki



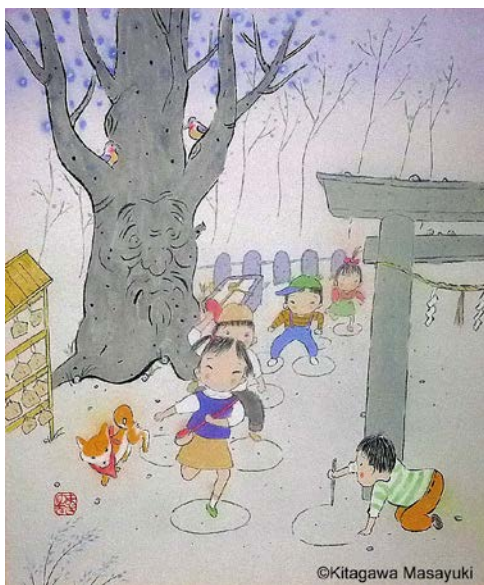
“Out of Step”

Almost all the pictures portray scenes of children with their friends or families. “In the past,” remarks Mr. Kitagawa, “we used to think up games and play them amid nature, surrounded by trees, plants, flowers, and insects. The pictures in this museum are almost all based on the theme of play. After all, then and now, it is at that moment when children are most jovial and full of pep.”



Child's Spirit Remains Deep Inside

If anything, warabe-e portray not only children themselves but also the childlike spirit that dwells inside adults.



“Hopscotch”



“Hide-and-Seek”

This childlike spirit lies in the deepest part of the psyche. Everyone had a childhood, and even after you have become an adult, suddenly, from the depths of your innermost being, you can recall the games you played so frantically, completely oblivious to the time of day, and the songs you sang in your childhood days. Transcending time, these are nostalgic and unforgettable memories.



Visitors Unintentionally Hum Children's Songs

One room at the museum features pictures based on children's songs. If you sang the song in your younger days, you would remember the melody of the tune, who you sang it with, and where. Quite a few visitors start unintentionally humming the tune, and apparently some groups of elderly women even burst into song in chorus.



“Red Dragonfly”



“The Singing of Insects”

Mr. Kitagawa sings children’s songs as he draws. Children’s songs are closely related to the four seasons. “When you sing children’s songs,” says Mr. Kitagawa, “scenes that you saw in the past spring to mind one after the other.”



Kanji-e: Images Spawned by Kanji



“Michi” (Road)

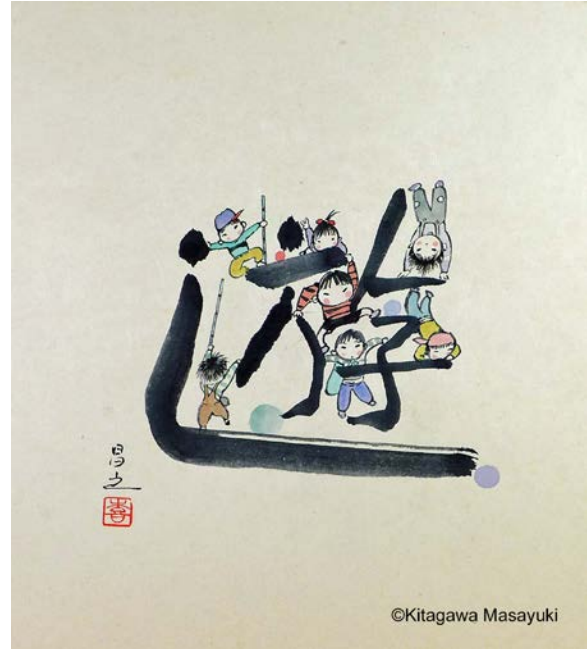


“Sato” (Village)

Kanji-e are children's pictures combined with kanji. The artist draws one kanji and then, thinking about the meaning of that character, adds the figures of children or animals as imagined from the shape of the kanji. "When I begin drawing," Mr. Kitagawa says, "the children just start moving of their own accord!" Apparently, when he looks at the finished work, the artist himself often wonders at the outcome.



"Kumo" (Cloud)



"Asobu" (Play)

Not only visitors from Chinese-speaking regions and South Korea but also Westerners show interest in the *kanji-e* combining kanji and children. In particular, I was told, many people gaze intently at the work titled "*Kumo*" (Cloud), which shows a dragon rising above a cloud.



Starting Point Was Purity of Children

In his younger days Mr. Kitagawa drew social caricatures for a newspaper. Although he saw the task as a contribution to society, gradually he realized it was simply poking fun at superficial aspects and lost interest. He would spend days searching for a topic that could be turned into a picture. One picture that took up a certain accident received an award, but Mr. Kitagawa was troubled by the act of making fun of other people's misfortune.



“I’m a Scrubbing Brush”



“Bonfire”

In his student days Mr. Kitagawa went to the countryside on a volunteer exchange program. The sight of children’s gentle, sparkling eyes when they saw a cartoon that he had been drawing for them changed him completely. The figures of children playing simply, sometimes mischievously, seemed so very pure. After that, Mr. Kitagawa met children through drawing classes that he held in his own apartment and around the country, and he began to wonder how he could express the emotions and sentiments that he felt on those occasions. Thus, Mr. Kitagawa decided to follow the warabe-e track.

Ink Painting with Mineral Pigments

Mr. Kitagawa draws his pictures on a type of washi (traditional Japanese paper) called *mashi*. For paints, he uses mineral pigments powdered from natural minerals and dissolved with animal-extract pasty glue. The ink that he uses when first drawing an outline with a fine brush is made from burnt pine. The ink made by kneading soot from burnt pine has a faintly purplish depth to it.



“May It Be Fine Tomorrow!”



“Wild Cherry Tree”

As in Japanese-style painting, Mr. Kitagawa does not make a draft but instead adopts an all-or-nothing approach. He is unable to adjust colors while drawing, as in oil painting. When the result is not what he wants, he starts again from scratch. The shaded parts at the borders between colors are the result of paint mixture and skillful brushwork refined over many years of experience.

Foreigners Have a Childlike Spirit Too

The museum refrains from telling visitors what they should see. "There is no need to say anything because visitors soon become immersed in the pictures, the world of the pictures, and the world of children," explains Mr. Kitagawa's wife. "There is never anyone who looks at a picture and says they cannot understand what it is about. Just by looking at a picture, they remember doing such things themselves and are carried back to their own childhood days."



“Watermelon”



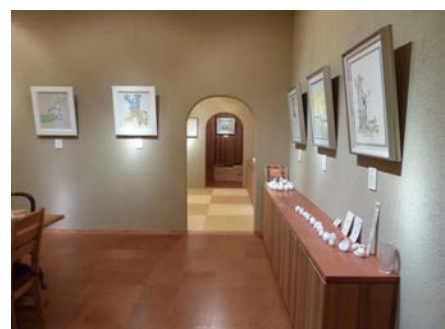
“Rolling Downhill”

Games and events may be different in other countries, but the child's spirit seems to be universal. Mr. Kitagawa's wife sings Japanese children's songs to foreigners, who are delighted to hear melodies that are different to those in their own country. She gives explanations and answers questions using a smartphone translation app. Neither Mr. Kitagawa nor his wife can speak a foreign language, but they come into direct contact with foreigners and are playing a role in warmhearted international exchange.

Sometimes it is possible for visitors to sit around a hearth and, while drinking tea, listen to a talk by the artist. To thoroughly immerse yourself in the spiritual world of children, you are recommended to visit with plenty of time to spare. Listen carefully amid the silence, and you are sure to hear the voices of children!

Museum Information

The museum, which is located in a quiet area, gives shape to an image nurtured by Mr. Kitagawa. The diatomite walls, which help control humidity, are a



combination of various colors, so a good balance is achieved whatever picture is hung. The exhibition room, which has a circular arch-like entrance, combines cork and tatami flooring and is a gently relaxing space. Indeed, not just the exhibits but the exhibition space as well can be described as a work of art.

Kitagawa Masayuki Warabe-e Kan

(Masayuki Kitagawa Children's Picture Gallery)

1208-59 Yawatano, Ito, Shizuoka Prefecture

7 min. walk (500 meters) from Izu-Kogen Station on the Izukyuko Line

Free car park (five cars)

Open: 10:00–17:00

Closed: Tuesdays and Wednesdays (open on these days on national holidays, during the spring and summer school holidays, and at New Year's); December 1–31 for winter holiday

Admission: ¥700 for adults (senior high school students and above); ¥400 for children (elementary and junior high school students); ¥500 for senior citizens (70+)

Tel.: 0557-54-7011

Website: <http://warabeekan.c.ooco.jp/> (Japanese site only)

Pets welcome; step-free facilities; exhibited works change seasonally.

MAP



The elegant exterior of the museum resembles a storehouse. Since there are many fallen leaves, no gutters have been installed. The sloping roof drops fallen leaves directly onto the ground.



Mr. Masayuki Kitagawa