

“Near the marble fireplace stands a large block of coal more than a meter high; it signals that we are in a coal-rich country.” (p125)

Michel Ribaud tells of his visit to Hokkaido in 1897 in “Japanese and Ainu in Yeso, a summer in Northern Japan”. The style of the travel report does not hide the main interest of his trip: the possible christianization of the island. His story, more focused on the progress of the Kaitakushi than on the landscapes of Hokkaido, shows the Europeans evolving views of this territory and breaks with some romantic codes of the previous English-speaking authors. The latter, impressed by a nature that differs less from Europe and the United States than that of the rest of Japan, project their own fantasy of a primitive nature which the Japanese, through industrialization, are taking away from them.

Did they see coal as a souvenir of the pristine nature that they so desperately wanted to see?

Interstice garden

Leaving the Hokkaido Botanical Garden, we moved toward Susukino to have lunch. Between two office buildings, a structure of seventy centimeters high blocks the way to the backyard. There we see gestures enunciating a garden. Three rectangular paving stones stand vertically in the foreground. To their left, five others are lying down and shape the beginning of a winding path. In the background, three last paving stones are erected, but one bears against its counterpart. The groups of paving stones are surrounded by white gravel to underline their presence. The whole is installed on ochre and grey gravel. In August 2010, the separation of the ochre and grey was clear but today the line is blurred, some weeds grow sporadically and the garden is no longer maintained.

Winter in Tenjinyama

Winter might be the best season to understand gardens. At this time, they fully expose their artificiality by revealing on-site maintenance devices.

In Hokkaido, the water freezes in winter. The pond of the small Japanese garden of Tenjinyama park is emptied in November. At its bottom, 4 medium-sized stones hold a metal grid, which can be used as a filter when draining.

Are these stones an essential part of the garden in the same way as the stones that protrude from the water surface?

Charcoal
Coal

The coal goes back to the depths from which they extracted it and the charcoal floats to the surface. It takes 300 million years for wood to sink.

After buying 80kg of coal

In the parking lot of a kaitenzushi in Shiroishi, a garden of approximately 10 meters long and 4 meters deep separates us from the restaurant. The concrete parking stop blocks draw a dashed line that emphasizes the separation between the tar and the earth. When parking from the back, the garden seems to be built to, for the time of the maneuver, offer a scenery to contemplate from the interior rearview mirror.

4 massive half-buried and asymmetrically placed stones, 1 Japanese white pine, 2 Japanese black pines and a plum tree overall form the garden. Between August 2019 and July 2020, a new arrangement is made (the one that is still present today). It consists of the addition of a semi-buried rock and a Japanese black pine.

Two stories of soccer and coal mining

In Lens, a French town known for its mining history, soccer was mainly played by miners. The team spirit that the sport brought continued underground and allowed for better performance in the mines. The bosses would have encouraged the construction of sports infrastructures in order to increase profits. In La Tribune des mineurs of March 8, 1947, we read: “You had to see how hard they [the young miners] played to make their team triumph [...] and the next day in the pit how proud they were to recount the events...” (read in “Sport et mobilisation politique dans les mines (1944-1950)” from Marion Fontaine.)

A rumor dating back to 1966, when North Korea was playing its first FIFA World Cup, was that the team’s players were sent to hard labor in the coal mine when they lost their game. The rumor started again on June 17, 2010, just after the North Korean defeat against Brazil (2-1). But it seems that it is unfounded: in 2002, Daniel Gordon made a documentary film on the 7 players still alive playing for the Chollima Football Team in 1966: The game of their lives. All of them deny the information, but the rumor of the coal mine punishment still remains in the memories.

Night guard on the mountain

We used to have a miner turned security guard here, said Moe san one day.
We used to have a miner turned security guard here, said Mami san another day.
We used to have a miner turned security guard here, said Ryotaro san even another day.

The coal of Yahoo! auction

Where could we acquire coal? With nowhere further to wander around on the internet or at home centers, we ended up at Yahoo! Auction and decided to give it a try on the one offered by this private seller. It said it weighed around 100 kg and cost 1,200 yen. In the bag were several tiny pieces of coal.

What we found out afterwards was that the price of coal these days has been around 10 yen per 1 kg. This means it costs 1,200,000 yen per 100 kg in case you purchase one at the Yahoo! Auction. Without a sufficient budget, we gave up on buying coal at the website. (From around 2021, the price is surging.)

Black of coal

In his book Connoisseuring Calligraphy, calligrapher Kyuyo Ishikawa writes of calligraphy implement “black ink.” “If a writing brush is a tool equivalent to a chisel, then the black ink should also be nothing but the shade, generated in hollows of engraved traces, out of the reach of lights. While the letters we write are gray when written with pencils, lighter gray with mechanical ones, black or blue with ball-point pens, and blue-black with fountain pens, we usually do not even mind this color and just dismiss it by calling it ‘black’. It is because these are shades of hollows of engraved traces.” Having been interested in the color “black,” I was fascinated by “the blackness” of coals when I encountered it for the first time. The long, long line made underground out of the reach of the light. The black stone derived there looked just as if it was the materialization of shades.

Uncle at the geopark

Entering the geopark, there waited for us this older man. We thought we would leave there shortly, but it was too late, despite our intention to take a walk around the lake nearby before it’d get dark. He was all smiles inviting us into the gallery, then began to turn on lights and videos and everything.

Video: This land, the vast plain brought about by the pyroclastic flow, is called “flatland.” Flatland does not have the notion of “height,” and thus people cannot measure “depth” with perspective. In winter there forms a dense fog, thus things in the distance appear vague and those nearby appear clear, which allows people to finally get to measure distances with an aerial perspective. This forces people to go out only in winter, and to stay safe inside the house during summer.

(The video part is an altered version of the text from E. A. Abbott’s “Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions”, published in 1884)

Alexandre Kato

Alex, a friend of mine, is always wearing attire with floral patterns on. When his shirt is not flower-patterned, his pants are. His attire shines bright in Hokkaido in winter. Alex does not have a winter cap, and he bought a full-black balaclava following his arrival at Hokkaido.

Another friend of mine, Aya, professionally creates clothing out of fabric products. One time she makes shirts out of typical European tablecloth and another time she makes pants out of a towel from some country. I recalled; I saw a balaclava made of a flower-patterned blanket in her shop before I’d come to Hokkaido. Now I’m regretting, I should’ve bought one.

Mobile wall

What a shame they engrave permanent borders on earth, to strengthen the walls dividing territories! This revolutionary idea, which was believed to bring people liberty, eventually exposed many frailties. They should’ve just left the space there as it had been!

Winterizing

In my house, my stove and circulator get wrapped in plastic bags, in summer and winter respectively, to be tucked away in the warehouse.

When I visited Hokkaido in November, it was right at the beginning of “the winterizing” of plants here. Plants, stored in straw mats and nets, were like electrical appliances which get stored as the seasons go by. As December came, people began to prepare for Christmas. They took these plastic trees out of boxes and began to spread their branches once suppressed.

