

【Cormorant Fishing Spectators (Paintings on a Pair of Folding Screens)】

These scenes of cormorant fishing on the Nagara River are from a pair of six-paneled folding screens produced during the middle of the Edo period (1603–1867). The images depict both the changing of the seasons and the sequence of events during an evening on the Nagara. The screen on the right shows a spring scene of spectator boats following the fishing boats as they progress in a loose formation downstream. In contrast, the scene on the left screen shows the six fishing vessels in autumn, drawn into a single line across the breadth of the river. This procession, called the *sōgarami*, is still performed today as the climax of each evening's display.

Other details in the images show the traditional cormorant fishing (*ukai*) practices of the Nagara River. Cormorant masters (*ushō*) are depicted standing at the boats' prows while holding the birds' leads (*tanawa*), which have become tangled as the birds dart and dive. The cormorant masters in the painting are using their right hands to untangle the lines, just as is done today.

The tradition of watching *ukai* for entertainment is also clearly depicted on the folding screens. The activity enjoyed a significant rise in popularity following a visit in 1688 by the famous *haikai* poet Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694). A poem he wrote about the viewing experience helped popularize the activity among both common people and the aristocratic elite.

In these images, passengers on the spectator boats are clearly relaxing with food and drink. Female entertainers and *wakashu* (young male companions) in colorful garb pour sake for their patrons. Tea-making sets and luxurious black-lacquered food containers called *jūbako* can also be seen in some of the boats. The vessels fitted with roofs and bamboo blinds carry high-status passengers, as indicated by the cylindrical, lacquer-rimmed paper lanterns bearing their family crests.

The similarities between these images and contemporary cormorant fishing on the Nagara River are a testament to the degree to which the region's traditions have been preserved. The original screens are kept at the Gifu City Museum of History.