

## Ohara and Literature

During the Heian period, Ohara was a quiet mountain village tucked away from the hustle and bustle of Kyoto. In fact, its seclusion attracted more than one member of the court seeking refuge from political rivals.

According to one story, in the second half of the ninth century, a prince named Koretaka no Miko (844–897) arrived in Ohara. He was the first son of the emperor, but decided to become a priest when his political ambitions were thwarted. Ariwara no Narihira, one of the leading poets of the day, recited the following *waka* poem when he visited the prince to express his sorrow for the prince's sad destiny:

When I forget our fate,  
I wonder if it is not a dream,  
for how could I have imagined  
I would have to toil so far in snow  
to see my beloved prince.

(*Wasurete wa / yume ka to zo omou / omoikiya / yuki fumi wakete / kimi o min to wa*)  
From *The Tales of Ise* (Penguin Books, 2016) p.122.

Eventually, more people came to settle in Ohara. The area became known as a place where one could seek peace of mind through Buddhism. Many of these newcomers chose not to join a large temple, however, but to practice their spirituality in nature. Some developed prodigious talents in various forms of Japanese literature, such as *waka* poetry.

In the second half of the eleventh century, a priest named Ryozen wrote the following poem in the famous anthology *One Hundred Poets, One Poem Each* (*Ogura Hyakunin Isshu*):

With a lonely heart,  
I step outside my hut  
and look around.  
Everywhere's the same—  
autumn at dusk.

(*Sabishisa ni / yado o tachiidete / nagamureba / izuko mo onaji / aki no yuugure*)

From *One Hundred Poets, One Poem Each* (Penguin Books, 2018), p. 84.

Some believed literature contradicted Buddhist teachings and undermined spiritual progress. The poets in Ohara had to reflect deeply on the balance of faith and literature. Perhaps for this reason, themes of loneliness, tranquility, and purity of heart became associated with the area.