

Basho in Otsu

The poet Matsuo Basho (1644–1694) was a frequent visitor to Otsu. He is most famous today for his haiku poems, and wrote poetry in his spare time while working as a teacher of letters after making a name for himself in the literary circles of Edo (modern-day Tokyo). However, he was never completely satisfied with urban life, and at the peak of his fame he began wandering Japan composing prose and poetry inspired by his travels.

In Basho's time, Otsu was the final stop before Kyoto on the Tokaido road between Edo and Kyoto, and it is not surprising that the itinerant poet eventually ended up there. Otsu's secluded temples and traditional neighborhoods seem to have appealed to Basho, and were the subject of many of his poems. He wrote 89 poems about places in and around Otsu, representing 10 percent of his published works.

Basho returned to Otsu so frequently that a group of his students began living in Katata, north of the city center. Basho stayed nearby at the Ukimido Hall, writing poems about this "floating pavilion," and about the towering pine tree at Karasaki Shrine to the south. These two sites were also immortalized by woodblock print artists as part of the Eight Views of Omi, a traditional selection of scenic views of Omi Province (present-day Shiga Prefecture). Another notable site in Otsu that is connected with Basho is Iwamadera Temple. The carp pond there is believed to be the inspiration for one of his most famous haiku: "an ancient pond / a frog jumps in / the splash of water." A large stone in the garden bears a plaque featuring the poem.

Basho loved Otsu so much that his final wish was to be buried in the city. After his death in Osaka, his friends and students sailed his body upriver to Lake Biwa. His grave is at Gichuji Temple, in central Otsu.