Calligraphy: Three Heian Poems

Translation with calligraphy by Kyoko Selden

These three Heian-period waka poems—the first by Buddhist priest Henjō (816-89), the second by court poet Ōshikōchi no Mitsune (859-925), and the third by female poet Ise no Taifu (circa 989-1060)—were prepared for Marc Peter Keane’s book, Songs in the Garden: Poetry and Gardens in Ancient Japan (Ithaca: MPK Books, 2012). Although these particular versions of the poems did not make the final cut for the book manuscript, Kyoko saved them in a scrapbook along with other favorites she had produced over the years.

The poems read as follows:

蓮の露を見て読める
はちす葉のにごりに染まぬ心もて
なにかは露を珠とあざむく
僧正遍昭
古今和歌集 165

hasu no tsuyu o mite yomeru
hachisuba no nigori ni shimanu kokoro mote
nanika wa tsuyu o tama to azamuku
Sōjō Henjō
Kokin wakashū, poem 165

Composed on seeing the dew on a lotus.

The lotus leaves, unstained by the muddy waters—why then do they deceive us with dewdrops shimmering gem-like?

* The opening of the poem references 不染世間法 如蓮華在水, a line in the Lotus Sutra that compares the purity of the Dharma with that of a lotus rising from the waters.
mono omoikeru toki, itokinaki ko o mite yomeru
imasara ni nani oizuramu take no no
uki fushi shigeki yo to wa shirazu ya
Ôshikôchi no Mitsune
Kokin wakashû, poem 957

Composed on seeing his young child when he was in a pensive mood.

Why ever come into this life to grow, young sprout—don’t you know sorrows flourish in this world as countless as the nodes on a bamboo stalk?

mono omou koto arieru koro, hagi o mite yomeru
oki akashi mitsutsu nagamuru hagi no ue no
tsuyu fuki midaru aki no yo no kaze

Ise no Taifu
Goshûi wakashû, poem 295

Composed on seeing a bush clover at a time when she was filled with cares

Peering hour after sleepless hour into the dark, my vacant gaze fixes on the dew scattered atop the bush clover by the autumn night’s wind

Ise no Taifu

(ca. 990-1060)
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Kyoko Selden studied calligraphy with Kamijō Shinzan (1907-97) throughout her high school and college years in Tokyo. Kamijō was a prominent calligrapher and powerful advocate for returning calligraphy to public school curricula in the postwar era. She continued, in the ensuing decades, to pull out her inkwell and brushes whenever she was asked by non-profit organizations or authors to produce calligraphied logos, or was herself inspired to brush a classical Chinese or Japanese poem.