

Annie Van Assche
(1986~87)

I remember the earthquakes. During my first few weeks at LIOJ, I stayed in the temporary housing on campus with fellow new teachers. One night, we were all awakened by a huge earthquake. We all huddled in the middle room wondering if the world had come to an end. Needless to say, we got used to this sort of earth-shaking very quickly.

I remember Oshima Island's volcanic eruption in the summer of 1987. A group of students and teachers gathered on the top floor veranda late at night after classes. We had beer and snacks, and watched as the flaming red lava was thrown high into the night sky.

There was only one computer, the Wang, for all of us in the teacher's office. There was a sign-up policy, and a one-hour limit. Some teachers would habitually wait until the last minute to prepare their class material and want to use it when a signed-on person was working. I usually traded free class material for my hour—more than a fair trade, I felt.

Parties, parties, parties. At one of the end-of-term parties, I bartended with Michael Lazerin. I suggested that we split the duties. He retorted, "Oh, so you believe in 'division of labor'?" I didn't know where the heck he was coming from at the time, and thought he was a bit strange. I later figured it out.

I remember all of the great vacations I had between terms. I traveled out of Japan during this time: Bali, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand. Really wonderful times. Those were the days!

I'd often go into Tokyo on the weekends and stay with a friend from home, who lived there. We'd go to the temple flea markets, and I returned to Odawara with all sorts of traditional Japanese items, many which now adorn my home here in NYC.

I used to absolutely love going to the public outdoor *rotemburo* in Hakone. Being a '70's generation gal, I had no trouble stripping down in front of others and bathing with ease in the nude. But the younger generation gals were much more chaste about it all—I got a kick out of that.

The teachers and students did a day trip, a hike, up to One Night Castle. That was fun. Kathy was big on hiking, and she knew about all sorts of interesting places. I often went with her on her outings.

I remember the beautiful cherry orchard up on the hills outside of Odawara. We'd go there when the trees were blooming, and walk along the rows. It seemed like a sacred place. People spoke with soft, low voices, as if it were a sanctuary. The view of Mt. Fuji from Odawara was also special.

How I loved the wisteria blooming at Odawara Castle! I have a wisteria tree growing up the building across from where I live now (Queens, New York), and it's blooming.

Every year when I see this, my mind undoubtedly travels back to Odawara Castle's wisteria tree.

I lived in a small house in Itabashi. Nearby there was a tofu shop, and I shopped there often. When I got home, I'd find that the shop clerk always put a few more pieces in my bag, I guess for good measure. They were all so warm and friendly. Really made me feel at home in Itabashi. I used to invite my Itabashi neighbors over once a month for a potluck get-together. Once I gave them a slide presentation of my year in Guatemala. They were so thrilled. While I always tried to fix something American, they brought gourmet Japanese food. There were always lots of leftovers.

On my way to work, I had to walk about 30 minutes up Shiroyama from Itabashi. The walk was along a lovely stone footpath cut into the woods. The trees made a canopy above the path, and when it rained you didn't even have to use your umbrella. It was quiet, except for the birds (and cicadas in summer). A very special walk.

I remember my interview for the LIOJ teaching job, with John Fleischauer. It was conducted at his friend's place in Portland, Oregon (where I was living in '86). It snowed that morning in March, which was unusual. I arrived a bit early, and John was shoveling the walkway. We went in and talked for two hours, but it wasn't really a question-answer type interview. Very casual and relaxed. Halfway through, he asked me if I wanted a cup of hot tea, and I said yes. We sipped the tea slowly, without speaking. Later, after I was working at LIOJ, he told me that he knew I could manage in Japan, because I didn't have to fill quiet time with empty talk—something like that. I thought to myself, "What a strange guy!"

Cross Currents: I was on the editorial staff, and that experience turned out to have a great impact on my professional life. I'm a freelance editor for several art book publishers now, and have worked as managing editor in the past.

I remember learning the Japanese *aisatsu*, "*Itadakimasu*," which we used to say to the kitchen staff (never to students—English only!). A few of us turned it into "Eat a dog or mouse" to help us remember and we would say it with the same flat intonation as the "real" expression as a private joke. Only we knew what we were actually saying. That was fun.

The food in the cafeteria was . . . one word, YUCK!!!

Weekly afternoon belly dancing lessons with Carol and aerobic classes with June in the listening lab were fun. Grueling testing marathons and report writing at the end of each session—those were no fun at all.

Minami-cho beach. During fall typhoons, a group of us would go there to see the big waves. I remember how my body would tremble as the waves crashed against the shore. There were 20-25 ft. waves, one after the other.

A visit to Susie's 64-year-old house in Minami-cho was fun. It was so rickety that during an earthquake, the beams freely swayed from side to side with the movement of the earth. We just sat there in awe.

After my eighteen months at LIOJ, I went on to work for Proctor & Gamble as an Intercultural Communication Trainer in their Akashi factory for five years. I was liaison between the non-Japanese Asian engineers who came to the factory for training, and the R&D and Japanese factory managers. That was a great experience. After P&G, I decided to return to my first love, Japanese art, and returned to school to get my MA in Japanese art history. I first attended Kyoto University to study Japanese Buddhist art for two years. After this, I went to the University of Hawaii, graduating in 1996. I wrote my thesis on *Nihonga*, specifically Kyoto School *bijinga*. After a two-year internship at the Honolulu Academy of Arts (while a student at UH), I got a job at the Morikami Museum in Delray Beach Florida, as curator of collections. From there, I went to Japan Society Gallery in New York City, where I worked as curator of education. I just left JSG last September to work freelance as a Japanese textile curator, and to write my book on Japanese textiles. This book will be accompanied by an exhibition that I will curate, in Milan in 2004. I have written several articles and two books (as contributing author) on Japanese art.

LIOJ brought me to Japan and provided me a great springboard for my career as a Japanese art historian, and collector of Japanese textiles. Japan is still a very vital part of my life, and I return as often as I can.