



One is Enough

In the years since the old Japanese National Railway system became privatized, our train system has changed radically. The network is greatly improved over the old days, at least from the perspective of a suburban Tokyo resident. The trains are far more comfortable than they used to be, there are many new and innovative services offering a wide variety of transportation options, and all the large stations have been transformed from dingy halls into vibrant urban centers.

I suppose the view of rural residents is not so rosy, as one of the downsides of the privatization process was the closure of many marginal country lines, but I don't think that we can clearly blame the train companies for the depopulation of our countryside. It seems to me that the removal of a train line generally follows a depopulation trend, rather than instigates it.

But the managers of the rail systems have been sensible enough to leave in place those rural lines that provide access to places with major tourist value, and - going by the endless variety of large posters that line every corridor of every train station - tourist travel by train is still a very big business.

In their basic essence, travel posters like this haven't changed too much over the years. The main idea is the same as it always has been - show a beautiful photograph to catch the eye and make you want go there and see the place in person. In these photos, the sun always shines brightly, the faces are cheerful, and the sky is bright blue.

And of course, as this is Japan, the posters are always seasonal. In the unlikely event you were living in a train station and never went outside, you would still be very aware of what time of year it was. Or I should say, 'what time of year is coming up soon,' as these posters are of course put up in advance of the actual peak travel times.

There is one thing though about these posters that never ceases to amaze me, and which leaves me wondering just much I really understand about Japanese culture. It frequently happens that a particular poster will have a floral theme; perhaps the daffodils that are famous in Chiba Prefecture, or the pampas grass in Hakone. In each case, the photograph will show the same thing - a vast landscape completely covered with the flowers.

It seems that once a particular area starts to become known for a particular flower, the people there really 'go to town' with it. In an attempt to catch as many tourists as possible, they plant that flower in huge quantities in wide fields and in every nook and cranny of their town. The visitors are led to these areas, where they walk through pathways with identical flowers on each side as far as the eye can see.

But is this really 'Japanese' behaviour? I may be wrong on this, but it seems to me that when we think of a western garden, we think of masses of flower beds. When we think of a Japanese garden on the other hand, we may see very few flowers. Understatement is the guiding principle in Japan. Picture a tea ceremony. Somebody hosting a tea ceremony wouldn't dream of using a hundred flowers. One will suffice.

I saw the same thing during my first summer in Japan when I attended a hanabi for the first time. Bang, bang, bang ... the repeated explosions of exactly the same firework, again and again endlessly, shocked me. Stop! Stop! Sure, show me the beautiful sight of a well-made firework. But please, give me a pause before you show it to me again.

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>

I have no idea if this practice of trying to overwhelm the viewer is something relatively new to this culture, or has always been present. But I do know that I, for one, much prefer the old-fashioned understated methods. One is enough.

If you look closely.

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>