October 3 marked the opening of a special exhibition (see cover) at the Indiana University Art Museum (IUAM) that features stunning photographs of one of Japan’s most fabled cities. Nara, Japan’s Ancient Capital: Photographs of Taikichi Irie represents a very small portion of the work of an award-winning artist who spent his life (1907–1992) photographing his native city and its environs through all the seasons.

Before his death in 1992, Irie bequeathed his archive of some 80,000 photographs to the city and helped establish the Nara City Museum of Photography to display them. His unique artistic vision, crafted over more than a half-century, documents the historic, cultural, and religious monuments and architecture of Nara, a city that has been evolving from when it was Japan’s capital (710–784 AD) until the present, when it has had to preserve itself against the intrusions of modern development.

The beautifully framed photographs in the Nara exhibition are accompanied by poems evoking nature and spirituality, chosen from two imperially sponsored anthologies of poetry, Manyoshu (early eighth century) and Kokinshu (early tenth century).

The IUAM exhibition came about due to a special relationship that Michael McRobbie, IU’s vice president for research and vice president for information technology and chief information officer, had cultivated over a 10-year period with the city of Nara. Before his appointment at IU in 1997, McRobbie was a professor at Australian National University (AUN) in Canberra, the capital of Australia, where he was involved with AUN’s many linkages with Japanese organizations and institutions. Because of his connections, he was asked to chair the inaugural Canberra–Nara Sister City Program Committee. Though he had visited Japan many times before, it was only through the sister city program that he made his first visit to that city. “I was dazzled by Nara,” says McRobbie. “It is in my view the most beautiful city in Japan and is one of the great cultural centers of the world.” Nara has one of the largest collections in one place of sites that are listed as World Heritage sites. According to McRobbie, 25 structures are designated as “national treasures,” 53 as “important cultural properties,” and 14 are wooden structures more than 1,200 years old.

On one of his recent trips to Japan on IU business, McRobbie paid a visit to the mayor of Nara and the museum and inquired whether it would be possible to arrange for a small exhibition of Irie’s photographs in Bloomington. To his surprise and delight, the mayor decided to make a rare and generous gift to IU of 25 of Irie’s photographs. It is the first time that the city and the museum have made a gift of these photographs to a non-sister city, and then only to sister cities Canberra and Kyongju, South Korea. A Nara spokesman explained, “We are donating a portion of the city’s collection of Irie’s works only because we appreciate Vice President McRobbie’s contribution for the establishment of our link to a foreign sister city.”

The opening of the exhibit of these 25 photographs was marked by a special program of events that featured a welcome by Adelheid Gealt, director of IUAM; an address by McRobbie that included the importance of funding artistic knowledge and vision; remarks and wishes from Nara municipality brought by Kenichiro Maeda, general manager of the General Affairs Department, and by Hiroyuki Kawaguchi, curator of Nara City Museum of Photography; a concert featuring the traditional Japanese harp kugo played by Tomoko Sugawara; and closing remarks by Patrick O’Meara, dean of the Office of International Programs, and Curt Simic, president of Indiana University Foundation.

The exhibit was sponsored by the City of Nara, Indiana University Foundation, the Office of International Programs, the Office of the Vice President for Information Technology and CIO, and the Office of the Vice President for Research. The exhibit is being shown in the Special Exhibitions Gallery of IUAM and will close on December 21.

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