



Torii: A Border for Prayer

by Shigeru Yoshida



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Commentary

I've often talked about the great purpose of art — that of *connection*. Art has the *potential* to connect us to one another across time, distance, and even culture. But those connections aren't always facilitated unless we know just a bit of what is going on in the artwork — things sometimes represented by symbols that might not be obvious. The classic example of this is the frequent inclusion of a single candle in a Renaissance era painting, or a blue garment worn by a woman in a biblical scene. Do you know what these symbols mean? If so, how did you learn them? If not, I'll help. A single candle is representative of the presence of God. The woman in the blue cloak is always Mary, Mother of Jesus. But without these visual clues, a significant meaning in these paintings would be lost.

In this photograph by Shigeru Yoshida, we see such a symbol that adds meaning to this photograph beyond just five figures on a rock at the edge of the sea. The symbol is the rope that encircles both the rock and the praying women. That rope (with its symbolic paper thunderbolts) is a standard Shinto talisman that is instantly understood by all Japanese people. It means this is a holy place. In fact, the women are offering their prayers to those lost in the Great Tohoku Tsunami of 2005. With that knowledge, the vast empty space in the photograph and the distant horizon take on a powerful and emotive role in the image.

But for those of us in the West who aren't in

possession of this symbolic meaning, how are we to interpret this so our understanding is complete? This is precisely the role of the traditional docent — a knowledgeable individual who can guide us into a deeper understanding of the artwork. Typically the term *docent* is used in conjunction with a museum employee or volunteer, often as a guide, who shares their knowledge about a piece of artwork so the visitors can grasp the hidden meanings in the artwork. The docent can also help provide context for the artist and the artwork from a historical perspective. The role of the docent is increasingly important as our world become increasingly global and we are exposed to artwork from outside our native culture. We often need the guidance of someone (or some text) who can help bridge the cultural divide.

This is as true for photography as any other art. Who is the docent for your photographs? Perhaps it is a museum volunteer or historian, but it's more likely that the best docent for your work is you! It is seductive to think that photography's realism doesn't need interpretation, but this simply isn't true. Often, the meaning in and connection to your photograph is best facilitated with a little help — in the form of your artist statement, title, or some other background information. Without it, viewer's may be lost and miss the connection entirely.