



The Snake Path at Nanatsugama

Jan Downes writes about this community project in Japan



*Top and above:
Children from the local
community became
involved. Photos:
Angela Armstrong.*

THE SNAKE PATH is a 150 metre long mosaic pathway winding up a walking track through natural vegetation at Nanatsugama in Japan. The project was the idea of Anne Graham, an Australian artist, its creation a part of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial held in 2003. The Echigo-Tsumari region is in the Niigata province of Japan, about three hours drive and a climb in altitude, north west of Tokyo. It is high in the mountains, an area covered by snow six months of the year. Despite this topography, every possible bit of flat land is cultivated with rice paddies.

The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial is organised by Art Front Gallery, in Tokyo. This organisation has been involved in the planning and coordination of mostly contemporary visual arts events over a number of years. The inaugural Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial of 2000 attracted 160,000 visitors. It had grown by 2003. More than 150 artists, Japanese and from around the world, were invited to come, stay and install artworks, mostly outdoors.

The Echigo-Tsumari region of Japan comprises six municipalities. Each one of these invited a range of artists to work on individual projects. The region's largest centre is the town of Tokamachi. In addition to the artworks of 2003, two new art-focused buildings were opened in conjunction with the triennial. One of these was the Echigo-Matsunoyama Museum of Natural Science. This museum is a modern piece of architecture, with external cladding of rusted iron sheets, the ground plan in a snake form. The opening exhibition at this venue was Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art, a Museum Victoria travelling exhibition from the Gantner Myer Collection.

After completing an artwork at the 2000 triennial, Anne Graham was invited to undertake another artwork at the triennial in 2003. Eighteen months before the triennial she visited Nanatsugama where she talked with the village people and with others in nearby Nakasanto. It became clear to Graham that the local people would like an artwork that responded to the location and the history of the area. It was also evident that the local people would enjoy a project in which they could participate.

The idea of the Snake Path was based on a local folk tale. The tale is about a fisherman, Shinaemon Ota, who visited the beautiful river of Nanatsugama on a number of occasions. He was keen to fish the river. He then had a dream.



An old man who identified himself as the master of Nanatsugama appeared in his dream. He told Shineomona that he could cast his net once, but never a second time. Shineomona cast his net and it was full of fish. The next day he cast again, forgetting what he had been told in his dream. A strange power prevented him from hauling in his net. A big snake with glittering eyes appeared, Shineomona was scared and started to run away. The snake chased him, then coiled itself around him, its poisonous breath giving him a fever and, ultimately, Shineomona died.

The Snake Path is made of ceramic tiles on a concrete base. The snake slithers up the winding walking track, mostly at ground level and sometimes disappearing under vegetation. Some parts of the snake are elevated as rounded humps, tempting to young children for climbing. The body of the snake has recessed in it about 60 diamond shapes. Initially, the background of black, grey and white tiles were laid leaving the diamonds of up to 70 centimetres square exposed. The diamonds were the place for individual and group mosaics to be placed. The Snake Path project was advertised for participants locally in Japan and on the internet. The response was good. Participants were asked to develop their designs, in some cases there were competitions within groups for the best designs.

Anne Graham took a team of two staff members and 15 students of fine art from the University of Newcastle. They stayed in Nanatsugama for two weeks. They ran workshops for local groups to guide the assembly of their mosaics. These groups included local primary schools, individuals and families and even a group of building labourers who worked on their mosaic in the evening. The tiles were cut to shape and placed on the drawn designs on a board, then, when finished, each mosaic was held together with clear contact sheets. The designs were then transported to the site of the Snake Path. Some designs were sent from other places such as Kyoto and Tokyo, and these were cemented in place by the university team and local Japanese tilers.

Each member of the team from the university was also responsible for a diamond. The Newcastle students had participated in mosaic workshops before leaving Australia. Some participants took their own mosaic contributions, such as the smooth ochre coloured river stones taken by Mandy Robinson and



Top: The Seven Bowls. Above: Snake Head, designed by Anne Graham. Photos: Caroline Hale.



Top right. Design by Caroline Hale. Top left: Design by a local community group.

the white dancing figures of Caroline Hale. Kerrie Coles took an image of Ned Kelly, part of Australia's local history, and natural history was evident in Sandy Gray's design of a platypus and Angela Armstrong's magpie. All tiles had been fired to stoneware temperatures in order to withstand with the freezing conditions of the winter season. Individuals also took their own tools and equipment such as knee pads and small stools. Flying with metal

tools and ceramic tiles in luggage meant clothing became a second priority. It also raised a few questions from airport security staff at the x-ray machines.

At the beginning of the Snake Path, the tail of the snake, Graham incorporated a local geographical aspect, the reference being to the seven deep pools of the nearby river. This component of the artwork is called *The Seven Bowls*. Graham has made seven deep bowls of corten steel, inside each bowl is a large round river stone. At the top of the winding pathway, beside the head of the snake is the third component of the artwork, *The Fisherman's Table*, which is situated in a small clearing, surrounded by natural vegetation. It is a low stone table surrounded with small stools, inviting a picnic beside the black-tiled copper-eyed head of the snake with its protruding pronged tongue. Unless of course, with thoughts of Shineomona, one does not feel comfortable having lunch in the presence of a snake.

The construction of the Snake Path culminated with a workshop and subsequent opening event. On that day the final mosaics were put in place and community groups came to make mosaics on site. In the evening the project was opened with a fitting Japanese ceremony.

Anne Graham and her team from the University of Newcastle visited schools and community groups as well as working on the project and looking at the other artworks in the triennial. They were well looked after by the local mayor, Kenko and his wife, Achigo, and other members of the community. Their appreciation also goes to Kitagawa, the Director of Art Front and his staff for their kindness and support. The permanent artworks of the Echigo-Tsumari triennials are worthwhile to visit, as is the mountainous area.

Jan Downes is a ceramic artist and teacher from Newcastle, NSW. Anne Graham is Professor at the University of Newcastle and regularly exhibits her paintings. The project was completed in November 2003. Caption title page: *Design by Angela Armstrong.*