

The Evolution of Japanese Poetry

Tanka/Waka 短歌・和歌

Man'yooshuu 万葉集 (compiled 8th century):

I thought my lover
Would never leave me,
So like split bamboo
We slept back-to-back –
How I regret it now!

Kokinshuu 古今集 (compiled 10th century):

Although grasses and trees
Both change their colors/passions
On the flower-waves
Of the great ocean
There is no autumn/weariness

Tale of Genji (11th century):

Genji:
I now must go into exile. In this mirror
An image of me will yet remain beside you.

Murasaki:
If when we part an image yet remains
Then will I find some comfort in my sorrow. (Seidensticker, p. 244)

Saigyoo (1118-90)

When she says
“I know how you’re feeling,”
How much more hateful
Than not saying
Anything at all.

Does the person
Who abandons the world
Really give it up?
The person who doesn’t renounce it
Is the only one to let it go.

As I rest on my journey
Under a tree
On Yoshino Mountain
The spring breeze spreads out
A quilt of blossoms.

Renga 連歌 (Linked Verse)

Three Poets at Minase (1488; first four of 100 segments)

Despite the snow,
Haze at the foot of the mountains –
Evening.¹ (Soogi)

Distant waters flow past
A plum-scented village. (Shoohaku)

The river breeze
In a single clump of willows
Shows us springtime. (Soochoo)

The sounds of poling a boat
Are clear at dawn. (Soogi)

Haiku 俳句

Sookan (1458-1586):

Now that spring has come
The goddess Sao
Pisses standing up.

Bitter it was
Yet also funny:
Even at the time
Of my father's death
I keep on farting.

Soojin (1605-82):

Dutch letters?
A line of wild geese
Across the sky.

¹ The opening stanza of a renga poem is called a hokku 発句, and this was the term originally used for haiku like those of Bashoo.

Matsuo Bashoo 松尾芭蕉 (1644-94):

Wake up! Wake up!
And let's be friends –
Sleeping butterfly. (c. 1682)

You the butterfly
And I Zhuangzi –
A dreaming heart. (c. 1690)

An ancient pond
A frog jumps in
The splash of water.

Structural Features of Haiku

1. 5-7-5 syllabic structure
2. seasonal reference
3. break (*kireji*)
4. colloquialism

William Blake, “Auguries of Innocence”

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour