

In 2008, my wife, as Artist in Residence for Pahrump Arts Council, asked me to accompany her *sumi-e ink painting presentation with a talk about haiku*. It seemed perfectly paired for it emphasizes simplicity as art form and attends to nature. Here are highlights from my talk, which I hope you will enjoy.

— George A. Strickland

## WHAT IS HAIKU?

**Haiku** is unrhymed Japanese verse of 17 syllables with 3 lines containing 5-7-5 syllables respectively. In Japan, Haiku can rhyme but it's unintentional. It was developed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was known as "poetry of nature" practiced by Buddhist-Taoist monks. Man is the main observer of Nature and hence, it is based on natural images. Each Haiku requires one season word or expression to imply time of year. **Kingo** is Japanese for season.

**Japanese Language** does not use western syllables; rather it uses something called an "**onji**," a phonetic sound, which often is not a syllable. When Haiku is translated from Japanese to English, the verse does not follow 5-7-5 syllable rules. We try to match in English a phonetic pattern that can capture the spirit of "onji." Our version is a 17-syllable verse with 5-7-5 syllables, and this is what has become the popular Western rule to follow.

**In the West**, Haiku began in early 20<sup>th</sup> century France when Revon translated Basho, a master. He called what was the *hokku of Basho* --- "**haikai**." In the late 1950s/early 1960s, America's interest was captured around Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Gums*, Harold Henderson's *Introduction to Haiku*, and New York City's William Carlos Williams, a poet who fully engaged the art of image juxtaposition so unique to Japanese haiku form (Higginson 65).



## FOUR GREAT MASTERS

Matsuo Basho, Yosa Buson, Kobayashi Issa, Masaoka Shiki

**Matsuo Basho** (1644-94): *Basho* means banana tree, a name he adopted after he moved into a hut with a banana tree alongside. Basho's father, a low-ranking samurai, served a local lord fond of writing "haikai." **Haikai**, a short term for "**haikai-no-renga**," is a *long* poem used for parties. Attendees bring poetry ready to add on to others and the game begins with a question/answer format composed by two persons who will share that poem. Basho actually was not known for haiku in his own day, but for his "haikai," which tended to be humorous. **Haikai-no-renga** means "**humorous linked poem**," which Basho composed under the name of **Sobo**.

Harvest moon:

Around the pond I wander  
And the night gone.

---Basho

"What we know as haiku, Basho called **hokku** that means "**starting verse**," the first verse of haikai-no-renga" (Higginson 11). Basho made many travels through Japan, but his last trip was to Osaka where he died. As he lay dying, he wrote his last haiku, thinking of traveling and writing poetry:

Fallen sick on a journey,  
in dreams I run wildly  
over a withered moor.

---Basho

At the time of his death, Basho had more than 2000 students.

**Yosa Buson** (1716-84)

A whale!  
down it goes, and more and more  
up goes its tail!

**Kobayahshi Issa** (1762-1826)

In my old home  
which I forsook, the cherries  
are in bloom.

**Masaoka Shiki** (1867-1902)

A lightning flash:  
between the forest trees  
I have seen water.

## SOME CONSIDERATIONS

**What is the technique of cutting?** Cutting divides haiku into two parts with a certain amount of imaginative distance between the two sections. But, the two sections must remain independent of each other. Both sections must enrich the understanding of the other.

Water dripping down:  
the icicle on the roof  
shining bright diamonds.

---George Strickland ©2007

This haiku about winter becomes spring, appearing in lines 1 & 2. Here we think about both water and ice (winter to spring). At the end of section 1, there is a break, and in line 3, diamonds become the metaphor basing its image on nature's lines 1 & 2. Both sections enrich the understanding of the other.

**Do not use simile** – the word “like” in metaphor or imagery.

## SENRYU

Early western haiku might be called *senryu* (sen rriu). Examples abound by Westerners who thought they were writing haiku. A *senryu* relies on a **point of wit** rather than provocation by contrast as haiku does.

Small is the chigger  
but nothing else can bite butt  
with chigger vigor!

---George Strickland ©2007

## TANKA

To be able to write a graceful poem is an important part of social training in Japan. Readers are plentiful for magazines devoted to different poetic schools. Western influence brought free verse poetry to Japan allowing a wider range of subjects and use of varying number of syllables. Another popular form of poetry is called **Tanka** that evolved from Renga as did Haiku. The Emperor of Japan holds an annual contest for all to participate; the winner goes to the emperor's palace, but there is no money or prize. Tanka is composed of **5-7-5-7-7 syllables**.

### An Imperial Tanka

On the wild plateau  
the mountain rhododendrons  
are blowing  
in lovely gathered clusters  
where birds are fluttering.

--- His Majesty the Emperor of Japan

### Universe Tanka

Starry starry night  
starry starry stars shine bright  
no starry earth light  
hatred travels with dark wind  
darkness remains on dim earth.

---George Strickland ©2007

## NATURE

The essence of haiku, the point, the goal, the image is always **Nature**. Any number of lines or syllables can be used so long as it is short. I suggest you present your idea as if handing a photo to the other person. Its impact is the same as a Japanese sumi-e ink painting. *Today, the West allows more non-traditional reflections showing images of technology or other abstracts, but somewhere, somehow . . . even these acknowledge Nature.*

## Haiku is Zen ~ the Way of Buddha

Take the image you see with your eyes,  
put it in your heart,  
take this part of your heart,  
and give of it freely.

## ARIGATO!

--- George A. Strickland ©2008

### Reference Work:

Higginson, William J., *The Haiku Handbook*. Ed. with Penny Harter. Kodansha International, New York. 1989. Print.