

The Colors of Fall Captured in Waka Poetry

The colors of the autumn leaves and the moon are typical subjects in the classical poetry of Japan known as “*waka*.”

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Colors of autumn leaves:
Image from the scene of
Harumichi no Tsuraki's *waka*

WAKA is a form of Japanese classical poetry in which the poems generally consist of 31 syllables, divided into five parts with five, seven, five, seven and seven (5-7-5-7-7) syllables in each. The oldest anthology of *waka* poems—the *Manyōshū* (“Collection of Myriad [Ten Thousand] Leaves”)—is said to have been compiled from around the second half of

the seventh century, and contains a wide assortment of *waka*, ranging from poems composed by emperors to those composed by common people. *Waka* poetry spans over 1,300 years.

In the introduction to the *Kokin Wakashū* (“Collection of Ancient and Modern Poetry”), which was compiled at the beginning of the tenth century, it says that “the seeds in people’s minds grow into

tens of thousands of leafy words, and that is the essence of *waka*.²¹ The distinctive character of *waka* is that they express the beauty of nature as it changes with the seasons, combined with the feelings of the poets. The poems handle topics such as the emotions experienced in life and love, employing various motifs from the natural world—what the Japanese call *kacho-fugetsu* (literally, “flowers, birds, wind, moon”)—to express their emotions. In particular, many *waka* are composed on the subtle changes in the colors of the leaves and the moon, both of which are symbols of autumn. Here, we introduce two *waka* poems that describe the colors of autumn leaves and the light of the moon (pages 10-11), taken from *Hyakunin Isshu* (see the framed article on page 11).

*Yamagawa ni
kaze no kakataru
shigarami wa
nagaremo aenu
momiji narikeri*

—Harumichi no Tsuraki [?-920], *Hyakunin Isshu* 32

The weir that the wind
has flung across
the mountain brook
is made of autumn’s
richly colored leaves.


—Trans. by Peter MacMillan, *One Hundred Poets, One Poem Each*

Yamagawa (mountain river) is a type of fast-flowing river or brook found in the valleys between mountains. *Shigarami* (weir) is a kind of fence-shaped barrier that is installed across a river by driving in stakes between the banks and then joining them horizontally using the tied-together branches of trees or bamboo. The premise of the poem is that what the poet at first took to be a colorful weir built across the mountain brook was actually a collection of richly colored autumn leaves gathered across the river by the autumn wind. The source of this poem is the *Kokin wakashu*.

Peter MacMillan, who wrote the English translation featured here, explains his interpretation of the appeal of this poem as follows:

“From ancient times the Japanese have loved the reds and yellows of the autumn maples. In the *One Hundred Poets, One Poem Each*, one of the most famous poems is poem 17. This poem begins with the word *chihayafuru*ⁱⁱ which gave the title to a famous manga of the same name. The word *chihayafuru* is a pillow word used in tandem with the word ‘god’ or ‘gods.’ It is thought to mean ‘awe-inspiring’ or ‘raging.’ I have translated it as ‘the raging gods.’ The poem depicts the maple leaves tie-dyeing the water in autumnal colors and states that nothing as beautiful has been seen since the age of the raging gods of ancient times. The maples are not only beautiful but are also often associated with the gods.

“In another poemⁱⁱⁱ the poet states that as he has nothing to offer the gods he will offer the beautiful brocade of the maples. Such is the sublime beauty of the maple leaves of autumn—they are a fitting gift even for the gods! In the poem by Harumichi no Tsuraki, the poet plays on the great beauty of the maples to end with a marvelous surprise: The weir that we believed the poet to be writing about in fact turns out to be made of the beautiful and much-loved maple leaves of autumn. There are many poems about the maples, so I sometimes change the wording. Sometimes I translate the maples of autumn as ‘brocade’ and sometimes, as here, as ‘richly colored leaves.’”

The *kotobagaki*, or foreword, to this poem in the *Kokin wakashu* says that the poet composed the *waka* on his way along a mountain road heading from Kyoto to a neighboring province. (Omi Province, present day Shiga Prefecture). 

i The *kana* preface to the *Kokin wakashu*, the translation from the Japanese-English Bilingual Corpus of Wikipedia’s Kyoto Articles/the National Institute of Information and Communications Technology (NICT) https://alaginrc.nict.go.jp/WikiCorpus/index_E.html

ii Such beauty unheard of/even in the age of the raging gods—/the Tatsuta River/ tie-dyeing its waters/in autumnal colors.

Translation by Peter MacMillan, *One Hundred Poets, One Poem Each*

iii On this journey/I have no streamers to offer up./Instead, dear gods, if it pleases you,/may you take this maple brocade/of Mount Tamuke’s colors.

Translation by Peter MacMillan, *One Hundred Poets, One Poem Each*