



Bronze statue of Basho, located in the Basho-an Historical Site Observation Garden (Koto City, Tokyo) by the Sumida River, which is said to have been the site of Basho-an, where Basho lived

Photo: Sawaji Osamu

Matsuo Basho

The Unparalleled Haiku Poet

The Japanese short poem the “haiku” is beloved all around the world. In this first instalment of a new series that introduces haiku poets who have made a lasting impression on the history of this poetry form, we profile arguably the greatest of them all, Matsuo Basho (1644-1694).

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HAIKU is a type of poetry unique to Japan that expresses natural aesthetics and human emotions in a limited number of characters. The poems typically comprise 17 *on* (phonetic units similar to syllables) in lines of five, seven and five (5-7-5) syllables. The basic rule is to include only one word to express the season, called a “*kigo*,” among the seventeen syllables. The *kigo* are categorized as spring, summer, fall, winter and new year words, and people usually reference a book called the *Saijiki*, which lists such *kigo* like a dictionary, when composing haiku.

The most important haiku poet in the history of haiku is Matsuo Basho (hereinafter Basho). He lived until he was about 50 and created about 1,000 poems. In his later years, he came to be called “Haisei” (Great Master of Haiku), which signified that he was unparalleled by any haiku poet.

Noro Tatsuya of the Koto City Basho Museum in Tokyo says, “Basho was someone who perfected haiku as a literary art with high artistry, despite them being short poems of only 17 syllables.”

Basho was born in 1644 in present-day Iga City, Mie Prefecture. He came across *haikai*¹ at the age of 19 and moved to Nihonbashi (now Chuo City, Tokyo)

in Edo at the age of 29 with the dream of making a living out of haikai. After becoming a master of haikai at the age of 35, he started living

in a house called Basho-an in Fukagawa (present-day Koto City) along the Sumida River in 1680. Basho was based in Fukagawa for about 14 years until his death, leaving behind a wealth of works.

The following poem is arguably Basho’s most famous work and the one that established Basho’s original style, called “*shofu*” (Basho style). Basho made this haiku on the subject of the frog (*kawazu* in old Japanese) in the spring of 1686 when his disciples were gathered at his house.

*Furuike ya
kawazu tobikomu
mizu no oto*

An ancient pond
A frog jumps in
The splash of water

—Trans. by Koto City Basho Museum

“The frog, which is a *kigo* for spring, has a croak which has been treated as a symbol of the frog itself. However, Basho did not represent the croak of the frog in this poem but used its jumping movement and the splash of water as his motifs, thereby emphasizing the ‘tranquility’ of the pond so much that

Portrait of Basho by painter and haiku poet Matsumura Gekkei (1752-1811) (Collection of Koto City Basho Museum)

Photo: Courtesy of Koto City Basho Museum

it feels like we can hear the movement of the small frog jumping,” says Noro. “In haiku, unnecessary explanations are omitted as much as possible. It encourages the reader to imagine the scene and emotions of the poem.”

It is important for haiku to have



Basho-an as depicted in an 1836 book introducing sights in Edo (present-day Tokyo)

Photo: Courtesy of Koto City Basho Museum

yohaku (empty space) that allows the reader to exercise their imagination. It is precisely such *yohaku* that yields the *yoin* (lingering note) that resonates with the heart. His composition of such poems is one of the ways Basho was innovative.

Basho traveled around the country and composed many haiku in various places. *Oku no Hosomichi* (The Narrow Road to the Deep North) is a travelogue written about his travels with disciples in some regions such as the Tohoku and



A display of the kind of clothes, hat, sandals, and other objects that Basho might have used on his travels, at Koto City Basho Museum

Photo: Sawaji Osamu

Hokuriku regions in 1689. It contains 50 poems, one of which is the following.

*Araumi ya
Sado ni yokotau
Amanogawa*

Turbulent the sea
Across to Sado stretches
The Milky Way.

—Trans. by Donald Keene

This poem, which uses the autumn kigo “Milky Way,” describes a scene with Sado Islandⁱ in a turbulent Sea of Japan at night and the Milky Way extending high above in the sky. With this short



poem, Basho is able to evoke this magnificent image of nature and space in a reader who has not actually seen it. This poem is also regarded as one of Basho’s masterpieces.

Haiku has now become a form of expression that is popular not only in Japan but also in other countries, with enthusiasts existing all over the world. For example, John Lennon, a member of the Beatles, said in an interview when he came to Japan in 1971 that “I think haiku is the most beautiful poetry I’ve ever read. I’d like to simplify my lyrics [to be] as beautiful as haiku.” There are numerous other examples of passionate enthusiasts in Europe, such as the former President of the European Council Her-

man Van Rompuy, who has produced a haiku anthology of his own.

The Basho-an International English Haiku Competition has been held by the Koto City Basho Museum annually since 2018. Regardless of nationality or age, anyone can submit a haiku via the website. There is a rule that it should consist of two to three lines, but it is not necessary to include a kigo. Last year, the fourth time the competition was held, there were more than 1,500 submissions from 34 countries and regions.

The haiku form whose artistry Basho established may be considered one of the few literary styles in the world that allows anyone to freely express what they feel with simple words. 

i Haikai is also known as *haikai-renga* and has its roots in the classic poetic form of *waka*. *Waka* is generally composed using 31 syllables in lines of five, seven, five, seven, seven (5-7-5-7-7) syllables. Traditional *waka* poetry often has a single author, but *haikai* is composed by multiple people. It starts with one person composing only the five, seven and five (5-7-5) syllables of the first half, called the “*hokku*,” which is then followed by another person (other persons) composing the latter lines of seven and seven (7-7).

ii See *Highlighting Japan* November 2021, “The Island of Gold Seeking to Become a World Heritage Site” https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202111/202111_06_en.html