



A bronze statue of Issa built in 1990 in Shinano Town, Nagano Prefecture. It stands before Haikaiji Temple near graves of Issa's family, built in 1910 by locals who cherish Issa's memory

SAKURAI SHIN

KOBAYASHI Issa (hereinafter Issa), born in 1763 in a farmhouse in modern day Shinanomachi, Nagano Prefecture, is said to have written over 20,000 haiku poems before his death at the age of 65¹

Kobayashi Issa

A Haiku Poet Who Empathized with the Weak

We take a look at Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828), who left behind many humorous haiku poems that use simple expressions and were written during difficult circumstances.

in 1828.

Issa's mother died when he was 3 and he didn't get along with his new stepmother who came into his life at 8. After being sent to Edo (now Tokyo) to serve as an apprentice at 15 and moving from employer to employer, he began to pursue haiku after he turned 20. He took haiku study trips and interacted with many haiku poets. Issa married a 28-year-old woman when he was 52, and while they had four children, all died from illness at a very young age and his wife died when she was 37. In 1827, the last year of his life, he lost his home to a fire, and died aged 65 living in a storehouse that was spared by the fire. It is assumed that these experiences had a significant influence on his works.

Watanabe Hiroshi, the curator at the Issa Memorial Museum built in Issa's hometown of Shinano Town, says, "Issa was a haiku poet who always wrote his poems from the perspective of the weak and powerless.



Portrait of Kobayashi Issa, painted by Muramatsu Shunpo (1772-1858), a disciple of Issa (Collection of Issa Memorial Museum)



The haiku *Yare utsuna hae ga te wo suri ashi wo suru* and self-portrait written on a fan by Issa himself

"It is clear that behind his poems are the many hardships he faced and the fact that he did not live a life of wealth despite having his talent for haiku recognized. However, his style is not in tragic expressions but rather in the way he uses humor to write about his life. In his later years, haiku poet Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902), who established modern haiku, said that there were three main characteristics of Issa's haiku: humor, satire, and mercy. Issa's haiku style whereby he directly expressed his personal impressions was very different from the mainstream of haiku at that time when poets

The storehouse where Issa died, now designated as a National Historic Site



expressed their feelings through objective depictions of scenery.”

Joy, sadness, and hardship are things anyone may experience in life. Issa tackled these themes and wrote haiku with simple expressions that anyone could understand. In doing so, Issa’s poems became universal, going beyond differ-

ences in time period or living environment. This could be why Issa’s haiku are loved by many people even today. 7

i Ages given are as counted in the traditional *kazoe-doshi* reckoning, in which a child is counted as one year old at birth and every January 1 after that counts as a year older.

*Yase-gaeru
makeru na
Issa kore ni ari*

Lean frog,
Don’t give up the fight!
Issa is here!

Translation Henderson, Harold G., *An Introduction to Haiku: An Anthology of Poems and Poets from Basho to Shiki*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1958

Written in 1816 when Issa was 54. The *kigo* (seasonal word) is *gaeru* (frog), so this is a spring haiku. This is the most famous of Issa’s haiku. Issa, upon seeing two male frogs fight after chasing after a female, writes a poem in support of the weak, lean frog. This haiku expresses Issa’s viewpoint of being closer to the weaker frog, and this weaker frog is like Issa himself. Issa lost his eldest son that year, so the haiku can also be read as a shout of support for the lean frog, which Issa associates with his late son.

*Yare utsu na
hae ga te wo suri
ashi wo suru*

Do not kill the fly:
See how it wrings its hands;
See how it wrings its feet!

Translation Blyth, R.H., *Zen in English Literature and Other Classics*. Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1942

Written in 1820 when Issa was 58. The *kigo* is *hae* (fly), so this is a summer haiku. It is a humorous poem, meaning, “Don’t kill that fly. Isn’t he just begging for his life by rubbing his hands and feet together?” The poem is saying that even small creatures like the fly have life and ought not be killed needlessly, but the fly, looking as if it is praying that life is valuable, can also be read as expressing Issa’s emotions as he approaches old age.

*Meigetsu wo
totte kurero to
naku ko kana*

The child is crying;
“Give me it!” she wails—
The harvest moon.

Translation Blyth, R.H., *Zen in English Literature and Other Classics*. Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1942

Written in 1813 when Issa was 51. The *kigo* is *meigetsu* (harvest moon), so this is an autumn haiku. The poem talks about a crying child begging someone to grab the beautiful moon shining in the sky, but as he still did not have any children at this point, the crying child also expresses an image of Issa himself, unable to get up due to having a fever. This is a scene that children and parents with children the world over can understand.