



Portrait of Yosa Buson by the scholar Kurihara Nobumitsu (1794-1870)

Photo: Courtesy of National Diet Library

## SAKURAI SHIN

**Y**OSA Buson (hereinafter Buson) was born in 1716 in a village near the Yodo River in what is now a suburb of Osaka. At some point he started to paint. Buson moved to Edo (now Tokyo) just before he was twenty years old and began to study haiku poetry under the master Hajin. However, Buson's master of painting is unknown and some believe he was self-taught.

Buson became a painter of the Nanga<sup>i</sup> school of Japanese painting and his talents gradually blossomed under its style of painting. After Hajin died, Buson committed himself to painting and led an itinerant life north of Edo in places such as present-day Ibaraki and Tochigi Prefectures. When he was 36 years old, he moved to Kyoto, but he moved once again to live elsewhere. When he was forty-two, Buson finally settled in Kyoto. He subsequently married and had a daughter.

Fujita Shinichi, Professor Emeritus at Kansai University, who has studied Buson for many years, says, "Above all, Buson painted to make a living. Paint-

# Yosa Buson

## The Late-Blooming Haiku Poet

This month we take a look at Yosa Buson (1716-1783), a haiku poet who also made a name for himself as a painter.



*Susuki ni shika* (Japanese Silver Grass and Deer) by Yosa Buson (Kimura Teizo Collection, Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art) (129.0 cm x 60.0 cm)

Photo: Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art

ing was a way to support his family. It was the people around him and the generations after him who appreciated the paintings as works of 'art.' It would be better to say Buson was someone who produced many paintings, or a professional artisan, rather than an artist."

In the Kyoto art world, townspeople with deep pockets recognized Buson's talent, frequently placing orders for paintings and supporting him as patrons, so to speak. On the one hand, Buson established himself as a painter, but it was not until he was fifty-five that he became a *sosho* (master) of a haiku poetry group. He seems to have been a fairly late

bloomer as he was already approaching an advanced age for the time. Nonetheless, he left more than 3,000 poems when he died at age sixty-eight. Moreover, he created many excellent haiku of a type that had never been written before.

Fujita says, "Buson first aimed to support himself as a painter, but he had also studied haiku since his youth, so I'm sure that the paintings and haiku influenced each other. There have been many poets who dabbled in painting as a sideline, but Buson is unique in the way he cultivated a sensitive and daring visual aesthetic as a proper painter and then projected this onto his haiku. No one else has done that. Even within the *haiga* genre, which combines haiku with paintings, Buson's talent created an unrivaled and unique world."

Buson composed haiku with the eye of a painter and painted with the sensitivity of a poet. The product of an exceptional talent for moving freely between pictures and words, Buson's many works have also been a great influence on modern poets of haiku and other forms, and his unique style is timeless. **7**



*Ajisai ni hototogisu zu* (Hydrangea and Cuckoo), a famous *haiga* by Yosa Buson (Kimura Teizo Collection, Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art) (38.7 cm x 64.3 cm)

Photo: Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art

<sup>i</sup> Influenced by the Nanshuga style of the Yuan (1271-1368) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties in China, the Nanga school of painting was popular in the 18th century.



*Haru no umi*  
*hinemosu notari*  
*notari kana*

vernal seas...  
all day long swelling, falling  
swelling, falling

Translation by Adam L. Kern, *The Penguin Book of Haiku*

This haiku was composed in around 1763 when Buson was forty-seven. *Haru no umi* (spring sea, or vernal seas) is the *kigo* (seasonal word) for spring. This is one of his most famous haiku. Buson describes waves rolling in slowly and leisurely all day long in spring. Buson creates a picture in the reader's mind of an expansive, gentle spring sea. This haiku is surely the combined product of the painter's gaze and the poet's sense of language.

*Botan chirite*  
*uchikasanarinu*  
*nisanpen*

peony petals  
scattering gently, nestle  
in twos and threes

Translation by Adam L. Kern, *The Penguin Book of Haiku*

This haiku was composed in 1769 when Buson was fifty-four. *Botan* (peony) is the *kigo* for summer. The description of fallen petals lying one on top of the other on the ground, rather than the extravagant peony in full bloom itself, combines the past and the present in a single verse. The way the haiku portrays the scattered petals, rather than the magnificent blooming flower itself to evoke an image of the flower in bloom is surely Buson's sense of beauty in action.

*Mini shimu ya*  
*naki tsuma no*  
*kushi wo*  
*neya ni fumu*

a stabbing chill!  
stepping on my dead wife's comb  
in our bedroom

Translation by Adam L. Kern, *The Penguin Book of Haiku*

Buson was sixty-two when he composed this haiku in 1777. *Mini shimu* (a chill of the body or soul) is the *kigo* for autumn. When a man accidentally steps on a comb that his deceased wife left behind in the bedroom, the husband is keenly reminded of her. This haiku vividly describes a moment in daily life, and the suggestion of the husband's sense of longing for his wife lends depth to the poem. Actually, Buson's wife did not die before him, so this verse is thought to be a piece of novel-like fiction.