

# Kaga no Chiyo-jo

A Haiku Poet Whose Work Expressed a Deep Love of Nature

**We introduce Kaga no Chiyo-jo (1703-1775), a haiku poet whose work expressed a deep love for the natural world and who may be said to have played a role pioneering international exchange through haiku.**



Statue of Kaga no Chiyo-jo in her Buddhist nun robes at the Chiyo-jo Haiku Museum

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**K**AGA no Chiyo-jo (hereinafter “Chiyo-jo”) was born in 1703 in Matto, Kaga Province (present-day Hakusan City, Ishikawa Prefecture). The daughter of a scroll mounter, she grew up surrounded by her father’s collection of paintings and calligraphic works, and is said to have already been composing haiku by the age of six<sup>i</sup>.

At the age of 17, Chiyo-jo’s talent for haiku was recognized by Kagami Shiko, a disciple of haiku poet Matsuo Basho<sup>ii</sup>, who described her as having “an exceptional talent for haiku.” Inspired by this recognition, Chiyo-jo devoted herself to creating haiku. After a hiatus from poetry composition from her mid-30s to run the family business following the successive deaths of her parents and siblings, she returned to writing haiku with a passion from her late 40s, continuing until shortly before her death in 1775 at the age of 73. To date, some 1,900 haiku have been attributed to Chiyo-jo during her lifetime.

Yokonishi Aya, curator of the Chiyo-jo Haiku Museum in the poet’s hometown of Hakusan City, Ishikawa Prefecture, says, “Chiyo-jo’s haiku are emotional and reveal her rich sensibility and deep love of nature. Her compositions were surely influenced by the abundant natural environment of the area where she was born and raised, and by the beauty of its ever-changing seasonal landscape.”

At the age of 52, Chiyo-jo was ordained as a Buddhist nun. Says Yokonishi, “Chiyo-jo wrote, ‘I did not become a nun because I was disillusioned with the world, but because I became anxious about the rapid



Portrait of Kaga no Chiyo-jo by Isoda Koryusai, 1773

passage of time.’ Still, Chiyo-jo continued to compose many haiku after becoming a nun. Most probably the family business was by then running smoothly, enabling her to devote herself to haiku.”

One occasion that saw Chiyo-jo become known more widely was her presentation of haiku to a Korean Delegation<sup>iii</sup>. In 1763, the 61-year-old Chiyo-jo presented haiku to a delegation of Korean envoys who came to Japan to celebrate the inauguration of Tokugawa Ieharu (1737-1786) as the Tenth Shogun.


“Chiyo-jo was ordered by the Kaga clan<sup>iv</sup> to write her own haiku on six hanging scrolls and fifteen fans, and present them to the envoys. This is a very early example of Japanese haiku being introduced to a foreign country in an official setting. In short, Chiyo-jo may be said to have played a role pioneering international exchange through haiku. During



Hanging scroll featuring the haiku “A hundred gourds from the heart of one vine” and *Hundred Gourds* painting by Kaga no Chiyo-jo

the Meiji period (1868-1912), Chiyo-jo's haiku were translated and introduced abroad by the German scholar of Japanese literature Karl Florenz (1865-1939)

and the English philologist Basil Hall Chamberlain (1850-1935), and the fame of 'the poetess Chiyo-jo' spread around the world," says Yokonishi.

Chiyo-jo's rich sensibility and deep love of nature must surely have touched the hearts of both Japanese and non-Japanese alike. 

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- 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.
  - ii Basho was a 17th-century haiku poet known as "Haisei" (Great Master of Haiku), which signified that he was unparalleled by any haiku poet. See *Highlighting Japan*, May 2022. [https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202205/202205\\_12\\_en.html](https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202205/202205_12_en.html)
  - iii Korean Delegations were diplomatic missions sent from Korea to Japan on twelve occasions from 1603 to 1811.
  - iv One of the most powerful clans in the Edo period, ruling over the area that is now Ishikawa and Toyama Prefectures.

*asagao ya  
tsurube torarete  
morai mizu*

**the morning glory!  
the well-bucket entangled  
I ask for water**

Translation by Patricia Donegan and Ishibashi Yoshie

Chiyo-jo's most famous haiku. The year of composition is unknown, but it is thought to have been penned when she was young. The *kigo* (season word) is 'morning glory,' evoking autumn. The poem describes the following scene: "When I rose early in the morning to draw water from the well, I discovered morning glory vines entangled in the rope of the well bucket, their gorgeous flowers in bloom. I couldn't bear to cut the vines to draw water, so I got water from my neighbor instead." The poem exudes the atmosphere of the crisp early morning air and the gentleness of the beautiful morning glories.

*beni saita  
kuchi mo wasururu  
shimizu kana*

**rouged lips  
forgotten—  
clean spring water**

Translation by Patricia Donegan and Ishibashi Yoshie

Year of composition unknown. The season word is 'clean spring water,' evoking summer. The poem describes the following scene: "On a sweltering summer day, I left home with lipstick on, but it was so hot that I stopped to quench my thirst with spring water, forgetting that my lipstick would come off." The poem can be read as the delicate emotion of a woman who made the effort to apply lipstick only to have it come off with water.

*hyakunari ya  
tsuru hitosuji no  
kokoro yori*

**a hundred gourds  
from the heart  
of one vine**

Translation by Patricia Donegan and Ishibashi Yoshie

Composed at the age of around 25. The season word is 'gourd,' evoking early autumn. The verse is based on the Buddhist teaching that "all behavior of human beings arises from one heart..." – just as many gourd fruits grow from a single vine – "... and everything depends on how your heart sees things." Many of Chiyo-jo's paintings and calligraphy featuring this haiku have survived, so it is thought to have been one of her particular favorites.