

DRAWING ON WHAT HAS ALREADY BEEN SUGGESTED

In Japan and China, the concept of exhibiting poetry/painting is understood. Often a poem, is written onto, or into, a painting (for example, into the crevice of a mountain). As an aside, when knowledge of woodgraining was a required house painting skill, tradesmen would often secretly sign their name into the painted woodgrain on a panel door or the wainscot of their interior woodgraining.

Peter Neilson (1944–)

*Time passes. I hesitate.
Then, to begin again, an email.
Shall we meet for coffee, my friend?
I've been ill, but I'm better than that now.
Your place or mine?
Or somewhere in between?*

At this late stage of an interrupted life of making visual images, I have become drawn to simply placing words on coloured backgrounds, putting them up on a wall and inviting in the neighbours.

I am unsure if they are Maxims (influenced by Georges Braque), Aphorisms, Western Haiku (Jack Kerouac), or Poems (Bertolt Brecht and Chinese and Japanese poetry). They are what they are. Michelangelo wrote poetry, Kerouac painted and drew, Bob Dylan does it all, and makes gates. Good company to be unsure in.

Georges Braque (1882–1963)

*One must not imitate what one wishes to create.
There is only one valuable thing in art: the thing you cannot explain.*

Georges Braque began writing his maxims during a time of convalescence after the First World War. He was 'left for dead' in no-man's land during his regiment's ordered 'commitment to a charge' at an enemy position in May 1915. He was badly injured (head). However, not everyone was taken with his little statements (Derain, Leger, probably Picasso). On the other hand, he had done his patriotic duty, and after the war had secured a favourable contract with the dealer Léonce Rosenberg, and his maxims were 'read with attention' by intellectuals of every stripe . . . Andre Malraux, Meyer Shapiro, Martin Heidegger among others.

Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694)

*old pond
a frog jumps into
the sound of water

ah spring spring
how great is spring!
and so on*

There is much to be learned from Bashō. He was a master of *renga*, the collaborative poem form usually written by two or more writers, and he took the poetic diary form, *haibun*, to a level that no one else has reached. Perhaps, most importantly, he almost single-handedly reformed the single poem form he called hokku, which we call haiku.

Even before Bashō, poets had recognised the importance and difficulty of finding the best possible poem to set the tone and stage for *renga* and had been practicing writing just this part of the collaborative poem in private. It was Bashō who saw the potential in hokku, a

form composed of a 5-7-5 string of sound units. By giving this slim form his attention, he was able to elevate a few phrases into the sacred realm of poetry. It is right that we honour him as the father ... of haiku. ...

Bashō was a major influence on the democratisation of poetry in his day and now. ... Still today, the accessibility of haiku allows it to move from the ivory towers of academia and mainstream poetry, into the heart and mind of anyone. ...

The Zen idea of “first word, best word” actually works in some cases, but the writer must be skilled enough to recognise when this is true and when it is not. Often, as a haiku writer’s understanding and experience with the form grows and changes, he will return to previously written poems and revise them – as did Bashō. It is vital to remember that a poet writes a poem with all the knowledge and skills available to him at that moment. With more study, wider reading, and deeper understanding, the poem could evolve, but we can still value the inspiration and capabilities under which it was written (read similar remarks by Jack Kerouac, below).

From Jane Reichhold (translator) in her introduction to Basho. *The Complete Haiku* by Matsuo Basho, Kodansha International 2008

Jean (Jack) Kerouac (1922–1969)

*Holding up my purring
cat to the moon,
I sighed*

The American writer Jack Kerouac is mostly known as a prose fiction stylist. He is famous for his bestselling novel *On the Road* ... For some, images of rebellious hipsters come to mind, as well as a beat determination not to revise, first thought best thought. But careful readers of Kerouac’s prose recognise that within the ragged, circular, soulful cadences for which his writing is at once criticised, imitated, and revered, is the rhythmic phrasing of poetry.

Among the literati who knew him best, Jack Kerouac was a poet supreme, who worked in several poetry traditions, including sonnets, odes, psalms, and blues (which he based on blues and jazz idioms). He also successfully adapted haiku into English - his “American haikus”. “‘Haiku’,” he wrote, “was invented and developed over hundreds of years to be a complete poem in seventeen syllables and pack in a whole vision of life in three short lines.” Finding that Western languages cannot adapt themselves to the “fluid syllablic Japanese”, he sought to redefine the genre:

“I propose that the ‘Western Haiku’ simply say a lot in three short lines of any Western language. Above all, a Haiku must be very simple and free of all poetic trickery and make a little picture and yet be as airy and graceful as a Vivaldi Pastorella.”

Jack Kerouac was not the first American poet to experiment in haiku aesthetics. Before him, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Amy Lowell, and Wallace Stevens all created haiku-inspired verse. ...

What Kerouac “got,” perhaps more than any other Beat poet working in this genre, was the rendering of a subject’s essence, and the shimmering, ephemeral nature of its fleeting existence. This sensitivity to impermanence appears again and again in his work ... which evokes the frail individual beset with a harsh, indifferent society ...

As indicated in letters, journals, and especially in his *Paris Review* interview, where he playfully appears not to have a clue, Kerouac was insecure about his own haiku abilities. “Haiku is best reworked and revised,” he told his interviewers. ... Kerouac’s notebooks show haiku composition as a matter of discipline, as difficult to achieve as spending time in Zen meditation (read similar remarks about Bashō’s poetry, above)

From Regina Weinreich, from her Introduction to *Book of Haikus* by Jack Kerouac, Penguin Poets 2003.

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