**HAIKU**

A brief form of poetry originally developed in Japan around the thirteenth century, haiku are typically composed of three lines with a total of seventeen *onji*, or syllable-like units. Traditional haiku depicts the natural world, is written in the present tense, and includes minimal subjective commentary from the poet, often reflecting Buddhist principles of interrelatedness and egolessness. Much like other forms of Asian culture, haiku played a significant role in the development of early modernism, notably the poetic movement Imagism developed primarily by Ezra Pound, H.D., and Amy Lowell. Haiku has maintained a strong presence globally and in Western literature throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, seeing a particularly strong resurgence in the 1950s and 1960s, when the poetic form and the related ideas of Zen Buddhism were embraced and disseminated by the Beat poets.

**History**

The master poet Matsuo Bash­ō (1644-1694) is credited with establishing haiku as its own genre, separate from *renga*, the longer linked poems for which it was initially a preface. Haiku was introduced to the world following the opening of Japan’s ports by Commodore Perry in 1853, coming to the attention of Western artists first in France, where translations and original compositions of haiku appeared as early as 1871. Such works were part of Japonisme, which also influenced the development of Impressionism and Symbolism. In 1910, Basil Hall Chamberlain’s *Japanese Poetry* provided the first translations of haiku in English.

**Influence on modernism**

By the 1910s, several little magazines were publishing haiku-like poetry from both Western and Asian writers. In his 1914 essay ‘Vorticism,’ Pound credits Japanese culture generally and haiku in particular for providing a model for Imagism and Vorticism. Pound illustrates this approach with his two-line poem ‘In a Station of the Metro’ (appearing in *Poetry Magazine* in 1913), which is often compared to haiku for its brevity and reliance on images. Many of the poems in Lowell’s collection *Laquer Prints* (1913-1919) also bear a striking resemblance to haiku in content and form. Like haiku, Imagist poetry uses a minimum of words, employs concrete imagery and common language, and adopts free verse (eschewing conventional meter and rhyme schemes but occasionally, as in the work of Marianne Moore, using a syllabic structure instead). Other modernist movements such as Cubism, Objectivism, and Surrealism share similar features with haiku, demonstrating formal experimentation while foregrounding the act of perception. In portraying isolated images, haiku also shares typical modernist traits such as fragmentation, juxtaposition, condensation, and a fascination with a sense of time oriented around the present moment rather than a narrative in which past and future determine the meaningfulness of the present.

Several soldier poets of World War I utilized the haiku form to capture the sensory and affective experience of trench warfare. Examples include Julien Vocance’s *Cent Visions de Guerre* (1916) and the poetry of Giuseppe Ungaretti and Paul Éluard. Igor Stravinsky’s *Three Japanese Lyrics* (1912-13) demonstrate his attempt to reflect haiku in music. Haiku traveled the world, embraced by Spanish, Latin American, and Mexican poets including José Juan Tablada and Octavio Paz. R.H. Blyth’s four-volume collection *Haiku* (1949-1952) catalyzed interest from Americans, specifically the Beat poets Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Gary Snyder. In the late 1950s, African-American writer Richard Wright composed over 4,000 haiku, posthumously published in 1988. Haiku’s brevity, simplicity, and emphasis on the observable world remain appealing for writers dedicated to the vividness of poetic expression.

**References and further reading**

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Image:

<http://library.brown.edu/jpegs/1205797533562500.jpg> (the Modernist Journals project)

Fig. 1: Pound’s Imagist poem in the April 1913 edition of *Poetry Magazine*

