

Introduction to the *Kokinshū*

The *Kokin wakashū*, or *Kokinshū*, is a collection of 1,111 Japanese poems (*waka*), compiled by imperial command and presented to Emperor Daigo (r. 897-930) in the early 10th century. Its main compiler was the famous poet Ki no Tsurayuki (872?-945?), who also wrote the *Kana Preface* to the collection and included ninety-nine of his own poems. Literally, *Kokin wakashū* means “Collection of ancient and modern Japanese poems.” The Japanese poem, *waka* or *uta*, is a 31 syllable form in five measures in a pattern of 5/7/5/7/7 syllables, and was so called to distinguish it from *shi*, Chinese poetry, which also commonly practiced by the Heian court.

One of the objectives of the *Kokinshū* was to bring *waka* more to the forefront of the cultural life of the imperial court. The collection is an attempt to create a normative source of poetic associations, motifs, and styles, which would become a standard for composing poetry. It thus includes poems that are representative of a motif (eg. “cherry blossoms,” “deer,” “moon”), and/or representative in style, and/or composed by famous poets (both “ancient” and “modern”). The *Kokinshū* also sets up narrative sequences that affect the meaning of each individual poems by placing it in a particular context relative to other poems.

Volumes I-II: Spring

9. *Composed when it had snowed*

Haze rises
over the first buds of spring
snow is falling,
and even in flowerless villages
flowers are scattering¹
Tsurayuki

¹ The word “spring” in the second line functions as a pun, or “pivot-word,” so that the sense is “over the first buds of spring—spring snow is falling.” This poem is typical of a common rhetorical stance that characterizes many poems in the *Kokinshū* in which an object is “seen as” if it were something else (in this case, snow and plum or cherry blossoms are confused with each other).

14. *A poem from the Empress's poetry contest during the Kanpyō era.*

Without the voice
of the warbler emerging
from the valley,
who could possibly tell
that the spring has arrived?²
Ōe no Chisato

35. *Topic unknown*

From that moment
when I barely lingered
beneath the plum blossoms,
there are those who reproach me
for my scented sleeves
Author unknown

41. *On a spring night, composed on plum blossoms*

The spring night,
its darkness is useless:
though it may hide
the color of the plum blossoms
could it ever hide their scent?
Ōshikōchi no Mitsune

71. *Topic unknown*

It is their scattering
with no regrets that I admire
of the cherry blossoms:
the world would be sad indeed
if they were to remain.
Author unknown

89. *Poem from the poetry contest at Teiji-in*

The blossoms

² As this poem indicates, the warbler (*uguisu*) is a harbinger of spring. Here the poet suggests that despite the calendar, "true" spring only arrives with the warbler.

are scattering in the wake
of the wind,
and in the waterless sky
it is waves that are rising³
Tsurayuki.

91. *Composed as a spring poem*

The color of the blossoms
is concealed by the haze:
if you will not reveal them,
at least steal their scent,
O spring mountain wind!
Yoshimine no Munesada

105. *Topic Unknown*

To each meadow
where the warbler cries
I come to see
the fading blossoms
blowing in the wind
Author unknown

Volumes IV-V: Autumn

169. *Composed on the first day of autumn*

Though the arrival
of autumn is not clear
to the eye
we were nonetheless alerted
by the sound of the wind
Fujiwara no Toshiyuki

184. *Topic unknown*

Seeing the light

³ Here the poet “sees” the blossoms swirling in the wind as if they were waves in the sky.

of the moon as it filters
through the branches
I know that autumn has arrived
the season of sadness
Author unknown

213. *A poem from the poetry contest held at Prince Koretaka's mansion*

Deep in the hills,
stepping on scarlet leaves,
the deer cries,
and in hearing his voice
is the sadness of autumn.
Author unknown

257. *Composed at the poetry contest held at Prince Koretaka's mansion*

How can it be
that the single color
of white dew
dyes the autumn leaves
in a thousand hues?
Toshiyuki

286. *Topic unknown*

The scarlet leaves,
scattered at the mercy
of the autumn wind,
wandering aimlessly
in the midst of my sadness.⁴
Author unknown

305. *Composed on an excursion to pick mushrooms with Monk Henjō*

I want to return
with my sleeves full
of scarlet leaves

⁴ Here, "wandering aimlessly" refers both to the scarlet leaves and to the speaker of the poem.

to show those who say
that autumn has passed
Sosei

Volume VII: Felicitous Poems

343. *Topic unknown*
May my lord live
a thousand, eight thousand ages
until the pebbles
turn into rocks
and are covered in moss⁵
Author unknown

Volume VIII: Farewells

393. *After climbing the hill, on the way down, a poem composed when they were saying goodbye*
I will entrust
my farewells to the cherries
of the mountain,
and let the blossoms decide
whether you go or you stay.
Master of the Law Yūsen

Volume IX: Travel

409. *Topic unknown*
In the first light
of the morning mists
at Akashi bay
I think of the ship that sails
hidden behind the islands
Author unknown

⁵ This poem, with a slight variation in the first line ("May my lord reign"), is the words to the modern Japanese national anthem.

Some attribute this poem to Kakinomoto Hitomaro

Volumes XI-XV: Longing⁶

516. *Topic unknown*

Night after night,
I cannot find the right way
to place my pillow,
how did I sleep that night
when I saw you in my dreams?

Author unknown

567. *Poem from the Empress's poetry contest in the Kanpyō era.*

Longing for you,
my bed with tears
I have filled,
and exhausted I find myself
turned into a buoy

Fujiwara no Okikaze

602. *Topic unknown*

If my body
could be transformed
into moonlight,
would she who rejects me
look on me sighing?

Tadamine.

627. *Topic unknown*

Are they such
as the waves that rise
before the wind,
the rumors that rise

⁶ The poems of longing begin with sequences of poems about longing for someone whom one has not yet met. At a certain point (in volume XIII), the meeting occurs, and thereafter, the poems are about missing someone who no longer comes to visit, or who has decided to terminate the relationship.

without us having met?

Author unknown

635. *Topic unknown*

Autumn nights

are long in name alone:

as soon as we had met,

without so much as a word

it was already dawn⁷

Ono no Komachi

645. *When Narihira went to the land of Ise he met with the priestess in secret. The next morning, while he thought about what to do without a messenger, the following arrived.*

Was it you who came here?

Or I who went to you?

I do not remember.

Was it dream or reality?

Was I asleep or awake?

Author unknown

646. *Answer*

The darkness

of my despair

has confused me.

Whether dream or reality

let other people decide.⁸

Narihira

656. *Topic unknown*

In reality

I know it must be so,

but how sad

⁷ "Without so much as a word" could also be read as "without having done anything."

⁸ The Ise Priestess was forbidden to have sexual liaisons. That is why the poem is marked as "author unknown," even though it is clear from the heading who wrote it. The last two lines of Narihira's poem imply that since they cannot pursue the affair and no one will know of it, it might as well have been a dream.

when even in my dreams
you continue to avoid me
Komachi

756. *Topic unknown*
How fitting
that when I think of him,
even the face of the moon
reflected in my sleeve
is covered in tears
Ise

772. *Topic unknown*
“Will he come” I wonder,
and though I know he will not,
when the cicada
sings in the evenings,
I still stand waiting for him
Author unknown

797. *Topic unknown*
Without showing its color
that which changes
in this world
now I know is the flower
of people’s hearts
Komachi

Volume XVI: Laments

839. *Composed when Ki no Tomonori died*
With four seasons
why did he have to die
in autumn,
when we feel sadness
even seeing the living?

Tadamine

860. *Composed before he died*

Why did I think

that the drops of dew

were in vain?

Just because I

do not lie on the grass

Fujiwara no Koremoto

Volume XVII-XVIII: Miscellaneous

978. *When Muneoka no Ōyori came back from Koshi, he saw the snow had piled up and said*

“My thoughts of you have piled up just like this snow,” (Mitsune) composed

If your thoughts

pile up like snow

I do not trust them

since they will be gone

come the spring

Mitsune

979. *Answer.*

On the white mountain

of Koshi over which I came

thinking of you,

is there ever a time

when the snow is gone?

Muneoka no Ōyori

(Introduction and Translations by Torquil Duthie)