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Haiga: Takebe Sōchō and the Haiku-Painting Tradition

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HAIGA

Takebe Sōchō
and the
Haiku-Painting
Tradition

March 3 through April 16, 1995
Marsh Art Gallery, University of Richmond

HAIGA: TAKEBE SŌCHŌ AND THE HAIKU-PAINTING TRADITION

Japanese Culture

There is an old saying in Japan that “the nail that sticks out gets banged down.” This shows how the Japanese tend to perceive themselves in a social context, as opposed to Western individualist perceptions. Japanese society is seen as a community of human relationships; its performance depends critically upon the quality of these relationships. Therefore, Japanese are constantly trying to reach a harmonious balance between individual aspirations and social responsibilities.

There is great admiration in Japan for the balance which is evident in nature between constraint and freedom. Their search for this equilibrium on the human level is evident throughout Japanese society and cultural activities. The works displayed in this exhibition show great freedom of emotional expression, yet they are created within a long-standing tradition that portrays the ideal harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

Haiku History

Haiku is a Japanese poetic form which contains seventeen syllables arranged in three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables each. Haiku actually derives from a longer five-line poetic form called *tanka*. It became a custom in the aristocratic court of Japan for two or more people to collaborate on *tanka* poems. One poet would write the first three lines, and another would contribute two seven-syllable lines, and so on. Eventually, the first three lines began to stand on their own as beautiful poems without need of the closing two lines. Haiku firmly established itself in the seventeenth century when the first great master Matsuo Bashō elevated it to a truly imaginative art form. Almost four centuries later, it is still the most popular poetic style in Japan.

At first, haiku were written as concrete and eloquent descriptions of nature. Each poem, usually representing a particular season, was intended to evoke a strong emotional response in the reader. As the form has developed, the subject range has broadened without ever detracting from that original emotional power. Great masters such as Yosa Buson added to the visual elements in haiku, creating a kind of word-painting, while other major poets such as Kobayashi Issa developed a sense of sympathy and empathy for all living creatures in their verses. This exhibition contains works of the three greatest names in haiku: Bashō, Buson, Issa, as well as their followers and individualist poets of the seventeenth through early twentieth centuries.

Haiku Aesthetics

Although the haiku is recognizable by its formal characteristics, its beauty and effect lie elsewhere. The short, ordered poem serves as a vehicle for natural imagery, imbued with all of nature's inherent beauty through the poet's own emotional depth; it also expresses the human heart.

The most important qualities of great haiku are simplicity and openness. The simple language used by the poet is made beautiful by the isolated natural images. Each word carries a great significance within the poem; the haiku as a whole is a lightning flash illuminating both the author's mind and the natural scene. The words offer an image to the viewer, but carry no extra explanation. Interpretation is left to each reader, so that a single haiku can support a variety of meanings and evoke a range of emotional responses.

Interaction of Text and Image

The interaction of painting and poem in haiga is very complex and, at times, mysterious. The two modes of expression are very distinct, so their combination in a single work makes for fascinating levels of interplay. Like haiku themselves, the images are always open, adding to the meanings of the work rather than limiting them to single interpretations.

The haiga tradition began in earnest with Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694). His images and those of his many followers complement the poems, each gaining from the other. Some of the subjects are extremely modest, such as a section of melon-rind floating down a stream, or a few rocks jutting out of the water. The subject of the moon is seen frequently in this exhibition; moon-viewing has long been one of the great pleasures in Japan, particularly in autumn. Some painted images in haiga are relatively fully depicted, but more often a few strokes of the brush are all that is needed to convey the suggestion of the subject, the season, and the emotional mood.

In order to examine the variety of works possible from one-poet artist in depth, this exhibition features a number of scrolls, a pair of six-panel screens, a handscroll, and two woodblock books by Takebe Sōchō, who lived from 1761 to 1814. A friend of other masters such as Issa and Inoue Shirō, Sōchō was primarily a poet who also loved painting, and his images and words interact and interpenetrate with deceptive ease. When painting haiga, Sōchō limited his paintings to simple and relaxed brushstrokes and very little use of color. The exhibition includes a few of his works that are more detailed; these are not haiga, but either contain more formal poetic inscriptions or no inscription at all. The inclusion of these works shows that the informal haiga style of painting was a conscious choice for poet-artists, suited to the nature of haiku as poetry.

The paintings in haiga can function in many ways. Some are images of haiku poets or other haiga artists; these can be reverent or mocking, relevant to the subject matter of the poem or to the style. Other paintings illustrate images from the text itself. Again, the visual images do not simply explain the text, pinning it down to a solitary meaning. Instead, the paintings give hints of what is important in the poem, clues towards possible attitudes and interpretations. In some cases the painted image is not mentioned at all in the poem, but adds new levels of meaning that complement the words without trying to repeat them in the visual medium. The masterful beauty of both the poems and the paintings in the haiga tradition is this ability to point out many possibilities rather than to dole out certainty.

Haiga Painting Formats

Japanese paintings can be presented in many different formats including hanging scrolls, handscrolls, album leaves, fans, folding screens, and sliding or stationary panels. In this exhibition, the majority of the works are hanging scrolls, but there are also screens and a single handscroll.

Hanging scrolls, suspended on cords, serve as changeable wall paintings. Because of their decorative potential and their ability to be changed and stored easily, they are a popular format in Japanese art. Handscrolls are not displayed all at once, but unrolled from right to left, with one section being viewed at a time. They are well suited to enjoying by oneself or with a friend, and offer a more intimate format than hanging scrolls.

Painted screens are formed most often of either two or six large vertical panels joined together with paper hinges. Screens were used as space dividers as well as artistic objects, and yet

due to their lightweight lattice-work construction they could be taken out for display and then folded and kept safe.

The great majority of Japanese paintings were created on either silk or paper. As hanging scrolls became popular, silk became the preferred medium for formal paintings, while artists seeking more informal effects frequently used paper for its greater absorbency and modest expense. In this exhibition, almost all the works are on paper, a medium well suited to the simplicity and subtlety of haiga.

Mountings are an integral part of the artworks. Scroll mountings are constructed to enhance the effect of the painting, as well as provide for its protection when it is rolled up and stored. Each scroll is backed several times with paper, and then silks or special papers are glued above, below, and to the sides of the painting, with a wooden dowel adding weight on the bottom. Small end-knobs are then added to the dowel, which can be made of ivory, wood, lacquer, or ceramic. The complete mountings must be strong and flexible, able to withstand many rollings and unrollings; they are changed when they grow too worn or damaged, on the average about once every fifty years. When scrolls are not being viewed, they are kept in individual wooden boxes with inscriptions by the artists, scholars, or collectors. In the case of haiga, scrolls would be displayed in the season appropriate to the poems and images, but in this exhibition viewers can enjoy the entire yearly cycle of nature as depicted in words and images by Japan's leading poet-artists of the past four centuries.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This exhibition brochure and the exhibition labels were developed as part of an art history course on Japanese art and culture. Dr. Addiss' students researched and collectively wrote this brochure essay, and individually wrote the exhibition's labels. The brochure text is by Jennifer Ashby, Maggie Borders, Anne-Marie Chace, Andrew Chen, Margaret Finn, Mary Goldsmith, Michael Haag, Max Heineman, Joshua Hockensmith, Ellen Leonnig, Jill Nissen, Michael Rectenwald, Daniel Sanvicente, and Khenh Vong. The labels are by Kyle Beinhower, Courtney Bradley, Steven Einhorn, James Felty, Erin Fox, Michio Fukuroku, Kristina Furse, Darren Impson, Brendan Jones, Herbert Lockyer, Lee Mutart, Sean O'Reilly, Renée Pezzuti, Douglas Satteson, Ivan Squire, Pearce Statts, Clark Talone, Myres Tilghman, Sara Wright, and Matthew van Weezel.

Published by the Marsh Art Gallery, University of Richmond, in association with the University of Hawai'i Press, the accompanying 136-page exhibition catalogue is fully-illustrated, written by Stephen Addiss with an essay by Fumiko Y. Yamamoto, and is available in paperback and hardcover at the Marsh Art Gallery (804-289-8276).