

Haiku (俳句), Wabi-sabi (侘寂) and Yugen (幽玄)

What appeals to us so much when reading Japanese poems like the famous frog haiku? The extraordinary appeal of the haikus is difficult to grasp.

Haiku, the Japanese verse form of 17 syllables (5-7-5 syllables), was created in the 13th century. When Bashô wrote the first version of his famous haiku “The old pond, a frog jumps in, splash!” in 1680, haiku had already become a highly stylized form. Bashô, his contemporaries and later masters such as Buson and Issa managed to turn this form into a unique poetic genre that was short but had more to offer than just wit or humor. Because of their brevity and condensation, haikus rarely contain details. The haiku poet draws only an outline or a highly selective image, and the reader must complete the vision.

Many classic haikus are based on Zen philosophy. The material or concrete is emphasized without expressing general principles of abstract thought. Animate and inanimate lose their differences. Zen teaches a love of nature without idealistic, moral or ethical commitments. The things of nature and people interpenetrate and depend on each other. In a Zen-inspired haiku, the poet attempts to achieve a state of mu, nothingness.

Bashô refers to this in the opening passage of his “Travel Diary of the Weathered Skeleton”: When I set out on my journey of a thousand leagues I packed no provisions for the road. I clung to the staff of that pilgrim of old who, it is said, ‘entered the realm of nothingness under the moon after midnight.’ The report begins with this haiku:

野ざらしを	<i>nozarashi wo</i>	Bones exposed in a field—
心に風の	<i>kokoro ni kaze no</i>	At the thought, how the wind
しむ身哉	<i>shimu mi ka na</i>	Bites into my flesh.

This haiku conveys a feeling of wabi (侘, quiet, simple loneliness), the feeling of the lonely wanderer. Although Bashô suffered from fatigue and privation on his journey, he achieved a higher state of mind, and although he was conscious of his physical and material poverty, his life was spiritually fulfilling. In this state of mind, having nothing meant having everything.

The most subtle and elusive aesthetic principle of Bashô's haikus is yûgen (幽玄). It was adopted from Chinese and originally means “dark, deep and mysterious”. Yûgen is close to the Wabi-Sabi aesthetic, but points to an underlying dimension that values what is implied and hidden more highly than what is open and clearly exposed. Yûgen is therefore a mood that opens itself to the hints of a transcendent. However, this transcendence is not that of an afterlife, but rather that inner-worldly depth of the world in which we live. This term is also inspired by Zen teachings. Yûgen as a style can

express both happiness and sadness. Cherry blossoms, as beautiful as they may be, must fade. Love between a man and a woman is inevitably followed by grief.

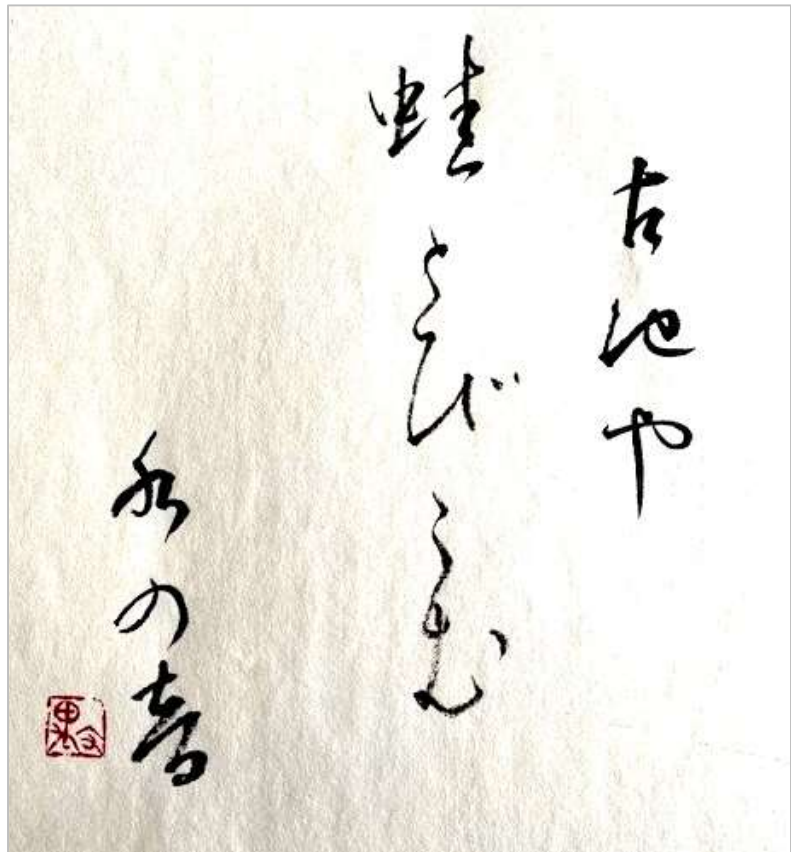
This mysterious order of the universe, incomprehensible in words, exerted a strong attraction on the classic haiku poets such as Bashô. His already mentioned haiku “The Old Pond” is an example of this:

古池や
蛙飛びこむ
水の音

*furu ike ya
kawazu tobi komu
mizu no oto*

the old pond,
a frog jumps into.
the sound of the water.

> Right: The poem about the old pond, Calligraphy by me.



In this haiku, the poet realistically describes a natural phenomenon and uses his direct perception to convey that nature is infinitely deep and absolutely silent. This is not explicitly stated and remains hidden. The calm of the old pond, which touched the poet, remains in the background. In the third line there is also nothing about calm, but literally “The sound of the water”. Bashô's language is more suggestive than descriptive, more hidden and reserved than overt and demonstrative. Yûgen has all the connotations of modesty, hiddenness, depth and darkness.