Celebrate Japanese Writing!
Add a Few Lines to the Wing-Opening Renga!

It takes at least two to “renga”!
• You start with a stanza just like a haiku: 3 lines (first line 5 syllables, second line 7, third line 5) packed with word-pictures.

• Then, someone else comes along and writes the second stanza: two lines, 7 syllables each. Now we’re cooking!

• Stanza three is handed back to the first poet—or on to somebody brand new. And so on!

• Each new player steals one word-picture from the previous stanza to use again, and adds one new image as well.

Ready to “renga”? On the Renga scroll displayed, read the lines written just ahead of you.

• What’s your favorite part? Now you’re ready to write, stealing some of that scene, then creating one of your own.

Jot down a few lines! Be our guest.

At the Harn, we’re surrounded by art just waiting to inspire us. Look closely—

Do you see a tree you like? What is the samurai saying to his faithful servant? What are they not saying to each other?

How Renga Came About

Renga was a party game that originated in Japan around 1200-1300 CE. A renga is a single poem by more than one author, connected by form and theme. It goes back and forth between sections of three lines (5-7-5 syllables) and two lines (7-7). Nobles and emperors, monks, rich lords, and, later, city dwellers gathered to write a single twisting and turning poem. As the form developed and became popular, poets came up with more rules to make renga writing more competitive and exciting. The wealthy had to hire masters to teach them the art.

Rules, rules! If the person before you wrote about spring or autumn, then the next few writers had to continue with that season for the next three or five sections. Seasons were not to be mentioned outright, but suggested through certain flowers or events associated with them. Snow melting or cherry trees in blossom hinted at spring.

Here in Florida, spring and autumn are not our most obvious seasons, but we can still see some changes if we look closely. In the beginning of the winter, the trees lose their leaves. We get more rain around April. As it becomes warmer, mosquitoes and gnats appear again. Japanese writers used observations like these to write renga.

The goal of the rule-makers was to keep a renga going and renewing itself. In the 1600s, the master poet Matsuo Basho came along and freed the form from over-complication, making the content more down to earth as he did so. After him, poets still wrote about the moon shining in the sky, but they also wrote about smelly fish and about people talking in the street. Basho perfected a mix of playfulness and spiritual depth. The Japanese called this new variation haikai.

Here’s a famous renga called Minase Sangin (translated by Earl Miner):

Despite some snow
the base of hills spreads with haze
the twilight scene
does not the moon
of a fog-enveloped night
stay yet in the sky
where the waters flow afar
the village glows with sweet plum flowers
as wide field settle with the frost
autumn has approached its end
in the river wind
a single stand of willow trees
shows spring color
daybreak comes on distinctly
with sounds of a punted boat

In renga, you paint a picture with words and the meaning takes care of itself. As the samples below demonstrate, a couple of vivid details are all you need per section. Here are some Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) poems to get you in the writing spirit:

New Year—the Basho-Tosei
hermitage
abuzz with haiku.
(Translated by Lucien Styk)

Girl cat, so thin on love
and barley.

It looks as if
iris flowers had bloomed
on my feet—
sandals laced in blue.
(Translated by Nobuyuki Yosai)

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