



# Haiku Before Haiku: From the Renga Masters to Basho (Translations from the Asian Classics)

*Steven D. Carter*

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While the rise of the charmingly simple, brilliantly evocative haiku is often associated with the seventeenth-century Japanese poet Matsuo Basho, the form had already flourished for three hundred years before Basho even began to write. These early poems, known as *hokku*, are identical to haiku in syllable count and structure but function differently as a genre. Whereas each haiku is its own constellation of image and meaning, *hokku* opens a series of linked, collaborative stanzas in a sequence called *renga*.

Under the mastery of Basho, *hokku* first gained its modern independence. His talents evolved the style into the haiku beloved by so many poets today—Richard Wright, Jack Kerouac, and Billy Collins being notable devotees. This anthology reproduces 300 Japanese *hokku* poems composed between the thirteenth and early eighteenth centuries, from the work of the courtier Nijo Yoshimoto to the genre's first "professional" master, Sogi, and his subsequent disciples. It also features twenty masterpieces by Basho himself. Steven Carter, a renowned scholar of Japanese poetry and prominent translator, includes an introduction covering the history of haiku and the form's aesthetics and classifies these poems according to style and context—distinguishing early *renga* from *Haikai renga* and *renga* from the Edo period, for example. His rich commentary and analysis illuminates each work, and he adds their romanized versions and notes on composition and setting, as well as brief descriptions of the poets and the times in which they wrote.



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