

French Haiku
by Gilles Fabre

According to George Swede's article in *Simply Haiku*, a certain Jose Juan Tablada of Portugal wrote a haiku sequence while visiting Yokohama in 1900. Also mentioned in this article is Hendrik Doeff, a Dutchman who worked for the Dutch East India Company in Nagasaki between 1798 and 1817; he taught himself Japanese, wrote two haiku and published a Latin transliteration of them in Japanese periodicals. These seem to be the first ever non-Japanese haiku. In 1903 the haiku movement started in the West, notably in France, where a group of writers published a collection of their work after visiting Japan on a cultural exchange trip and discovering the unexplored world of Japanese haiku. Exhibitions of Japanese prints and artworks in the early 20th century also had a major influence on writers and painters. The above-mentioned collection titled *Au fil de l'eau* (Going with the flow) was written by a group of poets that included Julien Vocance and Paul Louis Couchoud in the course of their travels along French rivers and canals on board a barge. This is quite in line with the tradition of social gatherings and wanderings in nature that became customary in the haiku world. Here is one of the haiku by Paul-Louis Couchoud

:

how will she reap
the whole field?
her sickle so small

Then an anthology of Japanese literature in French translation by Michel Revon was published in Paris in 1906 (according to other sources, in 1910). After that, quite a number of French magazines (among them, *La Nouvelle Revue Française*) started publishing haiku, including those written by the surrealists' guru Paul Eluard. Many worthy haiku were written by French poets during the First World War; they were later unearthed and published in Vocance's *100 Visions of War*, as well as in other anthologies. Julien Vocance's haiku can be rather emotional:

all night facing
the giant army,
two men in a hole

Some other well-known French and French-speaking poets were also involved in haiku writing. Louis Calaferte published a collection of haiku written in his garden. Philippe Jaccottet, using some notes taken while walking in nature, published a collection of haiku (*Airs*, 1964); he also translated some classical haiku. The travel-writer Nicolas Bouviers, who drove all over Japan, translated Basho's famous account of his travel to the North Provinces. Finally, Kenneth White, the founder of the International Institute of Geopoetics, a haiku enthusiast and an occasional haiku poet, acknowledged - like Jaccottet before him - that Basho's work and, generally, haiku had influenced his writing and the way of thinking.

A great deal of work was done by Alain Kervern, a master poet and a skilful translator, who provided French-speaking haiku poets with plenty of haiku texts and information on haiku and on nature (including lists of plants, flowers, animals, minerals, etc.). He published his magnum opus in five volumes, and it took him ten years to get it done. It is also worth mentioning that all the texts left by the Basho school (haiku and renga poems) have been translated to French by René Sieffert, and now are available in the shops, all the seven volumes! Most of them haven't been translated to other languages yet.

In the late 1990's, André Duhaime of Canada published his international haiku anthology comprised of more than 2,000 haiku from 24 countries (ten poets per country, on average), in their original language and in French translation. This anthology now is available online at <http://pages.infinet.net/haiku>

There is quite a number of haiku groups and associations in modern days' France and French-speaking countries. Among them, Association pour la Promotion du Haïku (<http://www.100pour100haiku.fr>) and Association Française du Haïku (<http://www.afhaiku.org>) that promote and share haiku by organising meetings and publishing haiku on their websites and in other publications. Haiku collections and anthologies are easily accessible. Moundarren has published more than 20 volumes by all the major Japanese poets, from Basho to Hozai Ozaki to Santoka Taneda. Design quality of their books is irreproachable, and so is the quality of the translations.

Gilles Fabre's collection of haiku titled *Because of a Seagull* was published in 2005 by The Fishing Cat Press.