

Zeitschrift: Pamphlet
Herausgeber: Professur für Landschaftsarchitektur, Christophe Girot, ETH Zürich
Band: - (2017)
Heft: 21: Sampling Kyoto gardens

Artikel: Waka () : scenery from Japanese poetry
Autor: Ono, Yoshiro
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-984678>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 28.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

WAKA (和歌): SCENERY FROM JAPANESE POETRY

Yoshiro Ono

The sound of running water in Japanese gardens is more than an auditory sensation. Multicolored leaves fall into the stream and form a carpet-like layer, reminding one of times spent admiring the fiery autumn foliage, while the chirping of birds and the buzzing of insects act together with poetry to convey the feeling of the season. Various sonic elements placed throughout the garden make it feel comfortable, inviting. These include the high-pitched hum of insects hovering and hopping amidst various shrubs and flowers, the bush warbler singing in the Japanese apricot trees, croaking frogs hidden in wet grass, the approaching twilight and accompanying cries of cicadas, the smell of the rain, or the subtle signs of falling snow.

Physical elements of all scales serve to give tangible form to the garden: vegetation, rocks, water, air, small creatures such as birds and insects, and buildings among other things. But to understand the garden one must possess a certain sensibility in order to discern the facets that tie these elements together organically. Such a sensibility can be cultivated through an understanding of *waka* (literally translated as “Japanese poetry”), a literary form that has been facilitating a shared understanding of garden scenery for about one thousand years. *Waka* poems are short compositions made up of thirty-one characters in 5-7-5+7-7 meter. They are also the source of the shorter haiku format, which derives its brief structure from the initial 5-7-5 portion of a *waka* composition. Within this unique structure, *waka* represents a condensed expression of human sensibilities, feelings, emotions, and thoughts—typically set against a natural backdrop such as a garden.

While the imagery of old *waka* poetry calls to mind recognizable scenes from a shared cultural landscape, Japanese gardens often feature scenery from specific poems. Visitors to these spaces not only get to enjoy the physical manifestation of a poem’s content, but it is as if poetry is the medium through which visitors to the garden may, in fact, experience these legendary sites. However, today most Japanese people tend to lack familiarity with this old style of poetry and its cultural context, focusing instead on visually and aurally taking in the physical elements of a garden for their enjoyment: cherry blossoms, vivid greenery in spring and early summer, autumn leaves

and snowfall in the winter, the cries of birds, buzzing of insects, and burbling of a brook. The dramatic changes occurring with each of the four seasons, perceptible in the appearance of trees and other plants, is impressive. But while today's garden visitors may enjoy the gardens's many sights and sounds, most have either forgotten—or indeed never learned about—the *waka* stories attached to this shifting scenery. Consequently, these visitors are also not capable of seeing the worlds evoked by *waka* poetry. Take, for example, *The Tales of Ise*, an ancient collection of *waka* poems, or *The Tale of Genji* or *The Tale of the Heike*, all of which were extremely influential literary works on later writing. There was a time when all Japanese people were familiar with *The Tales of Ise*, which is to say they clearly recognized any visual references contained within its poems. This is likely no longer the case today.

In garden design, *waka* stories may be best expressed through the layering technique of *mitate*. These are miniature depictions of scenery or re-creations of specific scenes and familiar places obtained from *waka* poetry and based on Japanese legends and literature. In particular, the *daimyo* gardens built between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries often utilized the *mitate* technique. These gardens once belonging to *daimyo* (“feudal lords”) and located in regions outside the capital, are just one type of Japanese garden alongside countless others, including the well-known gardens of Kyoto temples, gardens belonging to wealthy households which were built during Japan's early modern period, and so forth. The celebrated Kōraku-en Garden, built by the seventeenth-century *daimyo* of the Okayama Domain, Ikeda Tsunamasa, features numerous *mitate* scenes for visitors to enjoy. One such example is the Yatsunashi Bridges, a series of bridges made of overlapping wooden planks for crossing a pond filled with *kakitsubata* or *kakitsu-hata* (Japanese ‘Rabbit-ear’ iris) blossoms. A viewer familiar with *The Tales of Ise* would recognize the reference to the story of Lieutenant Ariwara no Narihira's exile from the capital of Kyoto to the East and his crossing of the Yatsunashi Bridges, and perhaps even the relevant *waka* poem. The visitor would discover that during this episode, Ariwara came across a river with a strong current in the Mikawa Province which was spanned by eight bridges (*yatsu* meaning “eight” and *hashi* meaning

“bridge”), and upon seeing the Japanese iris blossoming on the river-bank recalled the lover he had left behind in Kyoto, thus inspiring him to compose the following *waka* poem:

(5) Ka-Ki-Tu-Ba-Ta / (7) Ki-Tu-Tu-Na-Re-Ni-Si /
(5) Tu-Ma-(si)-A-Re-Ba / (7) Ha-Ru-Ba-Ru-Ki-Nu-Ru /
(7) Ta-Bi-Wo-(si)-Zo-O-Mo-U

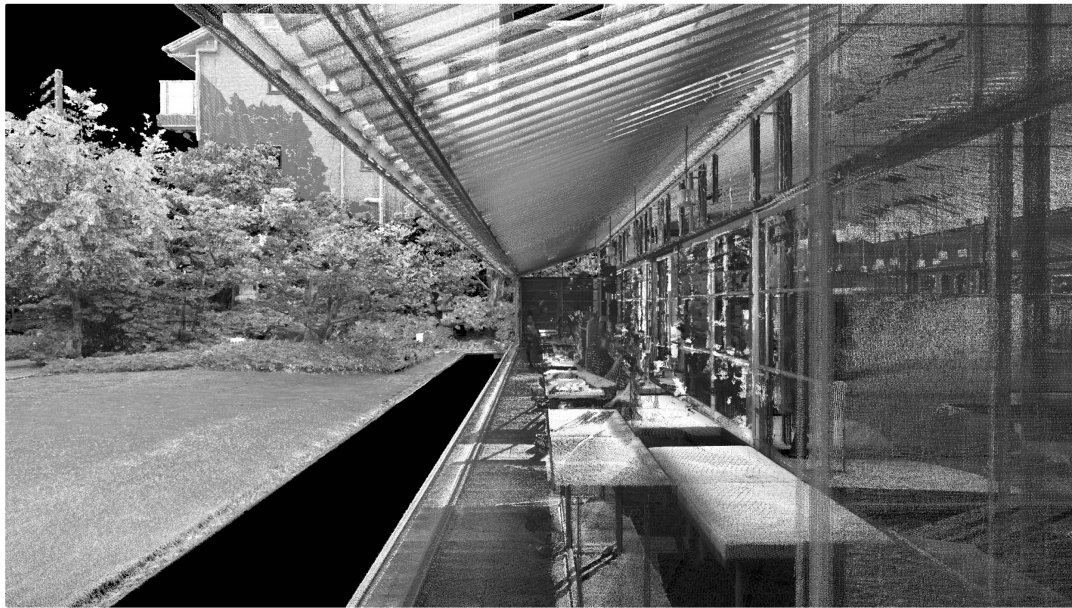
(5) I have a beloved wife / (7) familiar as the skirt /
(5) of a well-worn robe / (7) and so this distant journeying /
(7) fills my heart with grief

If the first character of each verse is isolated, the word *ka-ki-tsu-ha-ta* stands out: “Japanese iris.” Every reader familiar with this *waka* poem recognizes the cleverly embedded word and when such people visit Kōraku-en they immediately recall Ariwara’s tragic love story upon seeing the garden’s Yatsushashi Bridges.

In addition to this poetic allusion, one of the garden’s rock arrangements serves as a *mitate* portraying Mount Shumi, where according to Buddhist legend an eternal hermit is believed to reside. Nearby, a pond has been built in the shape of the character for *kokoro* (心) to represent the human heart and mind—a design choice meant to invoke the ideas of stillness and repose. Furthermore, the garden’s stream flows into a waterfall which resembles the small Otowa Waterfall built at Kyoto’s Kiyomizu-dera Temple. This is the temple where the Buddhist deity Guanyin (Kannon) is said to appear and impart spiritual power to the water. Constructed in the eighth century the waterfall still flows today. Familiar scenery can also be found in the specific location of Kiyomizu-dera Temple: It is perched on a small hillock fashioned after the shape of Mount Fuji and surrounded by a grove of *yamazakura* cherry trees reminiscent of Nara’s iconic Mount Yoshino. Each of these physical references or landscape symbols bears its own story. For instance, legend has it that Mount Fuji marks the site of the heavenly descent of a maiden who, wearing a celestial robe, performed a dance on her return to the moon—itsself a symbol for the gate of immortality. And Mount Yoshino in Nara, Japan’s first capital hosting nearly as many shrines,

temples, and gardens as Kyoto, is widely considered the best destination for viewing cherry blossoms in Japan. Yoshino, in turn, is known as the place where the hero Minamoto no Yoshitsune ran off with his lover, an event that took place during the war between the Genji and the Heike clans following the samurai's ascendancy to power in the tenth century.

Symbols containing symbols contain further symbols; poem and garden alike tell the stories of a native landscape. Places like Kōraku-en and Kiyomizu-dera feature the well-known and familiar scenery of places like Mount Shumi, Fuji, or Yoshino, each of which holds a significant place in the minds of the Japanese people. In other words, they are symbols of a collective memory and so remain key elements within the gardens's design as well as their narratives. However, while such a designation can preserve a garden's structural integrity, the transmission of its potential meaning to future generations may still be at risk. After all, Japanese gardens are not merely physical spaces intended to be sensed and enjoyed with one's eyes and ears; through the reenactment of classic Japanese tales using the *mitate* technique, they were also designed to be experienced on an emotional and intellectual level. A garden may not in itself instruct a new generation of Japanese garden-goers in the art of *waka* poetry, but an increased cultural awareness may at least serve as a guide for encountering these gardens today. With this knowledge, we can also reconsider the tools and modes of visual representation at hand, whether it be poetry, cameras, sound recorders, or 3D scanners. How can we best capture these complex, symbolic spaces?



THRESHOLD

girot.arch.ethz.ch/pamphlet21