



Image (Waka Poem): Karasumaru Mitsuhiro, Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of Traditional Arts and Crafts

UTA AWASE

A Modern Take on the Traditional Japanese Poetry Contest

Wednesday, October 26, 2022
Cammilleri Hall
University of Southern California

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- *Uta awase* are poetry contests that date back to Japan's Heian period (794–1185).
- In this event, students will compete in a poetry contest using the five-line Japanese form associated with *waka* (more formally *tanka*).
- The contest will be judged by LeRon Harrison, a *waka* expert who holds a PhD in East Languages and Culture and is a member of *Kinnara Gagaku*, an ensemble that performs traditional music from the Imperial Court of Japan.
- Music inspired by the winning team's poetry will be performed by Kinnara, Inc., an L.A.-based organization that comprises *Kinnara Gagaku* and *Kinnara Taiko*, the second taiko group formed in the United States.

UTA AWASE

Uta awase are poetry contests that date back to Japan's Heian period (794 to 1185). Sometimes called *waka* matches, they were not only an important part of the development of Japanese poetics but also one of the means by which political power was legitimated and concretized.

Group composition is a core part of the *Uta awase* tradition.

WAKA

Waka, as it is understood today, is a type of Japanese poetry that dates back to at least the Heian era (8th century). The word *waka* means *the songs of Japan* in Japanese (pointing to its orality and aurality), and it was historically a general term for Japanese poetry. By the Heian era, *waka* was largely understood to mean *tanka*, which had a 5/7/5/7/7 form. Though a longer form, *choka*, also occasionally appeared during the Heian era, *uta awase* largely employed *waka* in *tanka* form.

The characteristics of *waka* (more formally *tanka*) include

- 5 lines
- a 5-7-5-7-7 or 5-7-5 / 7-7 meter
- no rhyme
- organized in units and phrases instead of lines (units and phrases often become lines when poems are transliterated or translated into Western languages)

TWO HEIAN-PERIOD WAKA BY ONO NO KOMACHI (825–900 CE)

*The flowers withered,
their color faded away,
while meaninglessly
I spent my days in the world
and the long rains were falling.*

....

*The fisherfolk live
within the bay, rowing boats;
without oars they are
all at sea—how cruel the world
where I am sunk in sadness.*

Ono no Komachi is considered one of the best poets of the early Heian period and one of the “immortals” of Japanese poetry. Her recognition as a leading poet even during her lifetime is especially remarkable given that she lived in an age when women poets were overshadowed by men.

Sources: What is a waka?
afe.easia.columbia.edu | wakapoetry.net

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- What is different about writing collaboratively versus writing on your own?
- How did the winning poetry inform the music performed by Kinnara, Inc.? What connections did you hear between the poetry and the music?
- Try to observe the way your mind approaches different poetic forms. How does each form shape your creative process? Your thinking process?

IF YOU LIKED THIS EVENT, YOU MIGHT WANT TO CHECK OUT:

- [Waka Poetry wakapoetry.net](http://wakapoetry.net)
- [USC Pacific Asia Museum pacificasiamuseum.usc.edu](http://pacificasiamuseum.usc.edu)
- Upcoming Visions and Voices events, including
11/1/22 [An Evening with Natasha Tretheway](#)
11/3/22 [Dahlak Brathwaite: Try/Step/Trip](#)
3/23/23 [Rewriting War: A Conversation with Refugee Writers](#)
3/31/23 [Dismantling Orientalism: This Is Not a True Story](#)
4/30/23 [Tales of Clamor](#)

DISCOVER MORE AT THE USC LIBRARIES

CHRISTOPHER HEPBURN of USC Dornsife’s History department selected the following resources to help you learn more about this event. Electronic resources are accessible through the search bar on the USC Libraries homepage at libraries.usc.edu but may require the user to log in using their USC credentials.

BOOKS

- Gary Ebersole, [Ritual Poetry and the Politics of Death in Early Japan](#) (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2020)
- Edoardo Gerlini, [The Heian Court Poetry as World Literature: From the Point of View of Early Italian Poetry](#) (Florence: Florence Univ. Press, 2014).
- Tomoko Sakomura, [Poetry as Image: The Visual Culture of Waka in Sixteenth-century Japan](#) (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

ONLINE RESOURCES

- [Jittai waka](#)
- [Sanjūrokunin utaawase](#)

