

# **JAPANESE HOKKUS**

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Japanese Hokkus by Yone Noguchi

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*Seen and Unseen.*

*The Voice of the Valley.*

*From the Eastern Sea.*

*The Pilgrimage.*

*Lafcadio Hearn in Japan.*

*The Spirit of Japanese Poetry.*

*The Spirit of Japanese Art.*

*The Story of Yone Noguchi.*

*Ten Noh Plays.*

# *JAPANESE HOKKUS*

BY  
YONE NOGUCHI



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TO  
WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS



## PREFACE

THE word epigram is not right word (and there's no right word at all) for Hokku, the seventeen syllable poem of Japan, just as overcoat is not the word for our haori. "That is good," I exclaimed in spite of myself, when I found this comparison. We know that haori is more, or less, according to your attitude, than the overcoat of Western garb which rises and falls with practical service; when I say more, I mean that our Japanese haori is unlike the western overcoat, a piece of art and besides, a symbol of rite, as its usefulness appears often when it means practically nothing. If I rightly understand the word epigram, it is or at least looks to have one object, like that overcoat of practical use, to express something, a Cathay of thought or not, before itself; its beauty, if it has any, is like that of a netsuke or okimono carved in ivory or wood, decorative at the best. But what our Hokku

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aims at is, like the haori of silk or crepe, a usefulness of uselessness, not what it expresses but how it expresses itself spiritually; its real value is not in its physical directness but in its psychological indirectness. To use a simile, it is like a dew upon lotus leaves of green, or under maple leaves of red, which although it is nothing but a trifling drop of water, shines, glitters and sparkles now pearl-white, then amethyst-blue, again ruby-red according to the time of day and situation; better still to say, this Hokku is like a spider-thread laden with the white summer dews, swaying among the branches of a tree like an often invisible ghost in air, on the perfect balance; that sway indeed, not the thread itself, is the beauty of our seventeen syllable poem.

I can not forget Mrs. N. S. who came to see me at the poppy-covered mountainside of California one morning, now almost seventeen years ago; what I cannot forget chiefly about that morning is her story that she made a roundabout

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way in entering into my garden as the little proper path had been blocked by a spider-net thick with diamonds. I exclaimed, then, as I do often today, "Such a dear sweet soul (that could not dare break that silvery thread) would be the very soul who will appreciate our Hokku."

I confess that I secretly desired to become a Hokku poet in my younger days, that is now twenty years ago, and I used to put the Hokku collection of Basho or Buson with Spencer's *Education* in the same drawer of my desk; what did Spencer mean, you might wonder, for a boy of sixteen or seventeen? I myself wonder today about it when I look back on it; but it was the younger day of new Japan when even we boys thought to educate others before being educated ourselves (there was Spencer's *Education*), and we wished to swallow all the Western wisdom and philosophy, Spencer or Darwin or what else, at a gulp. I used to pass through Shiba Park famous for the Sleeping Houses of the Feudal