

Essays

Haiku as Dimensional Object

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Efforts to define English-language haiku range from attempts at liberation to attempts at colonization. They can be undertaken with engaging humor or with deadly seriousness. What follows here may look like an attempt at definition by description but I should point out from the beginning that I don't look upon my idea as applicable to all haiku. Nevertheless, I do feel that the genre offers a uniquely tactile opportunity for those poets (and readers) who exploit its dimensional possibilities to the fullest.

I like to think of haiku as material things, as two- or three-dimensional art objects. I imagine three-dimensional haiku being presented, one at a time, in a large circular exhibit hall, left in the center of a room whose circumference consists of a number of doors, each of which might be used as an entry or an exit. The poet has used one of these doors to enter the room and leave the haiku there for others. The poet has used the same or a different door to exit, taking a final look from that doorway. We hope that the poet has also turned over this object and viewed it from many perspectives before deciding it was ready for exhibition in this way.

Each viewer of the work will have a first encounter based upon the door from which he or she enters the exhibit room. Once inside, however, they are free to view the poem from any direction. They can approach it, walk around it. They may even pick it up and turn it over, if there are no guards in the room at the moment. And they can add more words, though these words must leave the room with them. Some will be inclined to spend more time than others. And, to some degree, this may be influenced by which entry door was used and whether the room itself feels more like the passage to another room or a restful place, inspiring reflection.

I imagine a two-dimensional haiku as one that is intended to be viewed from a particular arc of perspectives. Expanding the exhibit hall metaphor, a two-dimensional haiku is something like a painting. In order to be exhibited, it is likely to need some wall space and the circumference of the exhibit hall cannot consist entirely of doorways. In fact the exhibit room might be designed in a way that consciously limits the viewer/reader's approach to the work and there are almost always guards in this hall, so touching is a no-no.

For me, the sense of two or three dimensions transcends or at least applies equally to haiku that might be described as "traditional" or as "H21" (previously known as "gendai"). The dimensional quality is less about style than about what I imagine to be the poet/reader interface. The three-dimensional haiku cannot function as a puzzle, with a single solution or resolution, but must be more or less equally available from a variety of perspectives. A two-dimensional haiku, on the other hand, is designed to have a single or, at least, a limited number of available readings and is not diminished by having limited access for the reader/viewer.

In this regard, the "aha" moment might be a key indicator of dimensionality. Some viewers may only glance into that circular exhibit room from the doorway, one of many, and happen to hit upon a view of a three-dimensional word object that seems immediately satisfying. They might say "aha" and leave it at that rather than considering other views that might be available had they actually entered the room. If, on the other hand, the entry door they have used does not immediately provide this "aha" moment, they can only find it through persistence and discovery, by entering the room anyway and exploring it. The potential benefit for them is that there may be a number of "aha" experiences derived from the work when explored in this way. The two-dimensional haiku almost has to provide an "aha" through the single (or few) approaches it offers us, so it is kinder to the reader in that regard. But it rarely will provide the multiple pleasures of a three-dimensional poem.

And here is where I will leave this. I will only add that the decision about where to most effectively display a given haiku within the mind belongs to both the poet and the reader. This sense of dimensions might be extended in some way to the ordinary way of displaying haiku—in journals, anthologies, or in social media. But most interesting to me are the many types of imaginary exhibition halls from which to choose.



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