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# ***Haiga* and pictorial writing**

## **About *ut pictura poesis* and the relation between poetry and painting in Western countries compared with Japan<sup>1</sup>**

**Sabine SAVORNIN**

### **Introduction**

The *haiga* is a Japanese artistic practice that still remains quite unknown in Western countries. It took shape in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and combines in a very closely way poetry and painting. Both –poetry and painting– are realized all together, on the same sheet of paper or hanging scroll, using the same media – water, ink and brush– and requires the same art i.e. calligraphy. Consequently, could this practice be considered as an “écriture picturale”<sup>2</sup> ?

Firstly, we will consider the *haiga* from an historical and a technical point of view showing that the *haiga* belongs to a tradition in which poetry and painting are two different arts that complement each other. We will see that this conception of these two arts and of their relationship differs from the one generally accepted in Europe and, more precisely, from the current conception that appeared in the Renaissance when Horace’s Latin expression “*ut pictura poesis*” became an major axiom of the humanist theory. We will consider then this notion from an article of Maria Villela-Petit. In this article entitled “Les peintres de *La Poétique*”, the author reminds Aristotle’s approach of the relation between poetry and painting showing how this approach could have later been misinterpreted. Finally, we will consider the major changes concerning poetry and painting that occurred in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe following the influence of Japanese art. These changes seem to have led to a new conception of the relation between poetry and painting and of what could be called « écriture picturale ». The *haiga* appears then as an artistic practice which is completely apart from the others.

### ***Haiga* : haikai style painting**

The *haiga* appears along with the *haikai*, a Japanese poetical form whose best-known characteristics are a metre of 17 syllables (5/7/5), a season word – *kigo*– and a cutting word –*kireji*. The undisputed master of this poetical form is

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<sup>1</sup> Article proposed to the journal of the Faculty of Arts in Sfax, Tunisia, for an issue on the theme entitled « L’écriture picturale ».

<sup>2</sup> As we will see further the expression “écriture picturale” cannot be translated literally into English as “pictorial writing”.

Bashō (1644-1694) who is also considered as the one who lent credibility<sup>3</sup> to *haiga*, « painting in the *haikai* style<sup>4</sup> ». *Haiga* and *haikai* echo each other. They follow the same rules of composition : sobriety, spareness, seeming simplicity and also humour. The *haiga* is generally made with ink. Sometimes some light coloured touches enhance it. It is independent. It is not some kind of illustrations. It does not always represent directly what is expressed in the poem. The poem as well as the painting has a strong evocative and suggestive power. The whole *haiga* can consist of a sole stroke which can evoke a mountain which can evoke the moon standing behind. We must also underline that part of the *haiga* remains unpainted which let the viewer's eyes and imagination free. Poetry and painting are not always made by the same artist : the painting can be made by an artist whereas another artist makes the calligraphy. The *haikai* can be calligraphed by a single artist who also makes the painting. The artist can also make both the calligraphy and the painting from an *haikai* composed by an another poet. Consequently, the *haiga* offers a joint work which is based on dialogue, just like the *haikai*. Indeed, the *haikai* derives from the *renga* –a linked poetry- from which it proposes a freer poetical form<sup>5</sup>. The *renga* consisted in a joint creation of a series of verses on a chosen subject. Composed during poets reunions, this linked poetry consisted in series of *tanka*, poems of 31 syllables divided in two verses of 17 and 14 syllables. Each verse of the *renga* was made by a different person. The *haikai* derived from the first verse –the *hokku*- before becoming an new independent poetical form. Because of a poetical code, the *haikai* uses a highly codified vocabulary. As a strong intertextuality also links the poems, *haikai* could be considered as a work of rewriting. The painting in the *haiga* could also be inspired by a former painting. Consequently, the *haikai* and the *haiga* in some ways give a new interpretation of a former work, as, we could say, does the Buddhism whose instruction requires to meditate the instruction given in order to understand it and to go beyond it so that a personal interpretation could be found. Besides, the art of calligraphy –*shodō*– which is used both for the poem and the painting is considered in Buddhism as a "way", a path which permits to progress towards Enlightenment. So, the process of creating –either poetry or painting- can be considered as more important than the work itself. Moreover, the *haiga* comes from the *nanga* –painting in the Chinese style–. It belongs to a tradition where poetry and painting are closely combined as the poetry is considered in China as an invisible painting and the painting as a silent poetry. This conception of these two arts and the conception which is current in Western countries, especially since the Renaissance, are opposed to each other.

### **About *ut pictura poesis* and the displacement of *mimesis***

It seems first that we could relate this conception of the poetry as an “invisible painting” and of the painting as a “silent poetry” to the conception of Leonardo da Vinci's conception of poetry as a « blind painting » and the

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<sup>3</sup> Nonoguchi Ryūho (1595-1669).is the artist who is generally quoted as the one who originally made *haiga*.

<sup>4</sup> Věra Linhartová, *Sur un fond blanc*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p.518

<sup>5</sup> "*Haikai*" means "banter".

painting as a « dumb poetry »<sup>6</sup>. In fact, these two conceptions are opposed. Indeed, Leonardo da Vinci establishes a hierarchy between the arts. According to this hierarchy, the art of painting is superior to the art of poetry while in Japan these two arts are considered as completing each other. In her article « Les peintres de La Poétique », Maria Villela- Petit shows that this conception of *ut pictura poesis* derives from an wrong interpretation of Aristotle's words. Indeed, she reminds that for him the mimesis consists in representing human beings in action and that all arts are mimetic. For Aristotle, painting and poetry have a common particularity which is that they use signs in order to achieve representation. Aristotle does not compare poetry and painting. Neither does he establish a hierarchy between these arts. He certainly makes some distinctions, as the distinction between human beings -a central subject at that time- who, compared to us, could be better, worse or alike. Moreover, as M. Villela-Petit explains it<sup>7</sup>, Aristotle, considered that in the tragedy the story -*muthos*- was more important than the characters -*ethos*- just like in the painting the formal or schematizing element was more important than the colour, underlining, at the same time, that both of which are considered as « representation's means ». But, Aristotle does not compare poetry and painting. In his Poetics, he draws a parallel between the ways some poets and painters make use of the *mimesis*.

“In the comparisons he makes between painters and poets, Aristotle (...) never implies the imitation of an art by the other (...) because he conceives the mimesis not as an imitation-copy but as a matter of power of schematization or representation which is common to all the arts.”<sup>8</sup>

According to Maria Villela-Petit, in the Renaissance, a shift in meaning occurred : the comparison then turned on poetry and painting.

### About perspective et stroke

This interpretation of « *ut pictura poesis* » – a comparison between poetry and painting-, establishes a hierarchy at the head of which stands, as we have just seen before, the painting art. Indeed, in the Renaissance, painting, which includes colours, is based on the rules of linear perspective and seems to be the art that gives the possibility to render the « reality » in the most accurate way. The Japanese painters did not have the same concerns. Even once in contact with Western art, they did not really use the rules of perspective. They kept on using different points of view, taking the viewer's eyes with the moving vision of the painter. Indeed, the Japanese painters focus more on the stroke, the line, just like the Chinese painters do and we must underline here that if the mastery of the stroke requires some technical knowledge, it also -and especially- requires some particular concentration and energy.

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<sup>6</sup> Chapter intitled « Comparaison des arts » , in *Les Carnets de Léonard de Vinci*, Edward Curdy Ed., French translation by Louise Servicen, Paris, Gallimard, 1942, 2<sup>e</sup> éd., 1989, 2 vol. , quoted by Věra Linhartová in *Sur un fond blanc*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p.415 ; these sentences -just like all the following ones quoted in this present article- are translated from French into English by ourselves.

<sup>7</sup> Maria Villela-Petit reminds that at the time of Aristotle, there were monochrome paintings, made with white on a black background.

<sup>8</sup> Villela-Petit, Maria, « Les peintres de *La Poétique* », *La Part de l'Œil*, n°8, Bruxelles, 1992, p. 201

Before the Renaissance, the line was important for Western artists too, but, because of the perspective rules and the search for depth its importance decreased and the line tended to disappear as Guy Gauthier explained it<sup>9</sup>.

Nevertheless, the European painters rediscovered it through the influence of Japanese art during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, at that time, Japan which had been "closed" for about two centuries, opened up to the outside world again and Japanese art aroused then a strong craze among the Western people<sup>10</sup>. This phenomenon is called *japonisme*. It concerned all the arts but more specifically painting. The works that held especially the attention of painters –such as Van Gogh and Manet- were the prints. Japanese pictures sizes, subjects and perspective were took up again and copied. As for the line, Gauguin is certainly the one who reintroduced it the most clearly in his paintings with clear flats and sharp outlines<sup>11</sup>. The influence of the Japanese art is also obvious concerning the engravings which developed at that time. G. Gauthier, analyzing a woodcut by Vallotton intitled *La Paresse* draws the attention to the fact that it is not the scene itself but rather the organization of the lines that evokes indolence<sup>12</sup>. With the line, the composition prevails over what is represented.

As in Japanese painting, the prints use the contrasts between black and white. Maybe these kind of prints inspired Mallarmé for his poem *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*. For this poem, a special layout plays with the contrast between the black signs and the white paper. Moreover, we must underline that the Japanese paintings -whose composition was not based on the linear perspective rules and which let some part of the paper unpainted- were also distinguished by their "flatness" at a time when the artists of the "Modernité" rediscovered the two-dimensional aspect of the painting as Maurice Denis expressed it<sup>13</sup>. Concerning the notion of "*écriture picturale*", it seems so that we can learn a great deal from the major artistic changes which occurred at that time.

### **“*Écriture picturale*” : from signifié to signifiant**

It seems indeed that the expression "*écriture picturale*" -"pictorial writing"- could be easily defined as the representation of thought and speech by pictorial signs. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of these two terms –"*écriture*" and "*picturale*"- seems to implicitly provoke a paradox. Which paradox and why?

Let's consider the term "*écriture*" -"writing"-. Its definition as "the representation of speech and thought by signs" <sup>14</sup> does not connect it immediately to linguistic signs. Nevertheless, maybe because of shifts in meaning caused by the different articles that follow this definition, this term in

<sup>9</sup> G. Gauthier, *Vingt + une leçons sur l'image et le sens*, Edilig, Paris, 1989, p. 134

<sup>10</sup> During this period while Japan was said to be closed (1639-1854), we must underline that exchanges between Japan and Europe still went on, especially through the Dutch East India Company.

<sup>11</sup> G. Gauthier reminds that Gauguin also drew inspiration from the stained-glass window and popular imagery (op. cit. p.135)

<sup>12</sup> Gauthier Guy, op. cit., p. 158

<sup>13</sup> « Se rappeler qu'un tableau - avant d'être un cheval de bataille, une femme nue, ou une quelconque anecdote - est essentiellement une surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées ».

<sup>14</sup> The definitions come from the dictionary *Le Petit Robert*, A. Rey et J. Rey-Debove, Paris, Le Robert, 1967.

French seems to refer to linguistic signs, to alphabet letters. For instance the expression "*avoir une belle écriture*" that could be translated as "to have beautiful writing" can either mean being able to express oneself in a nice way when writing or writing letters (graphic signs) in a nice way. "*Écriture picturale*" in that case would mean something like : representation of thought and speech by painted linguistic signs. Indeed, the French adjective "*pictural*" comes from the substantive "*peinture*" – "painting" - , the "action, art of painting" , "operation consisting in covering a surface with colour" or more precisely it refers to "*la peinture*" - "the painting" - : "representation, suggestion of the visible or imaginary world on a flat surface with colours ; organization of a surface by the colour" -. "*Peinture*" or "*la peinture*" : in both cases the word which seems to predominate is the word "couleur" - "color"-. Moreover, in Western countries, the term "painting", nearly always refers to oil painting and a "tableau" to a canvas covered with colours and set up on a stretcher.

Consequently, the expression "*écriture picturale*" seems to connect together two concepts which are heterogeneous or even antinomic because of their different media. Considering this expression in that way, the term "*écriture*" would be applied to a linguistic message –the signifié-, whereas the term "*peinture*" – would refer to a picture –the signifiant–.

According to this interpretation, the expression "*écriture picturale*" could refer to painters such as Magritte or Klee who included linguistic signs, letters or words in their paintings. The expression "*écriture picturale*" would then arouse the question about how including these linguistic signs in paintings, how painting them or how "writing" them in painting. This expression can also be understood as linguistic signs arranged on a sheet of paper as forms can be arranged in a painting. In that case would be quoted as examples Mallarmé and his poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* with its linguistic signs arranged in a special way on a white sheet of paper or Apollinaire and his calligrammes, these kind of poems which form pictures.

In both cases, it seems that the visual effect is more to the fore than the linguistic message or, in other words, the signifiant seems to be more to the fore than the signifié. The expression "*écriture picturale*" underpins then a comparison between poetry and painting which does not exist in *haiga*.

## About *haikai* and language

In a *haiga*, the *haikai* is calligraphed using the Japanese writing system – made of *kanji* and *kana*<sup>15</sup>- and the painting, most of the time monochrome, is generally made with black ink but can be enhanced with slight coloured touches as just said before. It seems then that the implicit connotations connected to the expression "*écriture picturale*" can not be applied to *haiga*. Nevertheless they can question us about our conception of writing and painting. As the Japanese writing system includes ideograms<sup>16</sup>, we can wonder if it does have a special relationship with the picture. Moreover, when the calligraphy makes the

<sup>15</sup> Ideograms and syllabaries.

<sup>16</sup> ces « *signes gardant souvent un peu, dans leur apparence, de la figure des choses* » as said Y. Bonnefoy in his speech intitled *Le Haïku, la forme brève et les poètes français* ([www.shiki.org/2000/bonnefoy%20lecture.html](http://www.shiki.org/2000/bonnefoy%20lecture.html))

linguistic signs no more readable, can we still refer to writing ? Is black a colour just like the others ? Does a monochrome painting have a special status ? Can we say that a painting which is not made on a canvas fixed on a stretcher but made on a scroll which is gradually unrolled and consequently discovered in a similar process as the reading process, obeys an "écriture picturale" ? The *haiga* obviously questions issues which are not the issues generally questioned in the West. It forces us to rethink the notions of writing and painting themselves. It invites us to rethink the language.

How to define the play with language the *haiga* invites us to make ? Maybe the definition of "*jeu de langage*" given by Wittgenstein can serve us as a model when he asks us to "see" if these plays have something in common and when he underlines the "complex network of analogies" <sup>17</sup>. Actually, the *haiga* plays with analogies especially through the poem which is on the same paper as the painting. This spatial proximity of the two practices can take us back to the aesthetical notion given by Wittgenstein when he explains that "aesthetics is descriptive" and that "what it makes is drawing the attention of someone on some features, placing things side by side in order to indicate these features" <sup>18</sup>. In the *haiga*, poetry and painting are "side by side" indeed. They create an effect. In the *haiga*, poetry and painting create balance and harmony, just like a haikai composition requires a cutting word dividing the poem into two different parts which answer to each other, which echo each other. In the *haiga*, there is no hierarchy among arts or artists. It is a work as a whole where everything can be understood in connection with some other part of the work. Facing a *haiga*, there is neither a spectator or a reader but somebody who "sees", thanks to his/her subjectivity, in an open dialogue.

## Conclusion

Wherever it is, either in Japan or in France, poetry and painting use signs – *sèmia*-. In the broad sense of the term it designates linguistic signs as well as the drawing features said to be "signifiants". Nevertheless, in Japan, poetry and painting are considered as arts which complement each other while in the West, especially since the Renaissance and because of a shift in meaning within the notion of *ut picture poesis* and the comparison made by Aristotle between some poets and painters, poetry and painting are comparable arts, their comparison implying that painting prevails over poetry. Moreover, the notion of painting differs : in the West painting is based on perspective's rules whereas in Japan it is based on the stroke. Nevertheless, through the influence of Japanese art in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the "two-dimensions" aspect of painting and the importance of the stroke were rediscovered by the artists of the Modernité and their interest in Japanese art could have taken back to the meaning of the *ut pictura poesis* as Aristotle could have conceived it. After having imitated each other and now that they are no more opposed, maybe could poetry and painting grow richer in the specificity of each other. Maybe could they enrich the signifié in paying more attention to the signifiant. This attention supposes to take in

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<sup>17</sup> Saint-Fleur Joseph P., « Ludwig Wittgenstein : la transcendance de l'ostension », *La Part de l'Œil*, n°8, Bruxelles, 1992, p.15

<sup>18</sup> Saint-Fleur Joseph P., « Ludwig Wittgenstein : la transcendance de l'ostension », *La Part de l'Œil*, n°8, Bruxelles, 1992, p.15

account the medium : which medium is used and how. The *haiga* remains an artistic practice quite unknown. And yet it proposes a totally singular approach of poetry and painting and questions the issue of language itself.

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