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# EKPHRASIS IN TRANSLATION: VISUAL–TEXTUAL SHIFTS IN JAPANESE HAIKU/HAIGA AND ENGLISH

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**Abstract:**

*This paper examines how in the translation of Japanese Haiku and its visual counterpart Haiga into English, visual-textual representations shift. While ekphrasis was conventionally referred to as vivid description of visual art, critics including Jas Elsner and W. J. T. Mitchell have extended its meaning to describe any act of verbal visualisation. This finds a compelling parallel in Japanese Haiku, where it transfers a visual scene into a verbal sketch. Drawing on Jas Elsner's concept of enargeia (vivid visual presence), this study suggests that English translations of Japanese Haiku often transform the nature of ekphrasis, shifting its emphasis between different sensory experiences. These shifts are not merely linguistic but visual and cultural transformations. This study explores how auditory, visual and symbolic elements are preserved, transformed or diluted in translation. By analysing multiple translations of Matsuo Bashō's 1694 Nara Chrysanthemum haiku and a Haiga Yosa Buson's A Little Cuckoo across a Hydrangea, the paper demonstrates how translation reorients perception and redistributes meaning between text and image. Translation, therefore, is not a passive transfer of ekphrasis but an active reimagining of visuality, where linguistic and pictorial elements constantly refract each other.*



## Introduction

The ancient rhetorical term ekphrasis, the vivid verbal description of a visual object, has evolved into a concept central to modern studies of art, literature and visual culture. From Homer's description of Achilles' shield to Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, ekphrasis represents the effort to translate seeing into saying, to convert visual impressions into words. In recent decades, scholars such as Jas Elsner, W. J. T. Mitchell and James Heffernan have expanded its meaning to include the broader interplay between image and word. Elsner emphasises that ancient rhetoricians valued *saphēneia* (clarity) and *energeia (visibility)*[1], a vividness that allows audiences to "see through hearing" (Elsner 1).

Japanese Haiku and Haiga exemplify this visual-verbal dynamic. They are like microforms of ekphrasis. By compressing natural scenes, seasonal references (*kigo*) and temporal instants into a concise linguistic structure, Haiku offers a miniature pictorial tableau. The Haiku shrinks vision into minimal words while the Haiga translates those words back into brush and ink. Together, they enact a dialogue between the seen and the said. Yet, when Haiku and Haiga are translated into English, this dialogue shifts. Translators not only render words but also reconstruct images, altering what the reader imagines and feels. This paper explores these transformations through the lens of ekphrasis, using Bashō's Nara Chrysanthemum haiku and a Haiga, Yosa Buson's A Little Cuckoo across a Hydrangea as focal points.

## Theoretical Framework:

Ekphrasis in Western criticism has been extensively theorized as an intermedial mode of seeing and saying. Jas Elsner references ekphrasis as "a descriptive speech which brings the thing shown vividly before the eyes,"

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emphasising its visual force (Elsner 1). W. J. T. Mitchell considers ekphrasis "the verbal representation of visual representation," a dialogue between word and image (Mitchell 109). James Heffernan also frames it as "the verbal representation of visual representation," focusing on the mediation between aesthetic systems (Heffernan 3).

When applied to Japanese poetics, these definitions expand the reach of ekphrasis. The Haiku's concision, its 5–7–5 syllabic structure, creates an imagistic flash akin to a painted scene. The Haiga, its visual counterpart, completes this act of visualization. Both forms, Haiku and Haiga exemplify enargeia, the vividness that connects perception and expression.

Every classical Haiku traditionally includes a *kigo* or seasonal word, that signals the time of year and its associated mood. The *kigo* situates the poem in the **cyclical rhythm of nature.** A Haiku as well includes a ***kireji*** or **cutting word,** which creates a **pause, contrast or surprise** near the end of the poem. It works like a small hinge or breath mark that divides two images or ideas, one concrete, one reflective. In Haiku, Japanese poets often employed *Utamakura*, **a place name or location that** immediately evokes a set of feelings, images, legends or seasons that Japanese readers already know. *Utamakura* carry **invisible cultural imagery**, layers of art, religion and sentiment that cannot be fully conveyed in literal English. Translators often try to compensate by adding adjectives ("ancient," "sacred," "old bronze Buddhas") to restore some of that resonance. In English translation, however, these devices may be diminished or lost. English lacks the moraic rhythm and subtle auditory cues characteristic of Japanese. When a translator generalises and shifts the *kigo* or omits the *kireji* or *utamakura*, the **emotional temperature** and **visual imagery,** which is the original's Haiku's ekphrastic force, also change. The balance of perception and imagination of the reader alters.

Moreover, Japanese aesthetics such as wabi-sabi (beauty in imperfection and impermanence) and ma (the meaningful pause or space) deepen ekphrastic interpretation.[2] *Japanese poetic ekphrasis* often works through **suggestion and absence**, not description and this principle complicates Western ekphrastic assumptions (which often emphasise vivid detail). Haiku and Haiga do not merely describe. They evoke through absence and suggestion. This interplay of seen and unseen is the basis of what Elsner calls "the rhetoric of presence and absence" in all ekphrastic art.

In translation, however, this balance shifts. Translators navigate not only linguistics but also aesthetics, a reimagining of visual experience as it moves across cultural and semiotic boundaries.

**Methodology:**

The study undertakes a comparative analysis of (1) multiple English translations of Matsuo Bashō's Nara Chrysanthemum haiku, composed in 1694 for the Chrysanthemum Festival[3] and (2) a Haiga artwork, Yosa Buson's A Little Cuckoo across a Hydrangea. This work is selected for the shared fusion of text and image and its open-access availability.

The method involves examining how visual perception shifts across linguistic translation (Japanese to English) and media translation (Haiku to Haiga). By tracing changes in imagery, focus and affect, the study identifies how ekphrastic vividness i.e., saphēneia and enargeia migrates and transforms.

**Analysis:**

**1. Visual-Textual shifts in Translation**

Bashō's original haiku reads:

菊の香や奈良には古き仏達

(Kiku no ka ya / nara ni wa furuki / hotoketachi),

"Scent of chrysanthemums— / in Nara, the / old Buddhas"

This compact verse juxtaposes what is felt and what is still. The fragrance of chrysanthemums, the flower of autumn and longevity, mingles with the silent gaze of

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ancient Buddhas in Nara's temples. The poem's ekphrasis lies in the invisible made visible i.e., scent becomes image and stillness becomes perception, a felt experience.

Across English translations, however, this balance shifts:

"With ancient Bronze Buddhas at Nara comes / The green, honeyed scent from chrysanthemums." (A Net of Fireflies, p. 82)

"At Nara temple… / Fresh scented chrysanthemums / And ancient images." (Four Seasons Japanese Haiku)

"Ancient city of Nara / Ancient images of Buddha / Shrouded in the scent / of Chrysanthemum." (Narrow Road to the Deep North)

"smell of mums / in the ancient capital / are many Buddhas." (Bashō: The Complete Haiku)

"chrysanthemum of smell <> / Nara in as-for ancient / Buddha statue(s)" (Bashō: The Complete Haiku, p.391)

Each version emphasises a different sensory or visual register:

In the *Net of Fireflies* version, Harold Stewart amplifies the sensory lushness of the scene through adjectives "green," "honeyed" and "ancient bronze." His translation foregrounds the materiality of the Buddhas and the sensuous texture of scent. The ekphrasis thus becomes painterly and decorative, akin to an Art Nouveau canvas, emphasizing tactile and chromatic details.

In contrast, the *Four Seasons Japanese Haiku* version simplifies the description to "At Nara temple… / Fresh scented chrysanthemums / And ancient images." Here, the focus shifts from the Buddhas themselves to the coexistence of fragrance and sacred art. The ellipsis ("…") introduces a contemplative pause, replicating the Haiku's meditative silence. The ekphrasis in this version is spatial rather than sensory. It situates the reader within a temple space.

The *Narrow Road to the Deep North* translation, meanwhile, expands the scene into four lines, stressing the *ancient city* and the *images of Buddha*. The translation transforms the haiku's minimalism into narrative description. The ekphrasis now lies in historical context rather than immediacy: it invites the reader to visualize not a single sensory moment but an atmosphere of antiquity.

Finally, in *Bashō: The Complete Haiku*, the version "smell of mums / in the ancient capital / are many Buddhas" returns to the directness of perception. The scent becomes the grammatical subject, the agent that unites time and space. The visual detail of "many Buddhas" is secondary to the olfactory experience. This translation transforms ekphrasis into synaesthesia, which means sight is suggested through smell.

The shifting focus, from Buddhas to blossoms to atmosphere, reveals what this paper terms ekphrastic reorientation i.e., the redirection of visual energy in translation. In this process, enargeia is not lost but redistributed.

**2. Haiga and the Visual Dimension of Ekphrasis**

***A Little Cuckoo across a Hydrangea by Yosa Buson***

While Haiku embodies verbal ekphrasis, Haiga visualizes it. The Edo-period practice of pairing Haiku with ink paintings offered readers a double vision, words framed by image. Yosa Buson's A Little Cuckoo

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across a Hydrangea exemplifies this synthesis. The delicate brushwork echoes the Haiku's fleeting imagery, where the cuckoo's flight across the sky reflects the poem's own economy of expression. The viewer "reads" the painting as much as the poem, embodying Elsner's idea that ekphrasis mediates between vision and language. When Haiku are translated into English, however, they often appear stripped of their Haiga. Without the visual component, translators must compensate through verbal elaboration. Hence, Stewart's ornamental diction in *A Net of Fireflies* may be read as a substitute for the lost brushstroke. The Haiga's ma, its pregnant silence, is replaced by linguistic density.

In this sense, Haiga underscores the problem of ekphrastic displacement. The visual presence is lost in linguistic transfer. English translation thus performs a dual re-orientation. It not only translates words but also reconstitutes the absent image. Sometimes, the Haiga remains visually present, reproduced in books or digital archives, yet its interpretive force changes when detached from the linguistic and cultural context of the original Japanese. Even when the Haiga remains visible, its aura, spatial depth and symbolic resonance are reframed through translation.

**Discussion:**

The comparison of Haiku and Haiga reveals that translation does not diminish ekphrasis but diversifies it. Each English version of Bashō's poem and each visual interpretation in Haiga participate in what may be termed a *hermeneutic layering* of representation, a process that resonates with Jas Elsner's view of ekphrasis as a mediated act that translates vision into language and language into vision (Elsner 1).

Haiga adds another layer to this dynamic. In Buson's ink work, the viewer witnesses a symbiosis of text and line, each completing the other's silence. In translation, this interdependence fragments; the verbal and visual are separated, forcing the translator to reconstruct enargeia through textual means alone. The result is a range of visual imaginaries shaped by linguistic and cultural lenses, Japanese wabi-sabi versus English Romanticism, for instance.

Thus, translation operates not as duplication but as transformation. It reimagines ekphrasis within new semiotic and cultural frameworks, proving that seeing through language is itself a culturally inflected act.

**Conclusion:**

Ekphrasis, whether in Greek or Japanese traditions, is an act of re-vision, of seeing the world through the medium of words. In translating Japanese Haiku and Haiga into English, the ekphrastic relationship between image and text goes through subtle but profound shifts. The translator does not merely convert words but recreates perception. The Nara Chrysanthemum haiku demonstrates how translators redistribute sensory focus, while Haiga reveals how visual minimalism interacts with verbal silence. This results in what may be termed an *ekphrastic displacement*, a shift in how meaning is perceived and conveyed. The visual immediacy of the original Haiga remains visible, yet the poetic tone and sensory register often change. The English Haiku may emphasize metaphor or narrative clarity where the Japanese relied on atmosphere and intuition.

Through Elsner's concept of enargeia, translation emerges as a secondary ekphrasis. It does not replicate vision but refracts it, transforming the original's balance between word and image. By integrating Haiku and Haiga, this paper affirms that ekphrasis in translation is not a loss of visuality but its renewal, a reminder that every act of seeing, like every act of translation, begins anew. The translated Haiku–Haiga pairing shows the evolving dialogue between word and image that continues to renew the way we perceive art, poetry and the act of translation itself.

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**Figure:**

Yosa Buson. *A Little Cuckoo / across / a Hydrangea*. Edo period. Photographic reproduction, Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain.

[1] Jas Elsner, "*Introduction: The Genres of Ekphrasis.*", p.1

[2] *Wabi-sabi* and *ma* are core concepts in Japanese aesthetics referring, respectively, to beauty in imperfection and the meaningfulness of empty space.

[3] The Chrysanthemum Festival (*Kiku no Sekku*), celebrated on the ninth day of the ninth month, honors longevity and renewal in Japanese tradition.

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