

A Guide to *Waka* and *Kana* Calligraphy

What is a *Waka* ?

The term *waka* (lit. “Japanese verse”) generally refers to classical Japanese poetry as opposed to Chinese poetry. It consists of thirty-one syllables, in which the verses are arranged in five lines in an alternating pattern of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables. Today the terms *waka* and *tanka* are used interchangeably. Love and the four seasons were favorite themes featured in these verses.

The Thirty-Six Immortal Poets

The Thirty-Six Immortal Poets refer to a group of thirty-six Japanese poets from the seventh to the tenth centuries. They were chosen by the scholar-poet Fujiwara no Kintō (966-1041) as the greatest poets and included into his poetry anthology, the *Selection of Thirty-Six Poets*. In this, each poet was represented by several of his/her best verses. Later, the thirty-six poets became frequently visualized in the arts. The Satake version of the *Thirty-Six Immortal Poets* handscrolls featured in this exhibition, is one of the most famous extant pictorial representation of the poets. Other works on display showing the portraits of the Thirty-Six Immortals include fragments from the Agedatami version, the Tameie version, and the Narikane version.

The Development of the *Kana* Script

From the eighth through the tenth century, it was common to use *kanji* (lit. “Chinese characters”), a writing system adopted from the mainland, for official documents, religious, and literary texts. *Kana*, on the other hand, refers to a Japanese phonetic system of syllabic writing that developed in Japan from the Chinese characters. It is by the tenth century that *kana* had become recognized as a writing system and gradually came to be employed for unofficial purposes, such as the composing of *waka*, personal letters, diaries, and novels.

Chinese Characters		Modern Hiragana
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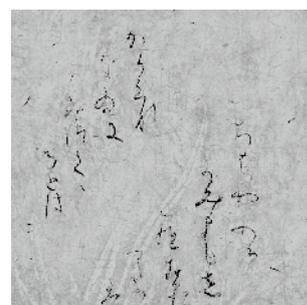
安	→ あ	→ あ [a]
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以	→ い	→ い [i]
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宇	→ う	→ う [u]
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Kana Calligraphy

Waka played an important role in the evolution of Japanese court calligraphy and were brushed in the *kana* script onto a variety of media and formats. The syllables were connected to create a rhythmic flow and rapidly brushed in a cursive style on handscrolls (*kansu*), small-scale poem sheets (*shikishi*), poetry paper (*kaishi*, lit. “breast paper”), or fans (*sensu*). Various writing manners were developed as well. One of them is referred to as “scattered writing” (*chirashi-gaki*) arranged in a fashion that creates, although highly crafted and calculated, the impression of randomness.



Important Cultural Property
Waka Poem “Chihayafuru” from the *Sunshōan shikishi* Set of Japanese-style Calligraphy
 Attr. to Ki no Tsurayuki
 Heian period, 11th century
 Kyoto National Museum

The Satake Version and the Appreciation of *Kana* Calligraphy

From the Muromachi period (1392–1573) onward, with the growing popularity of the tea ceremony, priced *kana* fragments increasingly were compiled into albums which served as exemplary calligraphy models (*tekgami*), or mounted as hanging scrolls (*kakejiku*) to be appreciated during the intimate gatherings in the tearoom. The mounting of the hanging scroll (right image) itself was usually considered part of the artwork, and thus appreciated as a set together with the mounted fragment. This was also the case for the fragments of the Satake version. Therefore don’t miss to take a careful look at the mounting as well!

