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Calligraphy: Three Heian Poems

Translation with calligraphy by Kyoko Selden

These three Heian-period *waka* poems—the first by Buddhist priest Henjō (816-89), the second by court poet Ōshikōchi no Mitsune (859-925), and the third by female poet Ise no Taifu (circa 989-1060)—were prepared for Marc Peter Keane's book, *Songs in the Garden: Poetry and Gardens in Ancient Japan* (Ithaca: MPK Books, 2012). Although these particular versions of the poems did not make the final cut for the book manuscript, Kyoko saved them in a scrapbook along with other favorites she had produced over the years.

The poems read as follows:

蓮の露を見て読める

はちす葉のにごりに染まぬ心もて

なにかは露を珠とあざむく

僧正遍昭

古今和歌集　165

hasu no tsuyu o mite yomeru

hachisuba no nigori ni shimanu kokoro mote

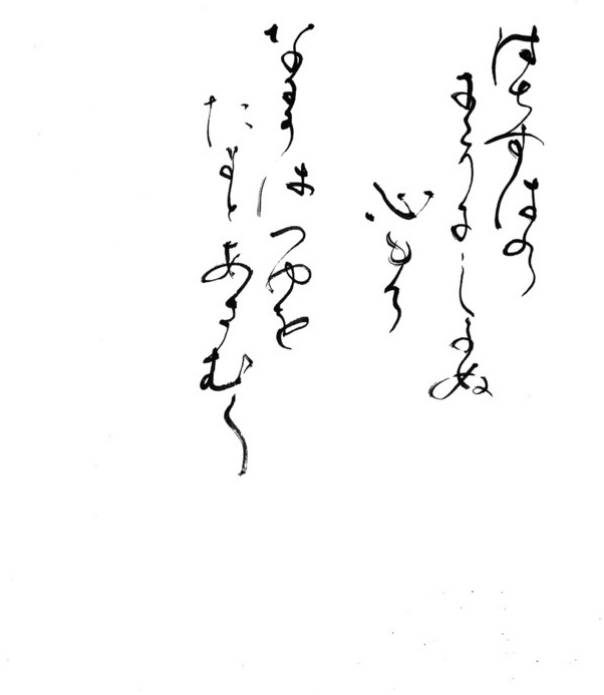
nanika wa tsuyu o tama to azamuku

Sōjō Henjō

Kokin wakashū, poem 165

Composed on seeing the dew on a lotus.

The lotus leaves, unstained by the muddy waters—why then do they deceive us with dewdrops shimmering gem-like?



* The opening of the poem references 不染世間法　如蓮華在水, a line in the Lotus Sutra that compares the purity of the Dharma with that of a lotus rising from the waters.

物思ける時、幼き子を見て、よめる

今更に生ひいづらむ竹の子の

憂き節しげき世とは知らずや

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凡河内躬恒

古今和歌集　957

mono omoikeru toki, itokinaki ko o mite yomeru

imasara ni nani oiizuramu take no ko no

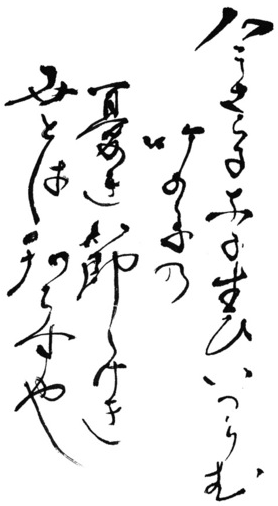
uki fushi shigeki yo to wa shirazu ya

Ōshikōchi no Mitsune

Kokin wakashū, poem 957

Composed on seeing his young child when he was in a pensive mood.

Why ever come into this life to grow, young sprout—don't you know sorrows flourish in this world as countless as the nodes on a bamboo stalk?



物思ふこと有りける頃、萩を見て詠める

おき明し見つつ眺むる萩の上の

露吹き乱る秋の夜の風

伊勢の大輔

後拾遺和歌集　295

mono omou koto arikeru koro, hagi o mite yomeru

oki akashi mitsutsu nagamuru hagi no ue no

tsuyu fuki midaru aki no yo no kaze

Ise no Taifu

Goshūi wakashū, poem 295

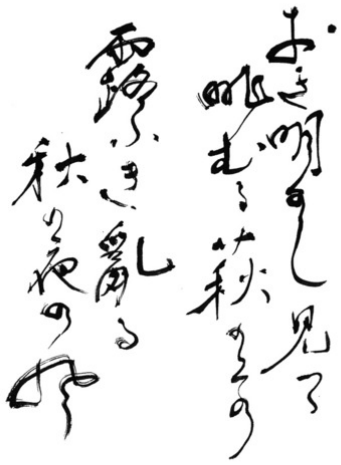
Composed on seeing a bush clover at a time when she was filled with cares

Peering hour after sleepless hour into the dark, my vacant gaze fixes on the dew scattered atop the bush clover by the autumn night's wind

Ise no Taifu

(ca. 990-1060)

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SPECIAL FEATURE

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Osaki Midori, Wanderings in the Realm of the Seventh Sense, translated by Kyoko Selden and Alisa Freedman

Kyoko Selden studied calligraphy with Kamijō Shinzan (1907-97) throughout her high school and college years in Tokyo. Kamijō was a prominent calligrapher and powerful advocate for returning calligraphy to public school curricula in the postwar era. She continued, in the ensuing decades, to pull out her inkwell and brushes whenever she was asked by non-profit organizations or authors to produce calligraphied logos, or was herself inspired to brush a classical Chinese or Japanese poem.

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