

PAUL REPS

by Ty Hadman

Paul Reps is America's first haiku poet and was the first to write visual haiku and minimalist haiku which have continued to gain steadily in popularity over the years. It is a very little known fact that Paul Reps was the first American to have a collection of English language haiku published in the United States. His book of haiku, *More Power To You – Poems Everyone Can Make*, was published in California in 1939, 27 years before Robert Spiess' first collection of haiku, *The Heron's Legs*, was published and over 20 years before any of the few other very early North American haiku collections were published in the early and mid-sixties. As a matter of fact, his next collection of haiku, *Zen Telegrams*, published in 1959, 20 years after *More Power To You*, was the second collection of haiku to be published in English! No other collection of haiku was ever published during the 20 year span between Reps' first and second collection of haiku! Reps was definitely ahead of his time. Adelaide Crapsey invented an American form of haiku, a sort of haiku-tanka hybrid called the cinquain (please read Jane Reichhold's [Those Women Writing Haiku Chapter Two](#) if you haven't done so yet), thus Reps was the second to develop a unique American brand of haiku (I recommend that you also read Jane Reichhold's essay - "Some Thoughts On Re-thinking [Haiku](#)").

In the beginning, Reps gave these picture-poems away to many of his friends as "weightless gifts". About five years after he had begun developing this new personal style of haiku in 1952, Reps started doing road shows, exhibiting his pictorial haiku; starting in Kyoto, Osaka, and Tokyo from 1957-1959, then one in Texas in late 1959; New Zealand, Australia, India, Japan, and Mexico in 1960; Pomona, California, in 1961; San Francisco in 1962; Chico, California, and back again in Tokyo, Japan, in 1963; Big Sur, California in 1964, and in later years in Washington, Rome, Honolulu, and perhaps other locations as well. Unlike the first collection *More Power To You*, *Zen Telegrams* was highly successful in the market place, being reprinted 10 times in the following 12 years! Reps was wise not to use the word "haiku" to describe his poems. Since his first few road shows were mainly in Japan, he knew quite well that he would run into trouble if he tried calling his poems haiku. The Japanese would have criticized his work, and the long debate that has never been resolved even today would have started up as to what is and what isn't a haiku. He wanted to avoid all that mess, so his picture-poems offended no one in Japan and he became a popular foreign attraction. The use of bamboo, rice-paper, his sumi ink calligraphic haiga, the brevity and simplicity of his poems, and his love of Buddhism all contributed to his success that appealed to Japanese cultural, aesthetic, and religious sensitivities.

More Power To You is a slim volume containing 89 haiku, four to a page. It is a remarkable collection considering when it was written, but attracted practically no attention whatsoever. In this book, it is undoubtedly clear that these poems are original American haiku. These haiku are not the picture-poems that he has become so well-known for even though a few of them were accompanied with drawings and included in some of his picture-poem books many years later. Even if one does not consider his picture-poems to be so-called "authentic"

haiku, it cannot be denied that the 89 poems contained in *More Power To You* are very good examples of early American haiku. Reps is one of the few people who has correctly stated, in his brief introduction, that haiku is just one of the short Japanese poetical forms that belong to a larger class of poetry that can also be found in nugget form in American Indian songs and in Persian, Hindu, Chinese, and Latin American Indian poetry. This point of view is also held by Carlos Garcia Prada, writer, critic, and a literary lecturer and researcher who was once one of the world's leading authorities on the history of haiku outside Japan. Prada points out that Indians were very keen observers and lovers of nature and suggests that it was very likely that there were some among them that captured these moments of heightened awareness and perception and expressed them in poetry or even sign language.

Reps very wisely chose not to adhere to any of the strict Japanese traditional haiku "rules" such as syllable (sound unit) count or line arrangement, nor did he feel he had to include a season word, although he often did. His haiku often expanded beyond nature to include human nature and social and political themes. He used punctuation sparingly, using mainly the dash and exclamation point. If you have not yet read Jane Reichhold's [Haiku](#) essay, "Fragment and Phrase Theory", I strongly suggest you read it (either now or later) if you write haiku and are interested in this important technical topic. Even though he divorced himself from many traditional Japanese haiku concepts and rules, he did however retain the spirit of Zen (but he rarely used the word himself) because he was a devout Buddhist and used Japanese materials and methods in composing his haiku and haiga.

I think Reps realized that he had to create his very own unique style of presentation in order to attract a wider audience, thus he chose a visual type of poetry that many people would not only read, but look at. To get people to read poetry, he cleverly attracted their attention first with his simple line drawings. His poetry addressed the reality of modern times back then and even now, that people in general do not read or listen to poetry like they once did in the past. The majority of people instead prefer using much of their leisure time to watch television and movies, attend concerts and sports events, and the numerous other modern leisure activities that consume and compete for our time and attention. His unique style of presentation enabled him to compete, putting on "poem shows" that attracted thousands of people. It should be remembered that Reps began writing and drawing visual haiku precisely at the time when television had effectively replaced radio as the number one mass medium in oral communications. I think he understood very well the rapidly increasing importance and impact of visual communications. I think he saw the trend toward compactness and speed as a result of television and new technology, thus he often called his haiku, "telegrams", urgent messages demanding immediate attention.

One of the ways that Reps marketed his picture-poems was to use some string to tie together long bamboo poles to form what he called a "child's space house". He scotch-taped the poems drawn and written on rice paper to the horizontal bamboo poles and suspended them like freshly cleaned laundry on a clothesline. He then turned on a couple of electric fans in the room to add a breezy effect. People at the show could view the poems hanging up on the line and buy any that they took a liking to. His prices varied. He used a sliding scale to charge for his poems; charging car owners the most, \$3 per poem, students paid 50¢, poor people were

charged 25¢ apiece, and lovers of Buddha only 2¢.

Reps had a wide range of ways of appealing to the hearts of many individuals in at least one of the many poems that he put up for display suspended from the bamboo poles and in this way he was able to make quite a few sales. He often commented that each haiku was especially meant for just one person, even though they could obviously be enjoyed and appreciated by many and were sometimes repeated and reproduced in books. His original intention however was not to reach out to a mass market, but to offer a wide variety of poems, each one appealing to a limited number of people. The marketing gurus today have finally come to realize what Reps understood long ago, the market is ONE, not millions. After each sale, Reps put up another picture poem on the line to replace the one that had just been sold. He also included sound effects in some of his shows and took customized orders for large broadsides of his picture-poems.

Reps was an early ecologist; condemning chemical dumping and water and air pollution in his picture-poem book, *Fish Signatures*. For this book, he borrowed live fish for a few minutes, brushed them with black sumi ink, then pressed each one against a sheet of rice paper, bathed the fish in water to rinse off the ink, and finally returned the fish to the fish tank, river, or wherever they had been taken from. Details of the fish were often recorded as to the size, weight, location, date, and weather conditions that day.

Other than these innovative approaches of presenting his haiku picture-poems, he also included them interspersed in prose, essays, and even plays (please read Jane Reichhold's [Banana Skies](#) – A Play In Ten Scenes based on Basho's haibun, *Backroads To The Interior*) thus expanding the concept of haibun (prose travel sketches containing haiku).

I once used one of Reps' ideas myself when I was living in Oakland in the early eighties. I wrote some minimalist haiku on colored paper cut into long triangular-shaped pennants which I glued onto long wooden dowels, six per dowel, three in one direction and three in the other. I marched slowly through the downtown streets and parks exhibiting the haiku gently flapping in the spring breeze. Since the haiku were minimalist haiku, people walking by could read one or more of them in just a glance. It must have seemed a bit strange since I was all dressed up in a suit, tie, and vest wearing my favorite Panama hat. The Oakland Art Museum found out about my activities in the streets and commissioned me to give a workshop for children on haiku (showing them how they could make these haiku pennants for themselves) at the museum on Family Day.

I used the same idea a few years later to give a haiku show for terminally ill children in a hospital auditorium in Sacramento. The children were delighted and some asked permission to have the haiku pennants put up on the hospital walls in their rooms. Each tiny poem had become like a new friend.

Reps often received comments on the interesting ink shapes and patterns, but he was more interested in how one reacted to the few words on the paper, the

haiku, explaining that the purpose of the ink drawings was to give an added dimension to the words and that is exactly what distinguishes excellent haiku; they work on multiple levels or dimensions simultaneously. We cannot visualize very much using our alphabet like the Chinese and Japanese are able to do by representing words visually through ideographs. Reps made a valiant attempt in his efforts to use our alphabet to convey ancient Oriental language concepts in a modern Western sense, to remove some of the abstractness of words, moving towards the delight of a more pictorial way of reading, thinking, and understanding. Paul Reps' haiku, telegrams, picture-poems, see say poems, poems before words, weightless gifts (all these designations, except for haiku, were used by Reps when referring to his work) or whatever you choose to call them, it doesn't really matter, were discussed on television, newsreels, radio, and magazines worldwide. No haiku poet outside of Japan since Reps has received so much international attention in the media, nor been anywhere nearly as successful as he in reaching large audiences and in merchandising his tiny poems. This should give food for thought to modern haiku poets throughout the world today; perhaps Reps' work deserves to be reconsidered, even if only from a marketing standpoint. It looks as though he was on the right track.

Below are several examples of his work from the following books: *More Power To You* (1939), *Zen Telegrams* (1959), *Big Bath* (1960), *Unwrinkling Plays* (1965), *Square Sun Square Moon* (1967), *Gold and Fish Signatures* (1969), and *Juicing* (1978). Other books by Paul Reps which you might find interesting are: *Sit In, Be: New Uses For the Human Instrument*, *As a Potato*, *Zen Flesh*, *Zen Bones* (compiled from three smaller books first published in the 1930s by Doubleday: without date), *10 Ways to Meditate* (1969, Weatherhill: 1981 - Bonus Edition with wooden cover and 1982 in paperback). I have included some of his picture-poems without the picture and of course something is lost. For those readers who would like to see Reps' drawings, I suggest that you buy one of his books in a used bookstore or over the Internet. Thousands of copies were printed and sold, so they are not too difficult to find if you live in a big city.

**Standing
in cool dew
I look at the cloudless sky**

* * * *

**How the dust flies!
Shaking my mop
into the sunset**

I was glad to see that he used the words "my mop" (indicating that he was the one who was doing the housecleaning) instead of using the possessive adjective "her" as many other males might have done. A 1939 haiku. Not bad. Compare the above haiku by Reps with this 1977 Dragonfly award-winner by William Kemmett:

**Out the upper window:
how bitterly the old woman
airs her dust mop**

* * * *

**Come stand with me
under the summer shower –
healed of world-madnesses**

We all need to cool off a bit from time to time in how we interact with one another as individuals, groups, and nations. A good invitation. I'll join in, what about you?

**Factory whistle screeching
this thousand-eyed body
sits in the tall grass**

* * * *

**Since men still make war
Let me lie down and sing
with the grasses**

* * * *

**Dumbly I stand before
cattle eyes hopefully questioning
through boxcar slats**

Most haiku poets will probably object to the use of the phrase "hopefully questioning" because it is a subjective interpretation of how the cattle felt, but I have spent some time hopping freight trains and I can clearly remember the times when I saw these same cattle eyes in cramped cattle cars like Reps saw, and I agree, that is what their facial expression looked like, "hopefully questioning" or if asked, I might have said "painfully wondering". Will the reader capture the haiku moment, the intense look in the eyes of those cattle without including the phrase? Maybe, but only if you have had this experience, otherwise probably not.

**Blind man's tremulous fingers
listening to spring stir
in pussy willow buds**

* * *

**Passing in the hot street
once and forever
we - knowingly - smile**

* * *

**walking through the forest
I rearrange
the trees**

* * *

**Sand, sundown, sea
nobody's dog
watches with me**

We never are really ever truly alone in this world.

**Frayed rug in the dust -
ah, the floating tapestry
of last night's moon!**

This reminds me of a scene from the movie "Blow Up" which was based on a short story written by the Argentine writer Julio Cortazar. Band members of the English rock group "Who" were playing violently on their instruments at a concert. The lead guitarist smashed his guitar to pieces and threw the bulk of it into the huge crowd of assembled people, landing in the hands of a photographer who was chasing after a young woman he saw in the crowd who he thought may have been involved in the murder of an older man who was her lover. The mob rushed after him to get the guitar scrap. He escaped; but so did the woman he was chasing. Then there he was on a quiet street with this strange worthless piece of junk in his hand. He didn't know what to do with the guitar scrap, so he just tossed it into the street gutter. Passers-by considered it an eyesore. The circumstances, conditions, our awareness at the moment, the inter-relationships between things; all these factors and many more influence how we see.

**Ticking, ticking away
at starlight
that watch and me**

* * *

**Kite on a string
Airplane
Evening star**

Compare the above 1939 Reps haiku with one written by L.A. Davidson in 1972:

**beyond
stars beyond
star**

* * *

**Squabbling wrens,
isn't there enough room
in this world?**

Sounds a bit like Issa's style.

**snow man
snow woman
melting away in the sun**

This one was written in 1939! A lot can be said about this haiku; but I think I'll allow you, the reader, make the discoveries for yourself.

**cobwebs
hesitating
us**

Nature does have a way of getting in our way. We're stopped in our tracks for a moment, yes, but we usually respond by destroying; tearing down cobwebs, chopping down trees, running

down animals on the roadways, killing off anything and everything in our path to what end, to where? Compare Reps' haiku with the following 1988 First Place Award by Dan Burke in the Harold G. Henderson Haiku Contest sponsored by the Haiku Society of America:

**a single strand
of spider silk
stops her**

* * *

**cucumber
unaccountably
cucumbering**

This haiku reminds me of the following haiku written by W.S. Merwin:

**I eat
the cucumber
my way**

The cucumber has its nature, as in Reps' haiku and we have ours, as in Merwin's.

| | | |
|----------------------|------------|--------------------|
| lose | | use |
| your unflower | and | your flower |
| mind | | mind |

These two haiku appear in different books but are corollaries. Japanese haiku Master Takahama Kyoshi said that the proper haiku mentality is to praise the beauty of birds and flowers and Clark Strand comments that few people in this life encounter circumstances which allow them to realize this "flower mind" ideal.

**suddenly from tree
peach blossoms
how can this be?**

* * *

elegantly crane lifts
spindling, shimmering, breathtaking
foot

Compare Reps' haiku above to the Shiki Grand Prize Haiku Award given to Timothy Russell in 1999:

noon
the egret shifts from stillness
to stillness

* * *

mother
blows away
baby's hurt

It often works! Usually not so, with fathers.

!

rain

Most everyone who has followed American haiku for a long time or has read up on it, is familiar with Cor Van den Heuval's famous one-word haiku on a page, "tundra", but few realize that Reps wrote about half a dozen picture-poems, containing one word, a few more with two, and several with three or four. Reps was the first to effectively exploit the minimalist technique. Reps one, two, or three word haiku accompanied by a simple line drawing involve far more reader participation than in the "tundra" example. I like one of Reps' haiku which shows a long vertical line in the center of the page with an oblique line on the left running down the page towards the vertical line forming a wide gap at the top and a narrow one at the bottom with the word "receiving" just to the left of the oblique line on the left looking roughly like:



receiving

This nicely displays a truth and also implies without actually stating its opposite, "giving". Giving stems from a narrow point that originates within ourselves and reaches out towards the widening world and becomes infinite, like sharing a poem with the world, the Creator, and the universe; and vice-versa, receiving originates at the top, outside ourselves from the wide world or the heavens, a "gift from the gods" we sometimes say. Thus the giving and

receiving principle is a constant flow, operating from the same points, outward and inward. Once you receive, you have something to give, and once you give, you have more space to receive. The "tundra" haiku falls flat (excuse the pun) in comparison.

**dance
stems,
dance!**

* *

the rain
oh yes
the rain

The joy of refreshing rain, nothing more, nothing less, but that's a lot, sufficient.

silently
the river
silently

* *

fourteen yellow petals
blown
into the doorway

Compare this with Shiki's famous haiku:

**cockscombs:
there must be
14 or 15**

When I began writing this month's Poet Profile, I thought that Reps was a peripheral haiku poet, but now, re-reading what I have written, I see that he was a lot closer to the center than I had originally thought. Reps was America's first haiku master. I think many of his poems prove this claim.

