

## Haiku in the Netherlands and Flanders

*by Max Verhart*

The Dutch language area comprises the Netherlands and the northern part of Belgium known as Flanders. There is a second living language within the Netherlands though: Frisian, spoken and written - next to Dutch, for the Frisians are bilingual - in the northern province of Friesland. Since about 1980 haiku has settled throughout the area, being written both in Dutch and in Frisian.

### History

The first Dutchman, and as far as we know even the first Westerner, known to have written haiku, was Hendrik Doeff (1777-1835). From 1798 till 1817 he stayed on Deshima, a small artificial island in the harbor of Nagasaki in Japan, which housed a Dutch trading post. This settlement at the time was the only 'door' between the thoroughly closed Japanese society and the outside world. Apart from the fact that the chief of that colony visited the shogun in the capital city of Edo once every one or two years, the Dutch hardly were allowed to set foot on Japanese soil; hence the artificial island. But that did not prevent contacts between the Dutch and the Japanese. In these contacts cultural exchange had its place, and haiku was part of that. Doeff, for several years chief of the settlement, was interested in the Japanese language, as witnessed by the Dutch-Japanese dictionary he compiled. Moreover, two haiku composed by him have been found in Japanese publications from the period of his stay in Japan. Here's one:

*lend me your arms,*

*fast as  
thunderbolts,*

*for a pillow on my  
journey*

This haiku supposedly refers to a young lady he saw slicing tofu very fast, while he was in an inn during a journey to visit the shogun. But there is no proof at all that Doeff was still interested in haiku after his return to the Netherlands. And certainly he played no role in spreading haiku outside of its country of origin. For that only took place in the 20th century.

Though haiku only started to settle in the Dutch language area around 1980, it did get incidental attention before that. The most prominent case in point is found in the work of the Dutch poet J.C. van Schagen (1891 - 1985). Having made a name for himself with poetry in a different style, in his later years he frequently used the three line 5-7-5 format to express himself. He preferred not to call these works haiku though, since he used the format in a very personal way and did not want to argue about whether they were haiku or not. One of several names he used for these small poems was reflexes, but he acknowledged his gratitude to Japan for being the origin of this 'gem'. One of his poems:

*ze is nog een kind  
doe heel voorzichtig met haar  
die mijn Moeder was*

*she's still a child  
be very carefull with her  
who was my Mother*

In Flanders Bart Mesotten started writing and promoting haiku in the early 1970's. With several other people interested in this type of poetry, he started the Haikoe-centrum Vlaanderen (Haiku Centre Flanders) in 1976. For his merits in promoting haiku he was awarded in 2000 in Matsuyama, Japan, with the Shiki Masaoka International Haiku Grand Prize. A poem he wrote:

*Ik rijd negentig.  
In mijn auto zweeft rustig  
een wilgenpluisje.*

*Driving at 50 mph;-  
quietly a fluff of willowseed  
floats in my car*

The greatest impetus for a lasting introduction of haiku in the Dutch language area however was the anthology *Een nieuwe maan* (A new moon), compiled by Mrs J. van Tooren (1900 - 1991) and published in 1973. She was already in her fifties when she got acquainted with haiku by reading the works of R.H. Blythe. Wanting to be able to read these gems in their original language she started, 60 years old, to learn Japanese, and having mastered that, continued by translating many haiku into Dutch. The anthology she compiled had an introduction explaining origin, history, format and character of haiku. The book sparked a rather broad interest and inspired many people to try their hand at haiku. In 1980 eight persons sharing an interest in haiku constituted the Haiku Kring Nederland (Haiku Circle Netherlands).

The way haiku developed in the Netherlands and Flanders is probably comparable with the way this happened and still happens in other countries outside of Japan. At first most efforts in haiku writing were imitative of the Japanese originals, especially those presented in such works as those by Blythe in English and Van Toorn in Dutch. Later on poets more and more tried to find their own approach, searching for ways to merge the Japanese example with their own poetical inclinations and the characteristics of their own language and culture. Probably the most prominent haiku poet to do this, was W.J. van der Molen (1923-2002), who had made himself a name as a poet in the nineteen fifties, but since about 1980 gave himself fully to haiku. Like Van Schagen before him, he used the format in a very personal way, rather than (trying) to adopt a Japanese-like attitude. Here's one of his haiku:

*Voor wat wisselgeld  
koop ik van een grijze moeder  
de stilte in haar hoofd*

*For some change  
I buy from a grey mother  
the silence in her head*

So two stages can be distinguished in the development of haiku: in the first one haiku was adopted and in the second one it was adapted. Especially since the late nineteen nineties this transition can be observed in the Dutch language area. As a result we now see, in addition to still many haiku being written in a classical style, more and more haiku appearing in a more free style; more free either in form, content or both. Of course some exemplary poets, like Van Schagen and Van der Molen, seem to have skipped the first stage almost entirely.

## **Organisations**

Both the Haiku Centre Flanders (HCF), with about 120 members, and the Haiku Circle Netherlands (HCN), with about 200 members, are unions with individual members, covering all of Flanders and all of the Netherlands respectively. Their goals were and are to promote interest in and study of haiku and stimulate the writing of original Dutch haiku. They organise activities, such as meetings, where for instance speeches are delivered on haiku matters and workshops and

discussions are held.

A few years ago the HCN started an annual excursion with what might be called a ginko character, since participants are invited to express their observations and reactions in haiku. If time allows, these are discussed at the end of the excursion. Thus visits were paid to the Hortus Botanicus in Leiden, to a Japanese garden in a former greenhouse and to the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam.

Regionally there are so called haiku cores or nuclei, whose members are not necessarily also members of HCF or HCN. However, all cores are coordinated by a member who is. The cores meet regularly, discussing topics related to haiku or discussing haiku written by members. The Frisian core by the way has chosen as its name: *Froaskedobbe*, which is Frisian for frogpond, thus acknowledging Basho in a similar way the Haiku Society of America did in naming its journal!

## **Publications**

A joint activity of HCF and HCN since 1981 is the quarterly *Vuursteen* (Flint), dedicated to haiku, senryu, tanka and other forms of poetry of Japanese origin. The journal is both a means to distribute information and comment and a platform to present original Dutch haiku. Over the years the articles published have paid much attention to the origins and the development of haiku, specifically in Japan, but there also were essays on haiku in other parts of the world, book reviews, analysis of literary techniques applied in haiku, and so on. The journal is the oldest still existing haiku journal in Europe.

*Vuursteen* publishes original haiku written in Dutch and occasionally in Frisian. Regularly included also at times were haiku in South African, which originates in 17th century Dutch and is one of the official languages of South Africa. The Dutch where the first colonists of South Africa.

In 1991 W.J. van der Molen started his journal *Kortheidshalve* (For Brevity's Sake), published three times a year and dedicated to short poetry in general, but with specific interest in haiku. Van der Molen had been one of the editors of *Vuursteen*, but got dissatisfied with the rather traditional approach of the genre the other editors adhered to. So the haiku poets with a more liberal approach then found a platform to present their works in *Kortheidshalve*. The last issue was produced by friends after Van der Molen's death in 2002.

Not specifically Dutch but published from the Netherlands (Friesland even!) was Woodpecker, an international journal with haiku from all over the world in the original languages with (unless the original language was English of course) translations in English. It was published twice a year in the period 1995-2002.

In 2000 the HCN, then celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, published *aan het woord* (speaking), a volume of haiku and tanka written by its members. There was enough appreciation for this production, for HCN and HCF to jointly decide to produce such a collection every two years. So in 2004 the third anthology in this series was published.

Over the years the greater commercial publishing houses have shown little or no interest in Dutch haiku. Works of Dutch haiku writers have been published mainly by small and/or private publishing houses, sometimes on the basis of financial participation of the author in the production. Of course authors - as well as several of the haiku cores - also take publication of their works in their own hands.

In a situation like that lack of quality of the poems is seldom an obstacle for publication. However important any publication may be for the well-being of the author, too much substandard haiku appearing in print do not help to increase the general esteem of haiku - which indeed is rather poor.

## **Present situation**

In the Dutch literary world haiku has hardly any standing. With a few exceptions neither publishing houses, nor reviewers or poets outside haiku show much interest or even consideration. Should this be a major concern? As a personal opinion my answer would be: we should not strive for acceptance of haiku in the literary world, but only for excellence in haiku. Of

course, that might also be helpful in gaining that acceptance after all.

### **A small anthology of Dutch, Flemish and Frisian haiku**

*Achter de duinen  
tussen ruisende dennen:  
het zeemanskerkhof*

Adri van den Berg (Netherlands)

*behind the dunes  
among rustling pine trees  
the sailors graveyard*

*Met elke voetstap  
wordt de weg wat langer –  
wordt hij wat korter.*

Inge Lievaart (Netherlands)

*with every step  
the road gets a bit longer -  
gets a bit shorter*

*kijk, die olifant  
langzaam wordt hij twee  
hondjes  
wolken in de wind*

Marianne Kiauta (Netherlands)

*look, that elephant  
changing into two dogs!  
clouds in the wind*

*Het zachte tikken  
van de witte blindenstok  
onder de bloesems*

Willy Cuvelier (Flanders)

*the soft tapping  
of the blind man's white cane  
under the blossoms*

*bij scherpe wind  
wandelt stilte in de straat  
decembermorgen*

Marcel Smets (Flanders)

*in a cutting wind  
silence walks in the street  
December morning*

*November mist  
geschreven in het veld  
bericht van een mol*

Wim Lofvers (Netherlands)

*November mist  
written in the field  
a mole's message*

*ik kijk achterom  
duizenden zonnebloemen  
staren mij plots aan*

Hans Reddingius (Netherlands)

*as I look back  
thousands of sunflowers  
suddenly staring at me*

*stille zondag  
de schaduw van de iep  
doet zijn ronde*

Max Verhart (Netherlands)

*quiet sunday  
the shadow of the elm  
makes its round*

*ze glijdt in het bad  
het zacht voelende water  
lijkt op zijn adem*

Paul Mercken (Fleming, living in the  
Netherlands)

*she glides in the tub  
the soft feel of the water  
resembling his breath*

*Yn 'e hjerststoarmen  
Ek it lêkste apeltsje  
Hat him losmakke*

Gé de Jong (Friesland, Netherlands)

*In the autumn storms  
the last small apple too  
released itself*