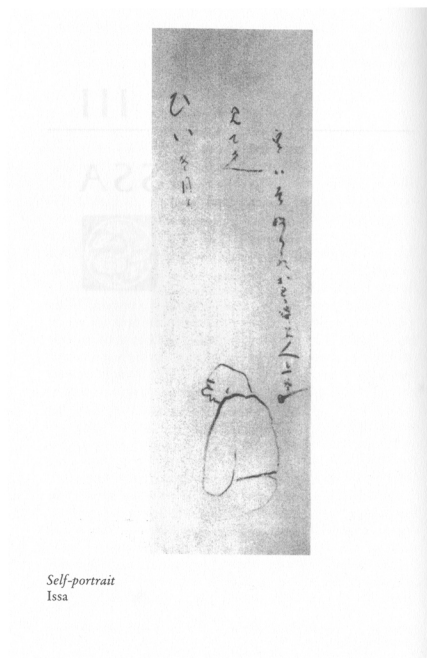


ISSA KOBAYASHI timeline from <http://en.kobayashi-issa.jp/issahistory.html>

- **1763** : born in a farmhouse in Kashiwabara Nagano
- **1765** : Age 3 : Issa's mother (Kuni) dies
- **1770** : Age 8 : Issa's father remarries - Stepmother (Hatsu) moves in
- **1772** : Age 10: Stepbrother Senroku is born
- **1776** : Age 14: Issa's grandmother (Kana) dies
- **1777** : Age 15: Issa moves to Edo (Tokyo) in the springtime.
It is unknown what Issa did for the next ten years, however it is thought that when Issa was around 20 years old that he was in Mabashi, Matsudo, Chiba studying under Ookawa Ryusa
- **1787** : Age 25: acted as a writer for leader Sogan Mizoguchi of the Katsushika group.
Studies under Kobayashi Chikua of the Katsushika group. Issa used the name "Ikyou" during this time.
- **1788** : Age 26: studied under Motoyume Morita of the Katsushika group
Issa used the name "Kikumei" during this period.
- **1791** : Age 29: returned to Kashiwabara for the first time since going to Edo (Tokyo)
- **1792** : Age 30: walking trip to western Japan (Kansai region)
- **1798** : Age 36: returned to Kashiwabara from western Japan (Kansai region) and departed again for Edo (Tokyo) shortly thereafter
- **1801** : Age 39: Issa's Father suffers a serious infection and dies in May. Disagreement arises with his stepmother and younger brother over inheritance distribution
- **1807** : Age 45: returns home for the Buddhist memorial services on the seventh anniversary of his father's death. Attends negotiations for the settlement of the inheritance twice this year.
- **1813** : Age 51: returns for the Buddhist memorial services for the 13th anniversary of his father's death. Reconciled with his younger brother and received half of the inheritance.
- **1814** : Age 52: married his first wife (Kikuko - who was 28 years old)
- **1816** : Age 54: Issa's first son, Sentaro is born, but dies soon afterward
- **1818** : Age 56: First daughter, Sato is born, but she dies the following year.
- **1820** : Age 58: Second son, Ishitaro is born. He dies the following year.
- **1822** : Age 60: Third son, Kinsaburo in born. He too dies the next year.
- **1823** : Age 61: Issa's first wife, Kikuko dies at age 37.
- **1824** : Age 62: marries Yuki, who is 38 years old but they soon divorce.
- **1826** : Age 64: Issa marries for the third time to Yawo. She is 32 years old at the time.
- **1827** : Age 65: Issa's home catches fire and burns down in the Kashiwara Fire.
The family temporarily moves into a storehouse that remained standing after the fire.
November 19 : Issa passes away while living in the storehouse.



Self-portrait
Issa

KOBAYASHI ISSA

(1763–1827)

Issa—his name means “a cup of tea” or “a single bubble in steeping tea”—is a much-loved poet. He has been described as a Whitman or Neruda in miniature, probably because his poems teem with creaturely life, especially the life of the smallest creatures. He wrote hundreds of poems about flies, fleas, crickets, bedbugs, lice. His main English translator, a Scot, compares him to Robert Burns, who was almost his exact contemporary. There is something very like Issa in the tone of Burns’s poem to the field mouse he turned up plowing: “Wee, sleekit, cowerin, tim’rous beastie, / O, what a panic’s in thy breastie.” And in other ways Issa’s sensibility resembles that of Charles Dickens—the humor and pathos, the sense of a childhood wound, the willingness to be silly and downright funny, and the fierceness about injustice. Issa wrote thousands of poems, many of them quite bad, flatly didactic and sentimental, but in his best work he is—for all the comparisons—quite unlike anyone else, the laughter cosmic, the sense of pain intense, as if the accuracy and openness of his observation left him with a thinness of the mind’s skin, with no defenses against the suffering in the world. Through he was a pious

Buddhist and inclined to moralize in his prose, there is an interesting edge of rage in his poems, something very near cynicism. What is delightful about his insouciance casts a shadow.

Issa's milieu was middle class. He was born Yataro Kobayashi in 1763, in the small mountain village of Kashiwabara in the province of Shinano in central Japan, the first son of a farmer with literary tastes. His mother died when he was two years old, an event that was to mark his life, and he was raised mostly by his grandmother. He attended the village school, where he was taught by a schoolmaster who kept the staging inn, practiced calligraphy, and wrote haiku under the name of Shimpō. Issa's father married a woman named Satsu when Issa was eight years old. When Issa was nine, Satsu bore a son, Senroku, and a bitter struggle began between son and stepmother that was to last much of Issa's life. His grandmother died when he was fourteen, and the following year his father, perhaps to end the conflict in the family, hired him out as an apprentice and sent him to Edo. His father traveled with him on part of his journey from home, and, according to the Scots translator, gave him final words of advice at parting: "Eat nothing harmful, don't let people think ill of you, and let me soon see your bonny face again."

Not much is known of what happened to Issa in his first ten years in the capital. By the time he was twenty-five, however, he was studying haiku under a man named Chikua and was publishing poems in the anthologies of Chikua's group, which was known as the Katsushika school and claimed an attachment to the tradition of Bashō. Although he was aware of Buson's work and wrote some imitations of it, it was the Danrin-like style of the Chikua group that formed Issa's own style. One scholar described that style as a reaching back past Bashō to get to

Bashō. Later, Issa described what the group wrote as "countrified *haikai*." But several elements of their style, the address to animals, lots of onomatopoeia, and more vernacular language than was used by either Bashō or Buson, as well as local slang, became part of Issa's characteristic idiom.

Issa's gift must have been recognized, because three years after joining the group, when Chikua died, he became the master at Chikua's Edo house, Nirokuan. Issa's tenure lasted just a year—apparently there were complaints against him from the more orthodox group members—and at age twenty-nine he resigned his position, returned to Kashiwabara to visit his father, and then—on the model of Saigyō and Bashō—set out on travels that were to occupy him for the next ten years. At this time he took the name Issa and adopted the tonsure. Following a common practice among teachers, he wore priestly garb for the rest of his life. Like Buson, Issa was a Pure Land Buddhist, though the sect in which he was raised, now the most numerous in Japan, seems, in western terms, distinctly protestant, pious, attentive to worldly work, and centered, in an almost Calvinist way, on faith.

Apparently Issa had some financial support from his father for his travels, and he made his living as an itinerant *haikaishi*, composing *renga* with local groups and correcting verses. He went south first to Ise, Nara, Kyoto, where he made offerings at the Hogangji Temple at his father's request, Osaka, the tomb of Bashō on the shore of Lake Biwa, and the island of Shikoku. In 1796 he traveled to the south again, then returned to Edo in 1798—the year of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*—and published his travel journals. In 1799 he made a third trip through the central mountains to the coast of the Sea of Japan.

In 1801 his father fell ill with typhus just after Issa had

returned to Kashiwabara to visit, and Issa nursed the old man in the month before his death. His father left a will, giving him the main part of his property on the condition that Issa settle there and marry. His stepmother and stepbrother refused to recognize the will, and the villagers, who had been their neighbors for years, supported them. Issa left a record of this time, *A Journal of My Father's Last Days*, which reads something like a chapter from a novel by Balzac.

The conflict initiated a new phase in Issa's life. From 1802 to 1813, he traveled back and forth from Edo to Kashiwabara while he engaged in litigation over the property. During this time he took students, and the stories about his Edo life, his casualness, his offhand way with the eminent, multiplied. Finally, the wrangling over his father's house was settled. Preposterously enough, Issa and his stepfamily decided to divide the house down the middle and live side by side. Issa is said to have composed a hundred haiku at his going-away party in Edo.

The last, catastrophic phase of his life began happily enough. He had returned to his home village and hired out his land to be worked. And he complied with his father's wishes by marrying a local farm girl named Kiku. He was fifty-one, and she was twenty-seven, and he seems to have been very fond of her. *Kiku* means "chrysanthemum," and Issa wrote a haiku about his young wife that can be translated as "Chrysanthemums / don't care / what they look like," or, "My Kiku— / she doesn't care / how she looks." A son was born in 1816 who survived a month, a second son was born and died the following year, a daughter, Sato, lived just over a year and died of smallpox. It was after this death that Issa wrote his major prose work, *A Year of My Life*. In 1819, Kiku was pregnant again, and after the delivery she fell ill and died. Her infant son did

not live the year. Four years later, aged sixty-three, Issa married again, into a samurai family, but dissolved the marriage in less than a year. In 1825 he married a third time, a midwife named Yao. In 1827 the house that had caused so much contention and seen so much trouble burned down. That November, suddenly and without pain, Issa died, leaving behind his wife and an unborn daughter, Yata. Yata inherited the rebuilt house, and it was still in her family in the 1950s.