

## ***The Tale of Genji* : The Impact of Women’s Voices on a Thousand Years of Romance in the Arts**

*The Tale of Genji* (*Genji Monogatari*) was written ca. 1000-1012 by Lady Murasaki Shikibu (c. 973-after 1014), an attendant of Shōshi, a consort of the emperor Ichijō (reigned 986-1011) at the illustrious Heian Japanese court (784-1185).

The world’s first psychological novel, it is also one of the world’s most important books by a woman. Its 54 chapters recount the romantic affairs of Prince Genji, his friends and their sons, and the many women they marry and/or fall in love with—both happily and tragically. The prose and its 795 poems play between two very different aesthetics: the restrained, even sad, but deeply moving awareness of the transience of life, inspired by Buddhism, called *mono no aware*, and a gorgeous up-to-date aesthetic of courtly elegance (*miyabi*). *Miyabi* is well known from the *Pillow Book*, written by Murasaki’s rival Sei Shōnagon (966?-after 1017), who served at the court of another consort.

Over the past millennium, the poems, characters, events, and emotions in the *Tale of Genji* became a foundation for poetry and Noh Theater, and inspired countless works of visual art—from painting, calligraphy, gardens, architecture, and woodblock prints to films, *anime*, *manga*—and candy, kimono designs, and *kai awase*, a game played with shells. *Genji* became a favorite subject of the Tosa School, painters for the court and aristocracy from the 1500s, several of whose works are shown here. By the Edo period (1600-1868) copies of both the novel and its pictures were being printed for commoners, who were inspired by ukiyo-e prints to see themselves in Genji’s romances.

The Academy has a fine collection of art related to the novel, especially calligraphy pages and illustrations. These include Edo-period Tosa School paintings with gold leaf, renowned for their depictions of gardens and of seasonal “sports” such as making snowmen and a type of football. Also shown are artworks inspired by *Genji*, such as the painted shell game.

The *Tale of Genji* is long—over 1100 pages in English translation—and has dozens of important characters. Within even a short time, Japanese society—and the language—changed enormously. Consequently, readers’ guides soon began to appear, and in the 16<sup>th</sup> century a painters’ guide also appeared: the *Genji Monogatari Ekotoba* (literally “words and text”). The manuscript gives brief excerpts from the novel with descriptions of how to paint each scene and what must be included. Some scenes are easily recognizable, such as Genji’s return visit to the Safflower Princess, in which he is protected by an umbrella, or the snowball scene from the Morning-Glory (Asagao) chapter. Others are more difficult, and the custom of using specific details to help identify a scene is very useful—even though many Tosa painters either used a different guide or felt free to modify the compositions.

**Anonymous**

**Chapter Thirty-Four: New Herbs I (*Wakana no ue*),**

**Scene 14**

Japan, Edo period (1615-1868), 18<sup>th</sup> century

Album leaf; ink, color and gold on paper

Gift of Ben Norris, 1992

(6999.4)

This delightful scene begins one of the most tragic sequences in the *Tale of Genji*. Genji's wife, the Third Princess (far right) and her ladies have been watching the beautifully dressed young men play football under the cherry blossoms. When her mischievous cat runs out onto the verandah, the Third Princess peeks out from behind the blinds to try to call him back. Both Yūgiri (Genji's son by Aoi) and the son of Genji's best friend Tō no Chūjō, named Kashiwagi (second from left, looking toward her, with an established sight line between them) see her. Kashiwagi falls instantly in love, with catastrophic consequences for everyone except the cat.

Edo-period Tosa painters, like ukiyo-e print artists of the same time, were fascinated by vision, in and of itself. They exploited themes of spectatorship and voyeurism, and experimented with showing the conditions of viewing. Here, fine brushwork conveys the semi-transparency of the lowered bamboo blinds that allow the girls to look out (but would have reflected the light back at the boys and prevented them from seeing the ladies in the darker interior).

**Anonymous**

**Lady Murasaki Writing the Tale of Genji**

**(*Ishiyama-dera Murasaki*)**

Japan, Edo period (1615-1868), 17<sup>th</sup> century

Fan; ink, color and gold on paper

Gift of John Gregg Allerton, 1984

(5264.1)

The *Ishiyama-dera Murasaki*, which shows Lady Murasaki writing the *Tale of Genji* at Ishiyama-dera, a famous temple outside Kyoto, is a favorite composition of Tosa School painters and their audiences. The temple, set on the side of a mountain overlooking Lake Biwa, is the thirteenth temple on the Saigoku Kannon Buddhist pilgrimage route, and was a favorite pilgrimage site of Heian-period courtiers.

*Ishiyama-dera Murasaki* compositions typically show the novelist, as here, leaning on her desk on a verandah overlooking the lake, with her brush in hand. Often the moon is shown reflected in the lake—a reference to numerous passages in the novel where the moon is reflected in water, such as the passage where Genji will meet the Akashi Lady:

The lady's house was some distance back in the hills. The coast lay in full view below, the bay silver in the moonlight.... (Chapter 12: Akashi, tr. Seidensticker, 262.).

Here Murasaki looks out at the sky, a variant of countless paintings depicting Chinese and Japanese monks, poets, and sages who contemplate the cosmos from a mountain temple.

**Anonymous**

***Heian Court Lady***

Japan, Edo period (1615-1868), 17<sup>th</sup> century

Fan; ink, color and gold on paper

Gift of John Gregg Allerton, 1984

(5264.2)

The elegant long hair and famous twelve-layer silk kimono (*jūni-hito-e*) worn by court ladies of *The Tale of Genji* was a favored subject in painting, and is still depicted not only in *Genji* illustrations but on chocolate boxes and gift handkerchiefs. The sliding door to the left, partially obscured by the gold cloud (a reminder, perhaps, that the court was referred to as “Above the Clouds”) is painted with an elegant ink landscape; the garden shows a shaped pine tree.

The painter is possibly Tosa Mitsunori (1583-1638) or his eldest son Mitsuoki (1617-1691). Both were known for the ceremonial fans they painted for the court. Like most of the paintings in this exhibition, this one uses typical Tosa techniques and materials: lavish amounts of gold and opaque mineral pigments. Although lead was sometimes used for white, since the lead would have darkened as it oxidized, here the white is ground shell (*gofun*).

Mitsunori, who painted hundreds of scenes from *Genji*, in spite of the painters’ guides, deliberately avoided repeating the same composition for any given scene.

**Anonymous**

**Passage from the *Tale of Genji*:**

***Chapter 14: Channel Buoys (Miotsukushi)***

Japan, Edo period (1615-1868), 18<sup>th</sup> century

Ink, silver and gold on paper

Gift of Ben Norris, 1992

(7000.1)

The underpainting here exemplifies a major aesthetic of the *Tale of Genji* that pervades Japanese culture: indirection or suggestion. Within a landscape of lake and mountains with wind-blown pine trees the *torii* gate of a Shinto shrine suggests Sumiyoshi Shrine and a painful almost-meeting.

Sumiyoshi is the shrine Genji visited after his banishment to Suma; it is also the shrine where an old monk living in nearby Akashi took his daughter twice a year, praying that some way be found for her to have a life with a nobleman in the city. When Genji moves from Suma to Akashi, he meets the monk and is introduced to his daughter, with whom he falls in love. Genji agrees to take her back to the capital. He

must leave her behind when he first returns, however. She gives birth to his child alone in Akashi, and awaits his return. In this passage, Genji returns to Sumiyoshi Shrine to thank the gods for ending his banishment. By sheer coincidence, the Akashi Lady has also arrived to thank the god. She is too humble to approach Genji, but he learns of her arrival and sends her a poem nonetheless.

The lone gate and pine tree allude to the whole story. There is no need to show the crowds, the main characters, or even the shrine itself.

**Anonymous**

**Passage from the *Tale of Genji***

Japan, Edo period (1615-1868), 18<sup>th</sup> century

Ink, silver and gold on paper

Gift of Ben Norris, 1992

(7000.3)

Calligraphy like this was a collaboration of several artists: calligrapher, paper-maker and paper-decorator, who used cut-gold leaf (*kirigane*), and silver foil sprinkled atop a surface landscape painted in silver (which has oxidized), gold paint, shell white, and *sumi* ink.

The custom of writing out brief passages from the *Tale of Genji* to accompany pictures goes back to at least the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, when the earliest extant *Illustrated Tale of Genji* was painted. Then, as in this example, the elegant calligraphy was in monochromatic *sumi* ink on decorated paper. Calligraphers gave their writing a visual form that reflected the emotions of the text. They indicate these by such things as the ways the syllables are linked or separated, the spacing on the page, the contrasts in thickness and thinness of the lines, and the angularity or roundness of the kana.

The passage reads:

From among the dense forests the fishing lights look like fireflies. “If we did not live in Suma, such a scene would have been a rare sight,” said Genji. Lady Akashi replied, “Like the lights my sufferings have come from Suma!”

**Anonymous**

**Chapter Fifteen, Scene 2: The Wormwood Patch (*Yomogiu*)**

Japan, Edo period (1615-1868), 18<sup>th</sup> century

Album leaf; ink, color and gold on paper

Gift of Ben Norris, 1992

(6999.1)

Readily identified by the umbrella that Genji’s friend Koremitsu holds to protect him from the dripping branches overhead, The Wormwood Patch Chapter is best known for its comic relief: its heroine, the Safflower Princess, has a most inelegant red nose.

Yet it is also one of the most poignant chapters of *Genji*. In scene 2, Genji has returned in the Fourth Month to visit the Safflower Princess (Suetsumuhana), whom he last visited in the early winter.

The Safflower Princess's house is derelict (note the missing floorboards on the upper right corner of the verandah—we can see right through to the supports.) Although it is late spring (the painting guides say the wisteria must always be shown in this chapter), her garden is so wild and forlorn it feels like autumn.

Because the scene is so easily recognizable, the guide's insistence on the wisteria might seem unnecessary. But it is needed to point up the emotional contrast between the fine weather and the princess's grim situation, reflected in the flowers on the one hand and the overgrown rain-laden branches on the other.

### **Anonymous**

#### ***Chapter Twenty: The Morning Glory (Asagao), Scene 3: Yuki no Asobi (Playing in the Snow) from the Tale of Genji***

Japan, Edo period (1615-1868), 18<sup>th</sup> century  
Album leaf; ink, color and gold on paper  
Gift of Ben Norris, 1992  
(6999.3)

On a moonlit night, Prince Genji and his most beloved Murasaki, dressed informally, watch the little maidservants Genji has sent out to make snowmen in the garden. The moonlight is reflected in the brook, where ducks sit by the rocks at the edge of the frozen water (geese and ducks, who mate for life, symbolize marital fidelity).

“There was the call of waterfowl.

‘A night of drifting snow and memories  
Is broken by another note of sadness.’”

(tr. Edward G. Seidensticker)

It is a scene of domestic bliss, which they appreciate all the more perhaps because they are recovering from a marital quarrel over the attention Genji has been paying to Lady Asagao. Asagao rebuffed him, which made him all the more interested. He can truthfully say they have not had an affair, and the author is careful to tell us he has never really loved Asagao; his heart belongs to Murasaki. Yet Murasaki has felt his attention drifting, and Genji knows he has hurt her. Here they spend a long night enjoying the contrasting effects of snow on pines and bamboo, and reminiscence.

### **Matsumoto Ichiyō (1893-1952)**

#### ***Funabashi Genji***

Japan, Taishō period (1912-1926), ca. 1922  
Pair of two-panel screens; ink and color on paper  
Purchase, Marjorie Lewis Griffing and Beatrice Watson Parrent Funds, 1994

(7542.1-2)

Paintings of beautiful women and men (*bijinga*) became popular in the Edo period and continued in the work of artists such as Ichiyō. Although the screens themselves bear no title, because of the boats and their romantic hero, they can be tentatively identified with the Ukifune (“Floating Boat”) theme of the last ten chapters of the *Tale of Genji*. Ichiyō is known to have painted a hanging scroll on this theme that he entered into the *Teiten*, a prestigious national exhibition, in 1922. *Genji*’s final chapter is called “The Floating Bridge of Dreams” (*Yume no ukihashi*), and here Ichiyō has constructed a literal floating bridge of planks laid across anchored boats along which the lovelorn young man walks, absorbed in his dream.

When *bijinga* specialists such as Ichiyō depict males, these men are noticeably feminized. This reflects not only the stylistic orientation of the artists but also the widespread taste for the *nimaimé* (second) type of romantic male lead in Kabuki, new drama (*shingeki*) and film. The *nimaimé* can be considered the male counterpart to the Taishō *bijin*. Although this is not a depiction of a *mobo* (modern boy), here Ichiyō presents his pre-modern counterpart.

**Attributed to Tosa Mitsuyoshi (1539-1613)**

**Chapter 5: Lavender (*Waka Murasaki*, literally “Young Murasaki”) from the *Tale of Genji*,**

**Scene 3: A Farewell Concert with the Bishop**

Japan, Momoyama period (1573-1615), 16<sup>th</sup> century

Two-panel screen; ink, color and gold on paper

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Ray R. Reeves, 1960

(2785.1)

The scene is the hills north of Kyoto, where a seventeen-year-old Genji visits a bishop and happens to see a lovely ten-year-old girl named Murasaki. (Her name has been given to the author Murasaki Shikibu, whose real name is unknown). Genji is taken by her, for she resembles her aunt, Genji’s one-time lover Fujitsubo. Living in the country, the child has no prospects for a decent marriage or education, and Genji takes her back to the capital with him, where she eventually becomes the deepest love of his life.

Here the bishop hosts a farewell party for Genji and his friends. Standard elements in the depiction of this section of *Genji* missing from this painting are Genji’s going-away-presents from the bishop (a rosary and several decorated medicine bottles), the couriers who have come to meet Genji and their carriages, children, priests, and acolytes—all specified by the Guidebook. This suggests the freedom artists enjoyed to modify their compositions for their own purposes.

**Kisui (dates unknown)**

***Noh Dance and Firefly***

Japan, Shōwa period (1926-1989), ca. 1920s

Pair of two-panel screens; ink and color on silk  
Purchase, Marjorie Lewis Griffing and Beatrice Watson Parrent Funds, 1994  
(7548.1-2)

The artist, title, and subject of these two screens remain a mystery, despite the many hints given regarding their iconography. While the idea of a firefly hunt dates to Kagashi Yamada's 1832 puppet play the *Morning-Glory Diary*, fireflies are also present in Chapter 25, "Fireflies" (Hotaru) of *Genji*. The "evening-face" flower (*yūgao*) is a likely reference to the *Tale of Genji*'s character Yūgao (The Lady of the Evening Faces), whom Genji also once loved and who died tragically young. Genji is trying to find a suitable match for his charge Tamakazura, the daughter of Yūgao and his best friend Tō no Chūjō. Genji releases fireflies near Tamakazura, so that his brother, Prince Hotaru, is able to see her face for the first time. Needless to say, he falls in love with the beautiful young girl.

Many Noh plays have been written based on characters from *Genji* and on its author. The great Noh playwright Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443), who loved female protagonists, particularly recommended *Genji* to other playwrights. Several Noh plays are based on Tamakazura, Yūgao, and other heroines. Others use poems from *Genji*.

Notice the facial resemblance between the two females, as well as the parallel between the pink of the dancer's formal skirt and the pink robe worn by the girl. Could the dancer be the girl, grown up, or in another incarnation? The artist appears to fuse three "pasts"—the dream worlds of literature, history, and childhood—a fusion of "selves" in keeping with writings about their lives by Heian women, who wrote of the roles of memory, literature, and dreams in shaping their identities.

### **Anonymous**

#### ***Painted Shell Game (Kai-awase)***

Japan, Edo period (1615-1868)

Ink, color and gold on shells

Gift of Mrs. Walter F. Dillingham in Memory of Elizabeth M. Adams, 1948

(623.1)

*Kai* is "shell" and *awase* means "to match." This game has been played since ancient times in Japan, where it was a popular form of entertainment for court ladies. It is very similar to the modern game of Memory. Each set of shells has the same picture painted on either half. When the shells are turned upside down, the challenge is to find the matching shell, creating a set. Chapters from the *Tale of Genji* inspired the designs.

### **Anonymous**

#### ***Pair of Lacquer Kaioke (Storage Containers for the Painted Shell Game, Kai-awase)***

Japan, Edo period (1615-1868), 19<sup>th</sup> century

Lacquer, gold, metal fittings, and braided cord  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Hamane, 1996  
(8538.1-2)

This pair of black-lacquer storage containers were designed to house the pieces for the shell game. Their exuberant yet elegant meandering design bespeaks their later date.

Lacquer has been used in Japan for thousands of years (9000-year-old relic ornaments have been found in Hokkaido). It is prized for not only for its preservative and water-proofing properties, but also for its beauty, lustrous sheen, and its ability to capture pigment, precious metals, and shells for eternity.

## **Anonymous**

### ***Bundai (Writing Table) and Suzuri-bako (Ink Box Set)***

Japan, Meiji period (1868-1912)

Lacquer, gold, silver and mother-of-pearl inlay

Gift of Glenn and Margaret Y. Oda, 2003

(12399.1-2)

Writing tables and boxes, such as we see here and in the painting of Murasaki Shikibu writing the *Tale of Genji* at Ishiyamadera, were essential accoutrements for the practice of calligraphy. The writing box traditionally held writing implements such as those on display here: ink stone, water dropper, brushes, awl, and knife.

By the Heian period, writing boxes were already a valuable—and revealing—accessory for both men and women. One is shown in the “Evening Mist” (Yūgiri) chapter of the 12<sup>th</sup>-century *Illustrated Tale of Genji* by Fujiwara no Takayoshi. In *The Pillow Book* Sei Shonagon explains:

It is...important for a man to keep his writing-table in perfect order. If his inkstone case is not made in several tiers, it should have two fitted boxes, and its gold lacquer design should be attractive without looking contrived; his inkstick, brush and other equipment should all be chosen to attract attention.

The writing box is decorated with different applications of gold to delineate a design of pine and flowering cherry trees growing near a riverbank. On the inner surface of the lid is a stream with water plants and herons. Lastly, in keeping with the theme, the silver water dropper is in the shape of a raft.