

## Katsukawa Shunshō and the Tales of Ise

The *Tales of Ise* is a classical Japanese literary work of the Heian period (794-1185), written anonymously circa 980 AD. It consists of 143 episodes, each containing one or more poems including a prose explanation of the circumstances of the poem's composition. Every chapter deals with romantic entanglements of the protagonist, assumed to be the court poet Ariwara no Narihira (825-880 AD), who some believe to also be the actual author of *Tales of Ise*.

The act of composing and sending poetry to one's lover was an extremely important aspect of love-affair etiquette during the Heian period. Amongst the nobility, it was, in fact, an expected activity after a romantic encounter. The letters would be judged not only on their poetic content but also on presentation, thus, the handwriting and even the type of paper used were careful considerations.

Katsukawa Shunshō was a founder of the Katsukawa Ukiyo-e School, where the legendary artist Katsushika Hokusai also studied. Artists of this school specialized in producing actor prints and in depicting the physiognomy of their subjects. Shunshō's series on the *Tale of Ise* reveals his earlier style, which was significantly influenced by another illustrious print artist, Suzuki Harunobu (1725-1770). Each of the forty-eight designs in Shunshō's *Ise* series is marked with one letter of the Japanese *kana* syllabary, starting with *i*, *ro*, *ha*.