JAPANESE SCREENS

IN

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

A Teaching Packet

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INTRODUCTION

Over one thousand years ago, the portable screen traveled from China and Korea to Japan, part of a series of successive waves of influence from these mainland countries that brought to the Asian islands a written language, Buddhism, new forms of government, and different styles of art. Just as the Japanese modified the imported written language and religion to fit the needs of their own culture, they also translated Chinese screens into forms that articulated the practical needs and aesthetic standards of their society. The adaptation of the portable screen demonstrates the ability of Japanese artists and craftsmen to borrow and imaginatively transform features of art from other countries.

The first screens introduced from China were heavy and cumbersome. Some consisted of a single wood panel supported by low bracketed feet, while others had a central panel flanked by two smaller wings that projected forward. Often a painting on silk was glued on the wood panel. The Japanese used these screens as a ceremonial backdrop for an important visitor or the master of the house. Such screens were also placed in the front entranceway of a house to block the wind or evil spirits from blowing inside. Hence the
name *byobu* developed for folding screens in which *byo* means "protection from" and *bu* means "wind".

The Japanese added sturdiness and flexibility to the construction of the early screens. To ensure better balance, an even number of panels were assembled so a freestanding screen could be folded in an accordion fashion. Most screens have six panels or folds. For the painter, this created a format somewhat like the handscroll in which the subject matter moved laterally from right to left across the screen. Paper made from pulp of the mulberry tree took the place of heavy wood panels. This type of paper was so strong that it was also used to make military armor and clothing. Double hinges, also constructed of paper, made it possible for the owner to fold the panels in two different directions, creating a zig-zag arrangement. An artist usually created the painting for a screen on a single piece of paper that lay flat on the floor. Needing to move over the paper to paint, the artist relied on a couple of inventions that offered maneuverability. One was a plank on wheels that bordered the paper. The artist knelt on the plank and was pushed across the expanse of the painting by assistants as his painting progressed. Another device was a swing-like contraption on which the artist sat to paint and used a pulley system to move above the paper. A
craftsman called the munter then glued the finished painting to the screen. This often entailed cutting the large painting into three horizontal strips and carefully gluing each to the screen. Silk borders frame the images and provide a means of moving a screen without touching the paper and damaging the painting. Lacquer covers the edges and simple stencils decorate the unpainted paper backing.

Byobu was highly suited to the Japanese style of architecture. Japan, a country wracked with earthquakes, developed a post and lintel style of architecture that minimized load-bearing walls and the possibility of severe damage in a natural disaster. This type of construction resulted in large, all-purpose rooms. The folding screen not only stopped a draft, but provided a means of privacy. It divided family members from servants, men from women, eating from living spaces, and private quarters from public reception areas. After waking up in the morning, one could literally make the bedroom disappear by folding and removing the screen. The age of warlords in the Muramachi period (1573 - 1615) ushered in a new type of architecture that featured audience halls and deep recesses to hide from stray arrows. These dark interiors, coupled with a lord's desire to make a public statement about his power, led to the increased use of gold in byobu. Gold brightened these dimly lit interiors by
reflecting the light of candles and oil lamps. The precious metal and
brilliant colors were symbols of the lord's wealth and prestige,
designed to arouse awe in the beholder.

One the most unique features of the Japanese folding screen is its
blending of functional object and work of art. The screens at The Art
Institute of Chicago provide examples of the wide variety of subject
matter and painting styles that developed in Japan between the
fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. They also offer insight into the
country's rich history and culture, with scenes ranging from the
imperial event of viewing cherry blossoms to dramatic moments
from Japan's The *Tale of Genji*, the world's first novel, dating from
approximately 1000 A.D.

Note to the teacher: In this teaching packet, glossary words
appear in bold type and Japanese terms are *italicized*. Classroom
suggestions are offered after each slide description; you are
encouraged to adapt them to meet the grade level, abilities, and
interests of your students.
HOW TO READ A JAPANESE SCREEN

The most common form of byobu (folding screens) is the six-fold screen, which consists of six separate panels hinged together to form a large horizontal surface for decoration.

Each screen is read from right to left. If there is a pair of screens, the right screen is read first.

In this teaching packet, there are three pairs of screens: slides 1 and 2, slides 3 and 4, and slides 7 and 8. In each pair, the slide with the higher number is the right screen and should be read first.

left screen

right screen

JAPANESE HISTORICAL PERIODS

Nara period 710-794
Heian period 794-1185
Kamakura period 1185-1333
Nanbokucho period 1336-1392
Muromachi period 1573-1615
Edo period 1615-1868
Meiji period 1868-1912
Slides 1 and 2

Sesson Shukei
Japanese c. 1504 - 1589
*Landscape of the Four Seasons*
Muranachi period, 16th Century
Sumi (ink) and color on paper
Gift of the Joseph and Helen Regenstein Foundation, 1958.167

Nature and its seasonal changes provide the setting for
a spiritual journey in a pair of six-fold screens executed by the
painter-priest Sesson Shukei (c.1504 - c.1589). The painter conceived
the pair as a single composition in which temples ensconced within
mountains flank a centrally placed body of water. Subtle changes in
the landscape denote a feature unique to Japanese painting, the cycle
of the seasons across a panoramic view of nature. Such depictions of
a shifting landscape, which integrated the bustle of human activity
with the beauty of nature, conveyed the fundamental unity of all
living things that is central to Buddhist belief. By comprehending
this intuitively, the viewer might instantly be enlightened, ending
the sorrowful cycle of rebirth.

By providing a point of focus, screens like *Landscape of the Four
Seasons* assisted the viewer's meditation on the cycles of life and the
human condition. Following the Asian convention of reading from
right to left, Sesson indicates spring in slide 2 through blossoming plum trees, budding foliage, and a waterfall that plunges and splashes with the force of a stream swollen by melted snow. Mist floating like cotton to the left of the waterfall suggests the passage of time from spring to summer. In panel four, a red-robed figure, wearing the straw hat of a commoner, rides a donkey over a bridge. The low water level beneath the bridge and the exposed rocks of the path that meanders around the bay evoke the heat of summer.

The subtlety of the shifting seasons and times of day requires a viewer to slow down and contemplate the cycles of life as one season flows into another across the landscape. Distant mountains, created by ink washes of blue and green, gently link the two screens. As the viewer follows these mountains across the screens, summer merges into fall and day turns into night. In slide 1, nature signals autumn in the form of heavy mist hovering in groves of pines clustered between two rocky outcroppings behind the temple in panel four and behind a village's rooftops in panel six. As the sky darkens in panel three, a full or harvest moon rises, foreshadowing the coming of winter. Snow-covered mountains, accentuated by the night sky, now replace the greens and blues of fall and summer.
Human activity seems determined by the seasons that unfold in this monumental landscape. In the spring, people venture outside to admire nature in full bloom. Sesson provides a wide variety of trees, plants, bushes, and rocks for the viewer to identify. Travel prevails in the summer landscape through which people journey on foot, donkey, or by boat. Boating activities continue in the autumn in the form of two fishing vessels casting their nets. This preoccupation with gathering food, combined with people scurrying along the shores, expresses a last spurt of energy to prepare for winter. A man, bowed by age, stands on a veranda in panel six contemplating the ephemeral autumn phenomenon of mist in the pines.

Meditation is central to Zen, the sect of Buddhism of which Sesson was a priest. Zen students learn through contemplation of a teacher's words rather than through reading scriptures or sutra. In fact, the word "Zen" comes from the sanscrit, Dhyana, which means "meditation." Zen Buddhism promotes the idea that the Buddha nature resides within each of us and thus unites all living things. The practitioner only needs to look within himself to find it. Paintings such as Landscape of the Four Seasons were part of a series of devices developed to heighten a devotee's intuitiveness and bring about spontaneous enlightenment. Zazen is the practice of meditation
in which one sits motionless for hours, days, or even weeks with legs crossed in an attempt to empty the mind, achieving first tranquillity and then insight into the way of things. *Koan* such as "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" offer unsolvable and illogical riddles. **Enlightenment** is achieved instantly when the practitioner transcends what appear to the logic-oriented person to be contradictions.

A pair of screens like Sesson's might create an environment for practicing *zazen* or contemplating a *koan* by delineating a space for devotional use within a monastery or mansion. The screens might also serve as a point of focus for the person meditating. The landscape itself presents a series of riddles. What happened to the mountain blotted out by the mist in panels three and four of the right screen (slide 2)? Where do all the trails lead? How can the pine survive on a craggy rock? Sesson suggests contradiction in the textures he evokes: the solidity of the rock mountains overwhelmed by the diaphanous mist; the rough hewn pine bark against the layers of stone smoothed by the wind and the rain (slide 2, panels three and four).
Zen Buddhism considered the process of painting as a form of meditation for the artist. In his book *Advice to Students*, Sesson says:

> When you create a painting, with brush infused with your spirit, you should wield the brush with a dedicated heart, as though on a holy pilgrimage through the seas and mountains.

Ink painting or *suibokuga* (sui=water, boku=ink, ga=painting) came to Japan from China in the 13th century and was considered an ideal medium for spontaneous intellectual and spiritual expression. Paper for the painting was laid flat on the floor of the artist's studio to be mounted on the screen after the finished painting dried. Artists as renowned as Sesson would have a moveable wooden plank mounted on wheels and placed above the blank paper. Assistants at each end wheeled the artist over the painting. After kneeling on the plank with his brush, water, inkcake, and inkstone beside him, the painter cleared his mind and focused as he mixed water with the inkcake, creating the desired consistency of ink. The application of ink to paper required total concentration of mind and body. The artist's vision must be complete and the inked brush must be applied without hesitation. No correction is possible on the absorbent paper. The artist cannot erase or cover a brushstroke; the paintings therefore reflect the strength or weakness of the painter's training and resolve.
Sesson used a wide variety of brushstrokes from the undulating lines of *viscous* ink outlining the forms of trees, rocks, and mountains to the light washes of ink that give texture and volume to the same objects. *Peppercorn strokes* sputter and splash across the rock formations and tree trunks. Such variety suggests an artist with a finely tuned mind and an arduously trained hand. The artist's use of *monochromatic* ink tones with slight embellishments of color on the mountains and trees further accentuates the *calligraphic* quality of the painting. Without the distraction of color, Sesson can dash off a splashing stream, just as a writer may jot down a sentence that pops into his or her head. He can focus on the brushwork, clarifying each variation of a line or form. In his austere use of color, Sesson follows the Zen adage, "Many colors blind your vision."

The qualities of discipline, spontaneity, and austerity manifest in Zen paintings like Sesson's screens and emphasized in the practice of the Zen religion appealed to the *warlords* of Japan. Warriors needed these same attributes for battle. Sesson came from a warrior family, the Satake clan, who ruled Hitachi province (north of Tokyo). He entered the priesthood in a Zen temple as a young man supposedly to avoid conflicts when a younger brother was chosen as the heir. As a priest, Sesson was an artist-in-residence to a number of warlords in
Japan's Kanto region, responsible for organizing and cataloging art collections, developing spiritual exercises, creating paintings, and providing painting lessons.

The life of a priest was ideal for an artist. Religious pilgrimages provided access to the great art collections housed in Buddhist temples and warlord palaces, and put the painter-priest in constant touch with nature. It was such exposure that enabled Sesson to create *Landscape of the Four Seasons* with its high degree of artistic skill and sensitivity.

**Classroom Suggestions**

1. Assign each student a season to examine in the *Landscape of the Four Seasons* screens. Have students imagine that they can step into the screen, into their particular season and scene. Have them write travel journals of their trip through the landscape, describing in detail the land, plants, weather, and activities that they encounter.

2. Supply students with paper, ink or black paint, and a variety of brushes. Have them experiment with creating brushstrokes of different thicknesses and styles, referring to Sesson's viscous ink outlines, light washes, and peppercorn strokes as examples. How does the quantity of ink on the brush or the angle of the brush against the paper affect each stroke?

3. In many cultures, including Japanese, the four seasons are symbolic of the cycle of life. Have students discuss the similarities between each of life's stages and their seasonal counterparts. What "season" of life are the students in at this time? Have students portray their "season" in written or pictorial form. As an alternative or supplement to this activity, have students interview someone in
the fall or winter of their life about their journey through the seasons.

4. In this screen, the integration of human activity with the beauty of nature conveyed the Buddhist notion of the fundamental unity of all living things. The individuals in *Landscape of the Four Seasons* are very attuned to and dependent upon nature. Have students consider their relationship to nature. How aware are they of its intricacies and its subtle changes from day to day? Do they feel harmonious with or separate from their natural surroundings? Why? How does their dependence upon nature differ from that of the people depicted in the screen?
Slides 3 and 4

Japanese
Sun and Moon on the Musashi Plain
Edo period, early 17th century
colors and gold leaf on paper
Samuel M. Nickerson Fund, 1936.251

It may have been a painting that inspired the Heian period (794 -
1185) courtier Minamoto Michikata to compose the poem included
in the imperial poetry anthology of 1265, the Shoku Kokinshu or
Collection of Ancient and Modern Poems, Continued:

The moon finds no hills to hide behind in Musashino,
White clouds hang at the tips of the pampas grasses.

While Musashi Plain or Musashino constituted a major category of
subject matter for painting and poetry, it was considered a desolate
travel spot by thirteenth-century courtiers. To reach Musashi Plain
from the imperial capital of Kyoto, one had to follow the Pacific Coast
Highway, the Tokaido, for over three hundred miles. Musashino’s
exotic appeal was in part due to its unusually flat topography, bare
of rocks and mountains, that was in stark contrast to the
mountainous terrain that covers 90 percent of Japan. Meisho-e, or
pictures of famous scenic places, enabled viewers such as the
courtier Minamoto Michikata to travel to the site in his mind. Such
imaginary journeys envisioned while contemplating folding screens inspired poems known as byobu waka or folding screen poems.

Like Minamoto's poem, the Art Institute's folding screens evoke the characteristics that make Musashi famous: the flat plain, the setting sun, the rising moon, and the autumn grasses. The pattern of interlocking gold leaf and malachite-green creates a sense of infinite space as the plain ebbs ever outward, stopped only by the frame of the screen. According to traditional screen design principles, a pair of screens is read from right to left. By placing the sun on the right and the moon on the left, the artist implies a setting sun and rising moon. The intensity of the pigment on the right screen (slide 4) as opposed to the left (slide 3) suggests two different types of light. Sunlight is indicated by the intense white of the chrysanthemum in front of the sun (slide 4, panels three and four) versus the grayish-white of the chrysanthemum in front of the moon (slide 3, panel four). Moonlight is also suggested through the darker shades used for flowers and plants on the left screen. This awesome space conjures a sense of man's isolation. The passage from day to night calls to mind the transitory nature of all living things. The viewer senses a poignancy in the dance of autumn grasses in the cool wind that foreshadows winter.
In the *Tales of Ise*, a tenth-century poetic narrative, the Musashi Plain provides the backdrop for Episode 12. The entire narrative presents a series of disjointed tales about the epic and often mythical love affairs of the 9th-century courtier Ariwara Narihara. The hero travels to *meisho* or famous scenic places when fleeing east from political and personal disappointments in Kyoto. At each famous site the wonders of nature remind both reader and hero of the great distance he has traveled and the isolation of man, while the awesome cycles of days and seasons evoke feelings of longing due to the transitory nature of life. Episode 12 deals with a pair of lovers escaping to Musashi. Like the moon in the Art Institute’s screen, the couple has only the autumn grasses to hide behind. Sadly, the couple is discovered and captured when officials threaten to burn the plain. The woman, fearing for her lover’s life, recites:

Musashino wa  
Kyo wa na yaki so  
Wakakusa no  
Tsuma mo komoreri  
Ware mo komoreri  

Do not set fire today  
To Musashi Plain,  
For my beloved husband  
Is hidden here,  
And so am I

Musashi’s appeal continued in the Edo period (1615 - 1868) when the Art Institute screens were painted. It was no longer a fantastic dreamland but the backyard of Edo (modern Tokyo), the military
capital of Japan. After becoming the shogun's bureaucratic headquarters in 1615, Edo grew from a fishing village of 15,000 to a city of two million inhabitants. The city's population was aware of the wilderness of Musashi that lay just beyond its bustling, ever-expanding boundaries and was drawn to its haunting beauty. The government regulated against travel for pleasure but permitted religious pilgrimages. Townspeople appropriated rituals and cultural traditions of the imperial court as one way of circumventing these shogunal restrictions. Musashi became popularly known as a travel spot for pilgrims observing rituals associated with insuring a bountiful autumn harvest of rice. These activities included moon-gazing, giving food offerings, saying prayers, identifying seasonal flowers and insects, collecting crickets for their sweet sound, and writing poetry. A popular Edo poem written by an anonymous author over 500 years after the Heian literature of Minamoto and Ariwara suggests that Edo pilgrims likewise linked the famous spot with themes of the awesome vastness of nature and the transitoriness of life in this world:

The moon finds no mountain to hide behind in Musashino, It rises from grasses and descends into grasses.
The Art Institute screens suggest the spectacle around which seasonal festivities at Musashi were organized - the full moon that occurs nearest the autumnal equinox. This moon has similar connotations in the United States, where it is often referred to as the harvest moon. The autumnal equinox is one of the two times in the year when the length of day and night are approximately equal. After this, days shorten, the season becomes colder, and plants perish. The Musashi screen artist suggests the equinox and balance of day and night by arranging the composition of the left screen to mirror that of the right. The outward ebbing plain and the placement of celestial orbs mimic each other in reverse. Baby or bush bamboo on the right screen (slide 4) in panels one and two and on the left screen (slide 3) in panels five and six provide architectonic elements that frame the scene. Bush clover, which in right screen panel two is juxtaposed with a backdrop of gossamer strands of pampas grass and flanked by blue, star-shaped blossoms of the Chinese bellflower, creates a rhythmic pattern through its clumps of tiny, round leaves and delicate, white flowers. This lyrical pattern is repeated in reverse on the left screen.

The artist, then, combines those elements that identify Musashi - sun and moon, flat plain, autumn grasses - with those that are intrinsic to
the harvest rituals begun by the imperial court. Here nature and symbol intertwine. The artist depicts a white chrysanthemum emblazoned by the fire-red orb of the sun as it hugs the edge of the verdant plain, evoking in the viewer an intensity of emotion by presenting a thing of beauty that will shortly disappear. These motifs also possess imperial overtones; the red sun symbolizes Ameratsu, the Shinto deity from whence the emperor descended, and the white chrysanthemum is the crest for the imperial family.

In summary, the Art Institute’s screens by Sesson function in a vein similar to the way the imagery inspired Minamoto Michikata’s poem over 500 years earlier. The artist created an identifiable space, pregnant with poetic mood, through which the viewer then and now can take endless journeys of the imagination. Given the high level of education in Japan by the 18th century, however, the patron and audience for these screens would presumably have brought a complex network of associations to the viewing experience, from court literature and religious rituals to the autumn festivals that became popular in the Edo period.
Classroom Suggestions

1. A few objects strategically placed against the gold leaf background gives the viewer a sense of infinite space. Using two 8 1/2 x 11 pieces of paper as backgrounds, have students experiment with the appearance of objects in space by cutting out and placing a moon, sun, grasses, and flowers in various positions against the paper. Can students create settings that are cluttered? Sparse? Close up? Remote? What effect does each arrangement have on the mood of the scene?

The composition in each of these screens is arranged so that the left mirrors the right. This balance adds to the calm mood. When arranging the objects, have students experiment with creating balance and imbalance. Discuss the different results.

2. This pair of screens provides a setting for quiet contemplation for the viewer. Have students find peaceful landscapes in magazines or books. Have them describe how it would feel to be in one of the landscapes. What would they see, hear, smell, and experience? While visitors were at Musashi Plain, they participated in many pleasing activities, including moon-gazing, collecting crickets, and writing poetry. Have the students write about activities that would enable them to experience the mood of their chosen landscape.

3. Have students make a chart that records the sunrise and/or sunset every day for one month out of each season they are in school. Have them record the time, describe the colors of the sky, and draw the different phases of the moon. Using paints or pastels, students can reproduce their observations. Have students discuss patterns found in their charting. Discuss how the sun and moon represent the transitory nature of all living things.

4. Compare and contrast these screens to People in Merriment at the Bathhouse (slide 6). Have students discuss if they would place the screens in public or private places. For what reasons would someone choose a particular screen for their home? Have students imagine that a screen from this packet could be donated to an organization of their choice. Have students write a letter to the organization, explaining why the screen is appropriate for the organization to display it in its headquarters.
The worlds of nature, art, and science intertwine in the six-fold screen of *maize* and *cockscomb*. On the right side of the screen (slide 5), luxuriant maize or corn plants bend under the bounty of their vegetables, and brilliantly hued stalks of cockscomb shoot into a fire-burst of blossoms on the left. Both the ears of corn with their silks dried and darkened to indicate ripeness and the flowers suggest to the informed viewer early autumn. The anonymous artist's intense, botanical study melds an interest in describing and categorizing with the aesthetic tastes of mid-17th-century Japanese painting.

This screen, which probably was one of a pair, comes from the School of Sotatsu (d.1643?). Sotatsu was an enigmatic artist who began his career by repairing ancient handscrolls produced in the prosperous days of the Heian period (794 -1185). From the handscrolls he learned about the earliest tradition of Japanese painting as well as the technique of ink painting. One of his hallmarks as an artist was
the ability to select details or partial sections of earlier paintings and enlarge them dramatically on folding screens. The artist of the Art Institute screen likewise acquired this ability, selecting a few plants to magnify in size and arrange in a complex composition.

Corn and cockscomb are not indigenous to Japan. Corn, native to the Americas, and cockscomb, native to Latin America and Africa, were introduced to the Japanese by Europeans during the 16th century. This seemingly simple subject matter, therefore, can be interpreted on two different levels. First, it functioned as a symbol of the power and affluence that resulted from trade with Europe. Secondly, these plants were a part of the wonders available from foreign lands and thus added a sense of exoticism to the screen.

The artist heightens the dramatic presence of these exotic botanicals to create a powerful image. In addition to magnifying their size, the artist positions the maize and cockscomb against a backdrop of sumptuous gold leaf. Besides adding richness to the screen, the background pushes the plants forward visually so that they confront the viewer directly. The artist softens the aggressiveness of this composition by positioning the row of plants to suggest subtle shifts in depth. The first corn plant to the right seems closest to us because
the edge of the screen cuts it off and we see only a fragment. It also has the darkest shade of green. The next two corn plants and the tallest cockscomb are placed in the mid-ground. The artist's placement of the tassel of the corn furthest to the left of the screen evokes the sense that the last group of cockscomb is in the background.

The depiction of the plants and their spatial relationship to one another further enhance the screen's dynamic composition. The corn has a vertical stalk, yet the ears bend the plants downward. The artist renders the underside of the leaves as they twist and turn in a motion towards the ground. The maize plants are thick with leaves in comparison to the sparseness of the cockscomb. To link such different plants and achieve a unified composition, the artist creates a diagonal progression, beginning with the lone stalk in panel two of the screen and ending with the stalk that intertwines with the leaves of the first cockscomb in panel four. This movement then connects to the upward motion of the cockscomb which seems to stretch towards the top of the screen.

Finally, the artist adds impact to the screen by limiting himself to a few strong colors painted over the shimmering ground of gold leaf.
The corn plants are predominantly green with variations in shade to indicate the underside of the plant. Gold delineates the veins of the leaves and describes the tassels, while tinges of red suggest old growth. Similarly, while the cockscombs are primarily a vibrant red, random leaves are green to represent a later stage of growth. The artist's concern with botanical accuracy is also evident in the individual kernels of corn. Their plumpness was created with gofun, a paste of crushed mussel shells that builds up the surface and creates a three-dimensional form.

The observation, description, and categorization of nature became immensely popular in the Edo period (1615 - 1868). The focus provided a means to show off the wonders available to commoners through trade and commerce. The subject also reinforced the pervasive belief system that the military government promoted called Confucianism. Imported from China, Confucianism professed that there is an underlying principle that orders human relationships. One can find and understand that principle through the careful examination of nature.

*Maize and Cockcomb* embodies a series of contrasts: decorative versus botanical realism, two-dimensional versus three dimensional
space, upward versus downward motion, and unity versus separation. The artist’s use of contrasting colors, gold leaf, and exotic subject matter evokes an elegant and wondrous world. In this sense, the screen represents one of the major characteristics of Japanese art: a seemingly simple subject, boldly rendered, that through further inspection reveals a complex subject.

Classroom Suggestions

1. The maize and cockscomb in this screen are depicted with an accuracy that is only possible after painstaking examination of the plants by the artist. Have students select a leaf or flower from nature and make careful studies (in pencil or charcoal) of it from different angles and in different stages of life.

2. The artist of this screen, like Sotatsu before him, selected details from landscape paintings to arrange into new screen compositions. Have students find landscape pictures in books or magazines and “borrow” elements to combine in a new landscape of their creation. Have students experiment with the scale and placement of these elements to produce different artistic and dramatic effects.

3. Maize and cockscomb are not indigenous to Japan, but were rather introduced to the country by the Europeans. Have students investigate other trade items between Europe and Japan in the sixteenth century or in present times. How were/are each of the major items used?

4. Have students compare Maize and Cockscomb with Sesson’s Landscape of the Four Seasons (slides 1,2). Consider each artist’s vantage point, depiction of space, and brushstrokes. Also discuss the screens’ differences in color, mood, and function. Which screen would students prefer to have in their homes? Why?
Japanese

*People in Merriment at the Bathhouse*

Edo period
colors and gold leaf on paper
1958.307

With jewel-like colors and gold, the artist of this screen creates a shimmering world in which people of all classes dance, eat, drink, or bathe together. *People in Merriment at the Bathhouse* visually demonstrates the new wealth and optimism of early 17th-century Japan, echoing the words of Miura Joshin in his book *Collection of Observations on the Keicho Era* (1596-1615):

Truly great times, these! Indeed, great times!
Even people the likes of me behold the beautiful and catch word of wonders in the good life of today!

The 17th century ushered in a new era of relative peace and prosperity in Japan that would last until the mid-19th-century. Commerce in the city of Kyoto flourished with foreign and domestic trade. Money and power grew with this burgeoning economy and the ancient capital of Kyoto witnessed an age of reconstruction and renaissance. Much of the city's rebirth was due to the *machishu* or merchant elite, whose wealth was based on profits derived from
money lending. During the civil wars of the Muramachi period (1573 - 1615), this emerging class became highly educated in the native culture of Japan, including literature like the *Tale of Genji*, poetry contests, painting, and music. These wealthy bankers and entrepreneurs assisted a financially strained imperial court through private donations and supported the salaries and mansions of officials in the new military government or *bakufu* through their taxes. It was the *machishu* who transformed the old imperial capital from a political entity into a commercial giant. One aspect of this new city was the development of an entertainment district, where people of diverse classes mixed as they enjoyed "the good life."

The screen at the Art Institute depicts an entertainment compound, with its tea house, puppetry center, dancing-in-the-round, *sumo wrestling*, and bathhouse. A deep blue river, studded with rocks and winding through panels four, five, and six, may be the Kamo River. The entertainment center of Kyoto in the Shijo quarter was nestled along the banks of the Kamo. City dwellers seeking relief from the hot, humid summers of Kyoto went there to witness the wonders of urban life.
The Shijo Riverbed became one of the favorite genre subjects. Genre is a category of painting that has as its theme the manners, customs, recreational activities, and other aspects of the lives of people of all classes. It developed in Japan in the 16th century, flourished in the Edo period (1615 - 1868), and was the basis for *ukiyo-e* wood block prints. Genre screens could be found in the homes of warlords, imperial courtiers, and wealthy merchants.

The six-fold screen from the Art Institute was originally one of a pair. Alone, however, it still conveys the sense of excitement and optimism that was so prevalent in early 17th-century Kyoto. The screen painting visualizes the flowering of a new culture of city people participating in a wide variety of pastimes and entertainments. Games and betting are suggested in the upper right hand corner of the screen where two young men play a game called *Go* while a third man sits with his arms crossed, watching the players with an amused expression. The extravagant coiffures, elegant attire, and swords suggest that the players are elite gentlemen, while the observer with his shaved pate and khaki-colored kimono is probably of a lesser class. The game of *Go*, played with black and white stones, is over 4,000 years old and bears a number of similarities to chess. The intellectual rigor of *Go* first
became popular in the Heian Court (794 - 1185). The Tale of Genji features the game. In the 16th- and 17th centuries, Go spread from the court to the commoners. The artist of this screen suggests the intensity of the game through the interlocked hands of the players, the angle of the spectator’s body, and the framing of the three by the door frame and gold clouds. In the alcove behind the group is an arrangement of flowers in front of three hanging scrolls, perhaps placing the ancient, intellectual game in the broader context of Japanese history and culture.

The intimate intensity of the Go game is broken by the large boisterous crowd watching the puppet show. People spill out of an opened sliding door to watch four puppets in the first panel of the screen. Again, we find a mix of classes from the more austere dressed men in khaki-colored kimono to those in multi-colored robes, covered with patterns and embellished with gold. The care with which the artist presents a pattern on a robe in its entirety suggests that he may have been depicting specific figures. Mpn, or identifying patterns on kimono, are a symbol of the family or house to which a person belongs. The artist also offers us a wide variety of reactions from the puppet show audience as they lounge on the veranda. In the second panel, they clap, laugh, smoke, and sip sake
which sits in a kettle on a black lacquer tray that is cluttered with sake saucers. In order to emphasize the source of all this merriment, the artist depicts a number of people pointing and gesturing towards the puppet show.

At the bottom of the first panel is a bustling restaurant or tea house. Inside the structure, a man kneels on a tatami mat before a large fish on a table. The artist captures the man in mid-gesture, about to slice through the fish. A candle on a stand illuminates this action. Shelves in the kitchen show the gastronomic delights that await the merrymakers. We see white trays filled with food, shallow red saki saucers, a blue and white vase, and a black lacquer box with neatly arranged rows of rice balls inside. Three men work outside on the veranda. One sits stirring a mixture that might be placed on the white platter in front of him. Another draws water from a well. And a third in navy trousers carries a floral arrangement towards a procession of similarly dressed men who carry tables, trays of food, and saki under the direction of an elderly, mustached gentleman. This distinguished man points his servants towards the elegant group seated at the roofed building with two gold lanterns in panels three and four. The artist emphasizes the movement of the procession by both the man’s pointing gesture as well as by the diagonals of the
bamboo fence at the bottom of panel two and the bush fence in panels two and three.

One man, in the middle of the roofed room, appears to be the figure around whom all this merriment revolves. He is located almost in the center of the screen, and is wearing a white kimono with a red over-garment. On the veranda in front of him, a group of musicians play the shamisen and wind instruments. Behind him sit two other figures in the cool white silk kimono of summer. One receives a massage. Their large heads with the shaved pates suggest they are of a lesser class than the gentleman in the center. The group lounging on the veranda on the gentleman's right adds to the languid atmosphere. One leans against the veranda rail, while another lies on his stomach, propping his chin with his hands. The other two, one in red, the other in pale blue, watch the activities going on around them. But the elegant gentleman in the white kimono leans away from the figures on the veranda towards his left. The angle of his pose is mirrored by the standing figure who holds a lacquer box. A wall separates him from a room filled with women, another source of pleasure for men. The last important figure in the group is the man dressed in a navy kimono patterned with gold towards whom the gentleman in the white kimono leans. The man in navy holds a fan,
indicating the heat of summer. The fan appears to be white with a blue center, not unlike those held by the Kabuki dancers he watches.

Kabuki began in 1603 at the Kamo riverbed in Kyoto. Okuni, a female attendant at the Izumo Shrine, led her troupe in a theatrical performance of dance and comic sketches in which women impersonated men. Later, in 1629, due to fights which broke out among the spectators over the performers, the military government banned women performers. In the Art Institute screen both the elegant party in the building and a group of spectators gather to watch the performance. A band consisting of players of instruments used in early kabuki performs in the center of the circle of dancers. The instruments include a small hourglass shaped drum held by the figure who wears a kimono with thick blue and white horizontal stripes. A medium drum, carried over the shoulder and played using drum sticks, can be seen with the man in red trousers and headgear on the far right. A figure in a blue kimono embellished with gold beats on a larger kettle drum held by a tiny person in attire that matches the medium drum player. The rest of the musicians create ethereal sounds on their flutes. The dancers add to the spectacle. The fifteen dancers in the circle are organized by their sumptuous
costumes. A third of them wear a white kimono with a large floral pattern. Another third wear kimono with narrow navy and gold horizontal stripes and the last third appear in blue kimono with white at the bottom and red undergarments. All of the dancers carry swords and fans with a blue circle in the center. Fans in dance are used to keep beat with the rhythm of the drums. The artist accentuates the rhythm and clockwise motion of the dance through the variety of gestures. The S-curve of the dancers' bodies heightens their sensuality. Yet another addition to the exoticism of the performance are the two figures in foreign dress. They dance inside the circle with the musicians. Unlike their counterparts in the circle, they wear shoes, pantaloons, European-style hats, and collars. The figure with the cape holds a Chinese-style fan and is bearded. The other holds a fan in the shape of a palmetto leaf. On the opposite side of the circle, a man holds a giant umbrella from the top of which protrudes a floral arrangement and lanterns. In traditional Japanese depictions of Western tradesmen, an umbrella carried over a man's head indicated that he was captain of a ship. Caught up in the excitement of the dance, the man in foreign dress has lost his sense of propriety and his indicator of rank.
If the frivolity of the dance becomes too much, the compound offers other delights. We find the tradition of the tea ceremony taking place in two rooms in the compound. In the room on the second panel, a gentleman ladles hot water from a cauldron. A man in the attire of a monk holds a bowl of tea, while a man in a white kimono waits for his bowl. At the top of panel four, a woman in a red kimono makes tea for two men as they sit chatting. The act of making and consuming tea traditionally created a measured environment that was conducive for meditation. In the entertainment quarter it also provided a space removed from the noise and raucousness of the crowds for the art of intimate conversation between friends.

Another means of relaxation was the bathhouse, found on the top of panel five. Public baths in the Edo period were unisex. They consisted of a tub deep enough to immerse the body up to the neck when sitting. After a bather washed and rinsed the body completely, he or she entered the tub for a soak. The Art Institute screen features this preliminary aspect of the bath. A woman in a red loin cloth attempts to reach a spot on her back. The man next to her seems to be having more luck. He leans on a stool as a masseuse rubs his head. A third figure wearing a red loin cloth enjoys a back massage. It was not uncommon to spend an entire day at the
bathhouse; people would lounge (like the man in the blue cloth at the entrance to the bathhouse) and eat, drink, and tell stories. One final aspect of the bathing is depicted on the veranda just outside the baths. A gentleman sits in front of a mirror as another man dresses his hair. After the rejuvenation of the bath, the seated man prepares for more merrymaking.

The last type of entertainment featured in this screen is the ancient pastime of sumo wrestling. Like Go, sumo wrestling is thousands of years old and became professionalized in the Edo period. The object of the match is to force one's opponent out of the ring or to cause him to touch the surface of the ring with any part of his body other than the sole of his feet. In the lower left corner of the screen a group of figures stand in a rough circle. The guests of honor appear to be the figures on the red mat. A referee, dressed in Shinto religious attire (because sumo has links to Shinto, the native religion of Japan), holds a fan used for signals. The wrestler in the blue trunks appears to have the upper hand. One arm encircles his opponent while the other grabs at his belt. His legs are bent as if he is about to hoist the figure in red trunks by his belt and carry him out of the circle. This technique is called tsuridashi and is the sign of an excellent wrestler who is "good at the belt."
All these activities are depicted with artistic devices similar to those in the Genji screen (slides 7 and 8). Gold clouds suggest the passage of time and draw attention to particular events, and angles created by architecture add action and vigor to the scene. The tilted perspective provides equal weight between those activities occurring in the background and foreground. The bird's-eye point of view allows the viewer to examine the bevy of pastimes and, by extension, participate in the new consumer culture of early seventeenth-century Japan.

Classroom Suggestions

1. Where are we, the viewer, in this scene of festivities? (above and away from the activities) How did the artist create this vantage point? Discuss the placement and role of gold in this screen. Is it the sky? the ground? both? How did the artist create separate, identifiable scenes while not disrupting the unity of the overall composition?

2. There are many forms of entertainment in this screen. Have students list them on the board and design a billboard or ad to advertise this entertainment compound.

3. Have students study the various kimono worn by people in panels 3 and 4 of the screen. What is striking? (designs, patterns, styles, and shapes) Each design is a symbol of the family or house to which the wearer belongs. Using the outline attached on page 37, have students design a kimono with symbols that would represent their family or a powerful family such as the U.S. President's.

4. Have students break into groups to present pantomimes of different scenes of the screen. Props and costumes can be made. (For example, drums can be made from oatmeal boxes, cups, etc.)
Fans can be made by folding 8 1/2 x 14 sheets of paper.) How will the students move their bodies in acting out their characters? How will they use their props? (Remember that the swords and fans are used to keep beat with the drums). Have the rest of the class decide what scene the group has pantomimed. As a research component to this activity, students can learn about the tradition of their chosen scene in Japan during the Edo period.
Japanese

*Genji Monogatari*

Edo period, early 17th century
colors and gold leaf on paper
Gift of Robert Allerton in honor of Mr. and Mrs. William McCormick
Blair's Fiftieth Wedding Anniversary, 1962.574-575

Written around 1000 A.D., *Genji Monogatari* or the *Tale of Genji*, is considered the first novel in the world. The fifty-four chapters of this epic, which spans almost 1100 pages in Edward Seidensticker's English translation (1978), chart the adventures, conquests, and misfortunes of Hikaru Genji or Genji, The Shining Prince, and two generations of his descendants over the course of seventy-five years. The novel's pioneering author, Murasaki Shikabu, a *lady-in-waiting* at the imperial court in Kyoto, drew upon the social mores, rituals, aesthetic tastes, and activities of Japanese aristocracy in the eleventh century. In doing so, she participated in a larger phenomenon of the Heian Period (794-1185), the formulation of a national identity and the definition of those characteristics that are unique to Japanese culture. Murasaki's complex plot, keen observations of nature and human emotions, and her prose style made the novel very popular with the Heian court. Almost immediately, it became a thematic source for artists of all disciplines.
The pair of six-fold screens at the Art Institute which date to the early seventeenth century or Edo Period (1615-1868) are part of a long history of Genji paintings. What links the many existing handscrolls, hanging scrolls, and screens about *Genji Monogatari* are the stylistic conventions that painters used through the centuries. Just as the subject matter, technique and materials used by Tosa Mitsuoki in *Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips* (slide 9) aligned that screen with native Japanese painting, so too do the style, story, and iconography of *Genji Monogatari*. Japanese art with a conscious reference to tradition is referred to as *yamato-e* (*yamato* = native Japan; *e* = painting). The stylistic conventions of Genji paintings that are found in the Art Institute screens include a bird's eye point of view, blown-off roofs to allow easy viewing into buildings, *Noh* mask-like representations of the faces, and the pervasive use of diagonal lines to convey emotional tension.

Genji screens that have survived fires, natural catastrophes, or the abuse of time generally fall into two categories. One type depicts a pinnacle point in each one of the epic's fifty-four chapters. In the second type, specific chapters selected by the patron, or person who commissioned the artist, are illustrated. Often, the patron selected two chapters with related themes and motifs to be illustrated on a
pair of screens. The Art Institute's Genji screens offer a more complex montage, in which the artist depicts incidents in the novel linked to the four seasons. The organization of the events of human life within the broader, unending cycle of the seasons is in keeping with one of the major themes of the novel -- the transitory nature of life.

The viewer can identify the seasons through the prominent placement of plants in the screens. Reading in Asian fashion from right to left, we see in the center of the right screen (slide 8) a blossoming tree that indicates spring (panel four). Directly above this is a clump of purple irises, accentuated by a deep blue pond and gold clouds. The iris is associated with the early summer festival of Boys' Day, in which the sword-like leaves of the flowering plant represent the metal swords of men. In the left screen (slide 7), the red leaves of the maple (panels one and two) and the thinning leaves of the weeping willow (panel three) denote autumn. Directly above the willow, a group of maidens building a snowman suggest the winter season. A full moon, traditionally associated with movement and change, shines through the branches of the pine tree in panel six.
Besides using plants and weather to identify the seasons and promote the theme of the transitoriness of life, the artist utilizes iconography to alert the viewer to which chapter of the novel is depicted. The artist enhances the narrative and emotional content of each chapter through yamato-e stylistic conventions. Art historians have yet to decide whether the first scene depicted in the right screen (slide 8) comes from chapter one, which includes the presentation of the baby Genji to his father, the Emperor, or from chapter thirty-six in which Prince Genji discovers that Kaoru, the baby presented as his son, is the love-child of his wife and his eldest son's best friend. Readers familiar with Genji knew the tragedies in each chapter. After his birth, Genji's mother dies, exhausted from the amorous obsession of the Emperor and the jealous court intrigues that his affections for her spawned. In chapter thirty-six, Kaoru's mother and father die from the shame of their indiscretion.

Whichever the chapter, the Art Institute screen presents an intensely emotional moment in which the father sees his son for the first time. The artist capitalizes upon yamato-e conventions to emphasize the drama. The scene shows four women on a veranda. The multiple layers of kimono, idealized facial features, including painted eyebrows, and their long black hair worn loosely down their
backs, identify these women as court ladies. A fifth woman sits on a
white mat with a red border. A cloth screen separates this woman
from a man on a raised platform seated on a tatami mat. Both her
physical proximity to the man and the gold used in the pattern of her
outer kimono denote that she has the highest rank of the women.
The man's red trousers and headgear establish his royal rank. In a
classic example of artistic license, a bamboo blind hanging in front of
him is rolled up so that we as viewers can see him. (The sexes were
separated in the Heian court by a battery of screens, sliding doors,
and drapes. Someone as important as this man would have had the
bamboo curtain rolled down. Such curtains had a unique
construction that allowed the person behind them to see out, while
those outside could not see inside. By rolling the curtain up, the artist
immediately places this man as central to the scene.) A number of
other yamato-e conventions emphasize the man. First, the artist uses
gold clouds to encircle him on three sides, blocking out any
extraneous detail. The branches of the pine tree produce a second
framing device that separates the imperial figure from the women on
the far right of the veranda. Next, the perspective creates the effect
of tilting the back of the building, where the man is seated, forward.
The contrasting colors of his red trousers with the verdant green of
the tatami mats make further appeals to the eye. The white borders
of the mats create a series of diagonals that, along with the undulating pine branches, infuse the scene with energy. One of those borders physically marks the direction of the man's gaze. It links him to one of the women on the veranda. She is the only person who stands, and she holds a baby in her arms.

The artist's observance of the conventions for representing Genji Monogatari enabled art historian Miyeko Murase in 1996 to identify some of the other chapters in the Art Institute screens. In panel six of the right screen (slide 8) we find a man peeking through a bamboo screen at a group of women seated on tatami mats. This is a scene from chapter 52 in which Kaoru, out for an evening walk in the royal compound, secretly observes the First Princess applying ice to her bare neck and shoulders to cool herself in the sweltering heat of summer. The First Princess is probably the woman in the white kimono seated in front of the folding screen. Kaoru admires her thin white kimono so much that he gives one to her sister, the Second Princess, to whom he is married.¹ Her attendant, Kosaisho, who has

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¹ It should be noted that men of the court had a senior wife and multiple consorts. Often each woman and her attendants occupied a series of apartments in the courtiers compound. While men could be polygamous, women were expected to be monogamous.
amorous feelings for Kaoru, sits fanning herself as Kaoru peeks through the screen.

The gaze is a recurring motif in Genji art. We encounter it twice in the right screen and find the motif again in the form of a peeping figure in panel six of the left screen. The world of women sheltered through screens, sliding doors and even their retinue of attendants, made it next to impossible to identify or see one’s beloved. Thus, far from being considered a perversion, voyeurism, eavesdropping, and finding ways to identify oneself were elevated to a fine art. Each lady wore twelve layers of kimono, the colors and patterns of which were linked to her. Often a woman would allow these to slip out from behind a screen. Another way of identifying a person was from the perfume developed specifically for that individual which was used to scent both the body and one’s robes. Finally, one’s calligraphy style, poetry composition, and musical prowess were coveted skills that created an individual’s style.

The two characters in **Genji Monogatari** who represent the ideals of the Heian man and the Heian woman are Genji and his wife Lady Murasaki. The left screen of the Art Institute pair (slide 7) depicts scenes from two chapters devoted to their relationship. Both scenes
occur at night. The first comes from chapter 20, entitled “Asagao” or “Morning Glory”, the name of Genji’s unrequited affection.

Throughout the chapter the reader is treated to all the sophisticated means of courtship as Genji, our romantic hero, pursues the obtuse Asagao. In the meantime, Murasaki, Genji’s wife, worries that he has tired of her. Rather than behaving jealously or vindictively, Murasaki remains loyal to Genji. In the end, he abandons his conquest and his love for Murasaki becomes stronger.

The scene in the Art Institute screen depicts the night of reconciliation. It begins with Genji visiting Murasaki at her apartment. This is suggested by the artist’s depiction of a woman in a white robe, a yamato-e convention to convey it is her apartment. Genji sits in front of a white folding screen that is placed parallel to a sliding door. Beyond the door is a veranda that opens to a garden with a deep blue stream. The two watch young court attendants frolicking in the snow, laughing when the girls get so excited about building a snowman that they improperly drop their fans and reveal their faces. The artist again uses the convention of gold clouds to encircle the girls playing in the snow. The artistic device of the blown-off roof allows us to look into Murasaki’s apartment where she and Genji sit by a warm fire sharing recollections of various
ladies. The artist reinforces the emotional intensity of this moment when Genji realizes his intense feelings for Murasaki by the dramatic angles of the architecture and tatami mats. The frenetic movement of the gold clouds and maple branches around them, as well as the angle of Murasaki's head as she leans toward him, further emphasize the poignancy of the moment. Genji composes this poem:

The water is stilled among the frozen rocks.  
A clear moon moves into the western sky.

He refers to Murasaki as the still water and himself as the mobile moon. She remained loyal and he returned.

The last chapter depicted in this screen also conveys harmony. The scene takes place in autumn and is the end of chapter 21. Genji has just renovated Rokujo palace and moves all of his concubines into it. He provides an autumn garden for Akikonomu, one of the women, and a spring garden for Murasaki. In the Art Institute screen, a statuesque woman stands on a bridge holding the ornamental lid of a box in which Akikonomu has arranged red leaves and chrysanthemums along with a poem as a gift to the sweet Murasaki. The poem reads:

Your garden quietly awaits the spring.  
Permit the winds to bring a touch of autumn.
Murasaki and her ladies are pleased to receive the gift. They are probably depicted in the lower left corner of the screen. Murasaki sends back a messenger with an arrangement of moss and a handmade pine bough nestled among stones. She composed this poem for Akikonou:

Fleeting, your leaves that scatter in the wind. 
The pine at the cliffs is forever green with spring.

The two screens are an exercise in contrasts. Images of discord are painted on the right screen and images of harmony on the left screen. The ideals of womanhood and manhood on the left screen seem to contrast with the follies of women and men on the right screen. A seventeenth-century artist's use of eleventh-century yamato-e conventions to convey the narrative and emotional content of Genji Monogatari speaks to the important role the novel continued to play in Japanese culture throughout the ages.

Classroom Suggestions

1. Have students create screens based upon a story that they have recently read. In keeping with the tradition of Genji screens, their works can depict a pinnacle point of the story or multiple incidents with related themes or motifs. Have them plan their compositions carefully, working from right to left and using line and color to draw attention to significant aspects of the story.

2. In Genji Monogatari, women wear particular kimono and perfume to identify themselves. They also develop unique calligraphy styles,
poetry compositions, and musical abilities to distinguish themselves. Have students consider ways that people today create and present individual identities. Can they think of stars who have become known by certain features or "props" (e.g. Dennis Rodman’s hair; George Burn’s cigars)? As students, how do they reveal to their peers who they are as individuals? Or are they more concerned with blending in with a group? Discuss.

3. In this screen, the artistic device of the blown-off roof is used to allow viewers to watch the drama unfolding in an interior. Have students draw a room interior from their home or school with a birds-eye perspective and a blown-off roof. In this setting, have them create and illustrate a drama between two or more individuals. As a writing exercise, have students compose a dialogue between the different characters.

4. Works of literature are the subject of paintings in many cultures. In the Art Institute’s European and American art collections, for example, the following paintings depict incidents from famous stories:

B. Martorell’s *St. George Killing the Dragon*, Ital., 1430/35  
(from the medieval legend of St. George)

A. di Giovanni’s *The Adventures of Ulysses*, Ital., 1435/45  
(from Homer’s *Odyssey)*

G. di Paolo, *Six Scenes from the Life of St. John the Baptist*, Ital., 1455/60  

J. Quidor’s *Rip Van Winkle*, Amer., 1829  
(from Washington Irving’s *Rip Van Winkle*, 1820)

On a trip to the museum, have students examine these paintings and discuss how each artist has told the story. Is one dramatic moment depicted or are several scenes presented together? What prior knowledge of the stories is needed to understand the paintings?
Tosa Mitsuoki  
Japanese, 1617 - 1691  
*Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips*  
Edo period, c. 1654- 78  
colors, gold leaf, and powdered gold on silk  
Kate S. Buckingham Collection, 1977.156

The customs and seasonal events associated with the imperial court  
serve as the subject for one of a pair of screens Tosa Mitsuoki  
painted for Tofukumon-in (1607-1678), the wife of retired Emperor  
Gomizuno-o (ruled 1611-1629) and daughter of Shogun Tokugawa  
Hidetada (ruled 1615-16).

In the screen painting, Tosa presents clues that an imperial event has  
taken place. The viewer is greeted by a cherry tree that seems to  
materialize out of a mist of gold powder. A profusion of dainty pink  
flowers covers the branches of the tree as they stretch across the  
expanse of the screen. A slight breeze wafts slips of paper tied to  
these branches. The slips, embellished with gold leaf and inscribed  
with classical poems about spring, indicate that the individuals who  
created them belonged to an elite circle that was both sophisticated  
and intellectual. Lichens, or fungus, growing on the cherry branches,  
tree trunk, and rocks suggest that this site is laden with heavy mists.
and moist air. Dwarf bamboo clustered at the base of the tree and jutting from behind the rocks locates the site in the mountains because this plant grows only at high altitudes. The sum of these clues might lead a Japanese viewer to conclude that this is Yoshino, a mountain that became famous during the Heian Period (784-1185) as the setting for imperial cherry blossom viewing parties.

The era of the Heian period was considered the apogee of Japanese aristocratic painting, poetry, calligraphy, and music -- before civil wars left the Japanese court financially and spiritually broken. It was a period in which customs and traditions that defined a native Japanese sensibility and identity were amalgamated. Nearly one thousand years later, in works of art like Tosa's *Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips*, artists made a conscious reference to this earlier tradition and its revival through subject matter, style, and materials. This type of art is often referred to as *yamato-e* (yamato=native Japan; e=painting).

Cherry blossoms are the national flower of Japan and a symbol of spring. In the Heian Period, *courtiers* observed the rites of spring through outings that centered around the viewing of flowering cherries. Elegantly attired aristocrats would bring *sake* and sweet
treats made especially for the occasion. They composed waka, poems with 31 syllables, inspired by the blossoms. These verses were later recorded in Imperial poetry anthologies, which organized the waka according to seasons of the year. In Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips, the waka inscribed on the slips tied to the tree branches come from these anthologies.\(^2\) The slips are the product of a poetry contest in which seventeenth-century courtiers vied with one another to recall the classical waka associated with spring. Participants would write the poems in a script called kana on vertical strips of paper embossed with silver, gold, or cinnabar. With great ceremony and excitement, the slips were tied to the branches of the tree. In reverence to the Empress, for whom Tosa painted Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips, 17th-century princes, abbots and courtiers personally inscribed a particular poem slip on the actual screen. Each had calligraphy so sophisticated and renowned that decades later in 1698, a connoisseur identified each person's hand. Tosa's screen painting of glittering poem slips twisting in a bank of blossoms extends beyond description of nature or documentation of a courtly and literary custom; his homage to native Japanese traditions links

the classical court to aristocrats of his day, conveying the continuity of the generations.

Aspects of Tosa's 17th-century design and technique also contain retrospective elements that speak to the classical tradition of *yamato-e*. Bold design energizes the composition, with the undulating tree trunk, twisting poem slips, thrusting horizontals of flowering branches, and jutting diagonals of rocks. Any incidental details are obscured with bands of clouds and mist. These atmospheric effects, painted in gold or sprinkled in gold powder, minimize suggestions of pictorial depth and reinforce the decorative, two-dimensional qualities of the screen design. Bright pinks and reds punctuate the lively jumble of flowers and poem slips. Tosa gives full rein to the swirling energy of the design and sensuality of colors by using a brush technique that hides its own processes. This highly refined and meticulous method called *tsukuri-e* (*tsukuri*=manufactured; *e*=painting) is the opposite of the Chinese ink painting technique of Sesson (see *Landscape of the Four Seasons*, slides 1 and 2) in which each brushstroke is distinguishable and irrevocably documented on the paper.
Tosa's use of precious materials follows the *yamato-e* tradition of conveying the luxury and opulence of the court. *Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips* is the only painting selected for this packet made on silk, a material that offers a more refined and resplendent look than paper. *Malachite* supplies the green of the bamboo and lichens. Cinnabar creates the red of the poem slips in panels two and four. Silver, now tarnished to a steely-gray, is visible on the unwritten side of a number of poem slips. Gold, in the form of leaf and powder, has been applied to catch and radiate light, causing the entire screen to glow. As in his choice of subject matter for the screen, Tosa's use of materials recreates the splendor of the court, reminding the viewer of the imperial role as arbiter of taste and national traditions.

The Tosa family of painters also constituted another native Japanese trait, that of a single family maintaining its profession in a hereditary fashion over the generations. Mitsuoki Tosa's affiliation with *yamato-e* came out of his family's long history as the official painters, *curators*, and connoisseurs for the imperial family. In Japan, the smallest unit in society was not the individual but the professional family or *ei* (house or household). (Until the late 19th century, the Japanese language had no word for the first person singular.) Vocational skills and property passed from generation to generation.
in the *ei* with promising workshop apprentices incorporated into the household through adoption or marriage. Elders maintained a family's lineage and reputation by selecting the family/workshop head or *eimoto* (*ei*=household, *moto*=foundation) from a pool that included first-born son, gifted junior relative, adopted workshop employee, or in-law. Thus, in the case of an artist workshop, an *ei* member's artistic ability and business acumen constituted the major factors in such a decision.

The Tosa atelier carved a niche for itself through its reputation for maintaining a painting style affiliated with the golden age of the Japanese court. Mitsuoki Tosa's appointment as Director of the Imperial Painting Bureau re-established a family tradition. It also served a political function. The Tosa workshop left Kyoto nearly one hundred years earlier, due to the loss of its *eimoto* in the midst of a bloody civil war battle waged in the streets of the imperial capital. Decades of war left the imperial court in shambles. Military generals throughout Japan battled together and against each other in an attempt to become Shogun, the military ruler of Japan. Finally, in 1615, Tokugawa Ieyasu defeated a former ally to become Shogun, forging peace through legislation and establishing his military capital in Edo (modern day Tokyo). With peace, the Tokugawa shogunate
gave financial support to the imperial court in its capital, Kyoto. The Tosa appointment thus came at a time of post-war reconstruction and was regarded as a symbol of the renaissance of the court and the unification of the nation.

Even as Tosa refers to the splendor of the imperial past in *Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips*, he incorporates aspects of contemporary painting associated with the Kano atelier which served the Tokugawa Shogun. For instance, in Heian Period *yamato-e*, bold design elements embellished the poetry or narrative of the painting. In Tosa's painting, the design overpowers the literary content of the poems. Tosa also incorporates a variety of brush techniques from contemporary popular workshops that differ from the *yamato-e* preference for hidden brushwork. This is particularly apparent in Tosa's treatment of the rock outcroppings. A comparison between Sesson's handling of rock formations in panels 1-4 of the right screen of *Landscape of the Four Seasons* (slide 2) and the artist's execution in *Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips* demonstrates Tosa's translation of ink-painting techniques. Both artists use strong contours to outline the shape of the rock, successive ink washes to create the drama of the bands of clouds and mist, and peppercorn strokes to add
texture. In his synthesis of classical and contemporary painting
techniques, Tosa again links past traditions with the contemporary.

Lineage, tradition, and continuity were important to the recipient of
the screen as well. Tosa painted *Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips*
and its companion *Autumn Maple with Poem Slips* for Empress
Tofukumon just a few years prior to her death in 1678 at the age of
71. Her father, Shogun Tokugawa Hidetada, had forced her marriage
upon the emperor some 50 years earlier in 1621. The union was one
of a series of strategies the Tokugawa *ei* used to legitimate its place
as the military ruling family of Japan. Such a marriage served as a
national symbol of imperial approval of Tokugawa; the royal children
would establish a pedigree for the Tokugawa *ei*. Tragically, and
through reputed court intrigue, none of Tofukumon-in's sons
survived childhood to become emperor. However, such monumental
paintings as *Flowering Cherries with Poem Slips*, painted by the
Director of the Imperial Painting Bureau, inscribed by high-ranking
courtiers, and displayed in the imperial apartments or state halls,
makes clear statements about the Empress Tofukumon's participation
in court life, its rituals and customs.
Classroom Suggestions

1. The poem slips were tied to the branches of the tree with great ceremony and excitement. Have students make a large drawing of a tree with cherry blossoms on a wall or bulletin board. Have them write poems associated with spring themes on slips of paper to hang on the tree. Students can use the haiku form of poetry. Haiku is a Japanese lyric poem of a fixed, 17-syllable form that often points to an observation of nature that has moved the writer.

   first line - 5 syllables
   second line - 7 syllables
   third line - 5 syllables
   Across the still lake
   through upcurls of morning mist
   the cry of a loon

   After students have written their poems, plan a ritual for hanging the slips on the tree. Invite other classes to write poem slips as well. Organize a festival to celebrate the ceremony, and include food, music, dance, poetry reading, etc.

2. Have students watch for the first signs of spring -- a robin, green grass, melting snow, flowers, etc. Have them pick limbs of pussywillows, forsythia, and bring them inside. Put them in water and watch them blossom. Have students sketch, paint, or photograph the branches and flowers as they begin to bloom.

3. Some first signs of spring are listed in classroom suggestion #2 above. Can students think of some first indications of the other three seasons as well? What rituals or traditions do they, their families, or our country engage in to celebrate the beginning of the seasons? Discuss. Have students write and/or draw one of the seasonal rituals.

4. The written word often inspires different images in each of our minds. Have students paint a picture based upon the poem below, illustrating the scene from right to left as the Japanese do. After displaying them around the classroom, discuss the different interpretations of the poem.

   Over cherry blossoms
   white clouds
   over clouds
   the deep sky
over cherry blossoms
over clouds
over the sky
I can climb on forever

once in spring
I with god
had a quiet talk.

Shuntaro Tanikawa
MAP OF JAPAN
GLOSSARY

architectonic - possessing the massive stability and calm grandeur of architecture

atelier - artist's workshop or studio

bakafu - bureaucratic administration of the military government in Japan during the Edo period (1615-1867).

Buddhist - pertaining to Buddhism, a religion that originated in India and later spread to China, Japan, Tibet and parts of southeast Asia that holds that suffering is caused by desire and that the way to end this suffering is through enlightenment that enables one to halt the endless sequence of births and deaths to which one is otherwise subject.

bush clover - plant in the genus Lespedeza that has compound, oval leaves with three leaflets and clusters of purple, pink, or yellowish flowers.

calligraphic - a quality or style of painting characterized by variations in ink tone and flowing brushwork.

cinnabar - red mercuric sulfide used as a pigment, also called "vermilion."

cockscomb - a plant with flowers, commonly crimson or purple, in a broad spike somewhat resembling the comb of a cock.

concubine - a secondary wife or woman who lives with a man to whom she is not married.

Confucianism - A philosophical system of social order first found in the teachings of Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.) based on devotion to one's ancestors and a hierarchy of relationships (e.g. ruler-subject, father-son).

courtiers - members of the imperial court.
**curator** - an individual who collects and displays a collection of art.

**embossed** - raised above the surface

**enlightened/enlightenment** - in the Buddhist religion, reaching a state of spiritual knowledge that ends the cycle of rebirth.

**Go** - a game similar to chess or checkers in which two players move black or white stones in an attempt to capture the opponents stones and secure control of the board.

**iconography** - a given set of symbols that bear and convey meaning in a stylized work of art.

**Kabuki** - one of three major theatres in Japan, along with Noh and puppet theatre (bunraku). Kabuki began in the 17th century as a variety show and developed into popular dramas performed by male actors with music and dance for townspeople.

**Kana** - native Japanese characters.

**Koan** - an unsolvable riddle used for meditative purposes in Zen Buddhism.

**lacquer** - glossy, resinous material exuded from the lacquer tree, used as a surface coating.

**lady-in-waiting** - a lady who is in attendance upon a queen or princess.

**maize** - corn

**malachite** - a green mineral carbonate of copper used as a pigment.

**mon** - heraldry or insignia that identifies the family or clan to which the person is associated.

**monochromatic** - of one color.

**Noh** - classical drama of Japan performed with music and dance that developed for the elite.
pampas grass - a tall grass that has silvery plumes (it comes up each autumn in the North garden at the Art Institute).

pate - the top of the head.

peppercorn strokes - small strokes of paint that resemble peppercorns, the dried berries of the pepper plant

post and lintel - a structural design in which two vertical beams (posts) support a horizontal beam (lintel) that carries the weight of the wall above it.

rebirth - a new birth.

sake - a brewed alcoholic beverage made from fermented rice.

sanskrit - ancient, literary language of India used for sacred or scholarly writing.

shamisen - a three-stringed plucked lute associated with the pleasure districts in Japan.

Shinto - the native, nature religion of Japan.

Shogunal - title given to the supreme military dictator of Japan during the Edo period.

Sumo wrestling - national sport of Japan with 2,000 year old roots in Shinto. This unique form of wrestling became a professional sport during the Edo period. In it, one wrestler attempts to force his opponent out of the wrestling circle.

sutra - holy scriptures in Buddhism.

tatami - type of reed-like plant used to weave mats for Japanese interiors.

ukiyo-e - literally "pictures of the floating world." Art that has as its theme the entertainments and activities of the pleasure districts popular among commoners in the Edo period.

vantage point - the position or place from which the artist and/or viewer observes a particular scene.
viscous - thick in texture.

warlord - military commander who exercises civil power in a particular region of Japan.

yamato-e - literally "Japanese pictures." Paintings of native subject matter, often literary or historical tales, executed with great detail, bright colors, and precious materials. After the Civil War period in Japan, yamato-e was associated with the imperial court and traditional culture.
AUDIO VISUAL MATERIALS AND SLIDE PROGRAMS

VIDEOS

*Daimyo* 30 min. video, Looks at the arts of war and the arts of the pen during Daimyo feudal culture of Japan. Extension Programs, national Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565.

*The Arts of Asia* (15 min.) Art Institute curators discuss the museum's collections from China, Korea and Japan. The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center, The Art Institute of Chicago, 111 South Michigan Ave, Chicago, IL 60603, (312) 443-3719.

*The Fugwaut Court of the Heian* (30 min.) Demonstrations of Japanese Heian Court Festival's art, costume, nature and music. The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center, The Art Institute of Chicago, 111 South Michigan Ave, Chicago, IL 60603, (312) 443-3719.

*Shinto and Eiheiji* (55 min.) The myth of the origins of the universe and the creation of the Japanese Islands. The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center, The Art Institute of Chicago, 111 South Michigan Ave, Chicago, IL 60603, (312) 443-3719.

TEACHING PACKETS

*The Arts of Asia: China, Korea, Japan Manual*, 100 pages of informative text, classroom suggestions and 15 slides. The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center, The Art Institute of Chicago, 111 South Michigan Ave, Chicago, IL 60603, (312) 443-3719.

BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR STUDENTS


BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR TEACHERS


