The Tale of Genji (Genji Monogatari)

The Tale of Genji was written by court-lady Murasaki Shikibu in 1007/1008–1014. Genji was the son of an Emperor by his favourite concubine, and was known to possess rare physical beauty, great sensitivity and intelligence. The narrative follows Genji’s life from his youth through to his meteoric rise in rank and influence and focuses on his cultural achievements, appearance and numerous romantic encounters that are often expressed through loving poems exchanged between characters.

The Tale of Genji album leaves reflect the refined aesthetics of Heian period Japan (794–1185). They provide viewers with an accurate and vivid description of the costumes and social customs as well as an insight into the intricacy of human relationships and the depth of human emotions that coloured the life of eleventh century court aristocracy.

Throughout Japanese history the fifty-four chapters of the tale have been extremely popular and inspired Japanese artists to create visual representations of the narrative in various forms such as hand scrolls, folding screens, hanging scrolls, woodblock prints and picture albums. Painted imagery of each of the chapters are stylised, and the codification of each of the scenes have been developed since the handscrolls were first created in the twelfth century. By the fifteenth century, painters used instructional manuals extensively, and could produce illustrations of tales without having to know the entire narrative.

This album leaf (top) is from a set of fifty-four. It illustrates a scene from chapter twenty called Asagao (literally meaning ‘morning glory’). In this chapter, Genji desires the affections of the young princess Asagao. To gain her attention, he sends her a poem accompanied with a morning glory flower (her namesake).

I do not forget the morning glory I saw.
Will the years, I wonder, have taken it past
its bloom?

However, Genji is a married man and with rumors reaching one of his wives, Murasaki has become concerned. To take Murasaki’s mind off his frequent absences, Genji decides to spend time with her in her rooms. Snow has fallen throughout the day, and in the evening he has the blinds raised so they can admire the moonlit, snow covered garden. He has also sent young maiden to play in the garden and make snowmen. Genji and Murasaki are shown here looking out on this charming scene as they discuss the many women in his life.