

The Tale of Genji (Genji Monogatari)



Due to *The Tale of Genji*'s great popularity during the mid seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, Genji motifs appeared in many different media such as lacquer ware, textiles and ceramics. Genji iconographies were popular amongst the aristocracy and the favourite decorations on dowry sets for daughters of ruling, influential and wealthy families. For example, on this stationery box (*Ryōshibako*) the scattered fan decoration on the exterior illustrates various scenes from *The Tale of Genji*. The stationery box is produced in a *maki-e* (literally meaning 'sprinkled picture') lacquer technique. The figures, garden and architecture on the fans are decorated with silver, gold and natural pigment in low and high relief, in combination with numerous coats of lacquer. When opening the box, the inside of the lid reveals an exquisite blossoming wisteria on a trellis in gold and silver (below left). Other surfaces of the interior are decorated in dense *nashiji* gold lacquer. *Nashiji* (literally meaning 'pear-skin ground') is where tiny flecks of gold are applied to the lacquer surface, which gives the appearance of pear skin.

Remnants of lacquer items have been found in ancient Jomon period tombs constructed before 300 BC. The technique reached its pinnacle of technical and artistic excellence during the opulent medieval Momoyama period of the sixteenth century. Lacquer is produced from the sap of the *rhus verniciflua* tree, and forms a waterproof protective coating. It is a time consuming and labour intensive technique, as refined sap lacquer must be applied to a wooden base in many coats, which are successively dried and polished each time. Pieces of high-quality lacquer require up to thirty coats before the gold and other materials, including coral, shell, ivory, metal and mother-of-pearl, may be applied.

It is a combination of this refined technique and the use of high-quality, precious materials and exquisite designs, which have made *maki-e* lacquer ware greatly celebrated objects of Japanese beauty.

JAPANESE
Stationery box (*Ryōshibako* 料紙箱)
(c. 1710–50)
lacquer on wood, metallic powders and
foils, pigment (*taka maki-e*, *hira maki-e*)
(a-c) 14.6 x 41.5 x 32.7 cm (overall)
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