

The Tale of Genji (Genji Monogatari)

● see DVD for additional material

と さ みつ のり
土 佐 光 則

TOSA Mitsunori

げん じ もの がたり
源 氏 物 語

Genji Monogatari

Tale of Genji

もの がたり

物 語

monogatari

tale

あさ がお

朝 顔

asagao

morning glory

し

詩

shi

poem

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.

Tosa Mitsunori, who lived from 1583–1638, painted the album leaf, which represents the epitome of traditional Genji iconography as established by the Tosa school. The Tosa school was devoted to *yamato-e*, which are paintings that specialised in subject matter and techniques derived from ancient Japanese art (as opposed to schools influenced by Chinese art). The signature style of the Tosa school became the most favoured and widely recognised of Genji illustrations.

In the painting, the figures are conventionalised and represented without facial expressions or distinguishing characteristics in their appearance. There is no sign of Murasaki's sad feelings, Genji's guilt, or the maiden's joy; the figures simply sit silently, swathed in layers of gorgeously decorated robes. The absence of their individuality is regarded as essential, as it allows viewers to become the characters in the story. The faces of the male and female figures are portrayed as small and round, their mouths rosebud dots, and their eyes mere slits beneath shaved and redrawn eyebrows. The details of the faces are conveyed with simple strokes via a pictorial device called *hikime kagihana* (dashes for the eyes and a hook for the nose). A sense of the viewer's direct involvement in the pictorial realm is enhanced by the stylistic device of *fukinuki yatai* (literally meaning 'blown off roof'), which eliminates the roofs of the building to allow a view of the interior (seen in the lower right image).

The fifty-four rectangular *shikishi* (poem card) album leaves appear to be the preferred format of Genji painting in the Muromachi period (1336–1573). They were presented regularly as gifts of gratitude or friendship on special occasions. The album leaves were usually pasted onto a folding screen or constructed into concertina albums.

TOSA Mitsunori 土佐光則

Japanese 1583–1638

The Tale of Genji 源氏物語

(17th century) Japan

album: pigments and gold paint on paper on powder gold leaf on card, 56 pages, gold thread, silk and wood cover, glued binding

14.8 x 13.2 cm (image and sheet),

19.8 x 16.7 cm (page),

19.8 x 16.7 x 9.2 cm (closed),

19.8 x 968.6 x 4.6 cm (open)

Purchased, 1967 (1755-5)

