

# Kin byōbu: golden screens

📺 see DVD for additional material

きん びょう ぶ  
金 屏 風

kin byōbu  
golden screen

しろ

城  
shiro

castle

ご しょ ぐるま

御 所 車  
goshoguruma

courtly carriage

し だれ ざくら

枝 垂 桜  
shidare zakura

weeping cherry tree

Decorative folding screens known as *byōbu* are one of the most representational formats for painting in the history of Japanese art. The term '*byōbu*' means 'protection from wind', however this simple and practical piece of furniture developed into one of the most exquisitely decorative and artistically expressive objects of art that is synonymous with Japanese culture and interior decor.

Historically, screens have been an integral part of Japanese architecture and daily life. Traditional buildings consisted of multipurpose interior spaces that increased or decreased in size with the use of flat sliding screens (*fusuma* or *shōji*) or free standing folding screens (*byōbu*). This provided ideal ventilation that could be regulated to suit the season and also allowed interior spaces to open onto adjoining gardens and include nature into daily life.

Traditionally, most formats of Japanese painting were small. However, folding screens gave Japanese artists the opportunity to work on a larger scale, and the freedom to display their personal genius and ability. The result was the innovation of many styles and a high level of excellence in both painting and workmanship.

*Byōbu* are comprised of several individual panels made of layers of paper pasted on a wooden framework. The panels are joined together by paper hinges to make a concertina-style, free-standing screen. Light in weight, the folding screen is convenient to use since it is quick to set up and easy to fold to a portable size and store away when not in use.

The first recorded screens in Japan were gifts from the Korean kingdom of Silla in the seventh century. However, the distinctive Japanese style of screen we are familiar with today did not develop until much later during the Muromachi (1392–1573) and Momoyama periods (1573–1600). This was a time when the power and wealth of ruling warrior classes grew and many lavish castles and villas were built throughout their feudal domains. The interiors of these ostentatious residences were decorated to display the flamboyant life styles of the lords and nothing could better impress visitors and illuminate dark interiors than large screens painted in bright pigments and precious metal gildings of gold and silver leafing. Hence these became known as *Kin byōbu* (golden screens).

Screens became essential furnishings in the residences of the rich and powerful. They could be arranged on special occasions behind an imperial dignitary, a religious priest, a birthday celebrant or other guests of honor to demarcate his or her status. They could be set up for ladies in waiting

to sleep behind or for giving courtiers a measure of solitude during the night and then folded away along with bedding to make way for the next day's events. Screens would often be positioned at a person's deathbed with the painted sides turned outwards or the screen displayed upside down at the head of the deceased. Screens were often used to furnish the room where a birth was taking place. These would usually be decorated with special celebratory subject matter of pines, bamboo, cranes and tortoise, all symbols of long life. Screens were favored gifts among the elite as well as premier items in a woman's dowry, along with lacquered vanity sets, writing sets, kimono and other items of daily use.

The painted styles of screens can be divided into two general categories:

1. *Yamato-e*, refers to Japanese style painting, with the word *Yamato* an ancient term for Japan and the suffix *e* meaning picture or painting. The Tosa school of painting is the most synonymous group related to *Yamato-e* painting.
2. *Kara-e*, referring to a style influenced by Chinese-style Song dynasty painting. The themes of these were commonly birds and flowers in a landscape of changing seasons. The Kanō school of painting is the most synonymous group related to *Kara-e* painting (see DVD for additional material).

The pair of screens titled *Noble lady's carriage and a flower cart* in the NGV collection is a fine example of *Yamato-e* painting. *Yamato-e* generally depicted the imperial family, their life style and the activities of people in and around the capital city of Heiankyō (current day Kyoto). Japanese screens are viewed from right to left and in most cases follow a progression of seasons. Starting on the right (upper screen) is depicted an aristocrat's carriage that would usually be drawn by an ox. It is positioned under a weeping cherry and beside a group of poppies, suggesting the arrival of spring. Moving on to the left screen (lower screen) we find a flower cart surrounded by irises and peonies, representing the rainy season of early summer; wisteria, apparently hanging from clouds as if to shade us from the summer sun and chrysanthemums, the symbol of autumn and the imperial family appear with peonies in the cart.

## JAPANESE

*Noble lady's carriage and a flower cart (Goshoguruma 御所車)*  
(early 18th century)

pair of six panel folding screens; ink, gold paint, pigments on gold leaf on paper, lacquer on wood, silk, brass, copper, paper  
(a) 170.0 x 359.7 cm (image and sheet)  
(b) 170.0 x 366.0 cm (image and sheet)  
Purchased, 1994 (AS13.a-b-1994)

