Poetry

Poetry figured in Heian aristocratic society not simply as a personal accomplishment which could prove the quality of a gentleman or gentlewoman, as it had been since at least the Nara period. It had evolved by the Heian period into almost a form of communication used between friends, family, lovers, and even government officials. In addition to the Chinese poetry forms, many different Japanese forms had developed, with the *waka* (literally "poetry of Wa," or Japan) and its thirty-one syllables in five lines being the basic form from which most of the others derived. The most famous Japanese poetry form of all, and the most popular since the sixteenth century, is the **haiku**, which evolved out of the first three verses that make up the standard *waka*. Using a rich, but set, fund of imagery often drawn from nature and the changing of the seasons and established as poetic motifs by several centuries of court poetry collected in the *Manyōshū*, the poet could create anything from a wry or biting observation about another person to a more abstract evocation of the mood of a particular moment or season. A *waka* by one of the great masters of the early Heian period, Ki no Tomonori (act. 850–904), neatly sums up the spirit of his age.

> This perfectly still
> Spring day bathed in the soft light
> From the spread-out sky.
> Why do the cherry blossoms
> So restlessly scatter down?
>
> Donald Keene, ed., *Anthology of Japanese Literature*, New York, 1955, 80.

The poet, looking out of his comfortable abode, sees the cherry blossoms, and projects his own feelings onto the scene in front of him, with nature serving as a mirror in which he contemplates his own elegant and indolent reflection.

Poems were written primarily for a single viewer, a friend, colleague, or lover, and usually a reply was expected. If one could not compose a decent poem or produce respectable calligraphy, then it was better for a man to seek a career outside the capital, and for a woman to remain completely cloistered. One's reputation hinged more crucially on these two accomplishments than on any other aspect of conduct or aesthetic judgement. Many gatherings at the court were for the occasions of poetry competitions, and many members of the lower-ranking aristocracy basically became professional performers at these displays of what was supposed to be a purely amateur accomplishment. In addition many of the private social gatherings in the aristocratic *shinden* also took the form of poetry parties, at which the guests imbibed copious amounts of rice wine. From early in the Heian period, imperial collections of *waka* were commissioned.

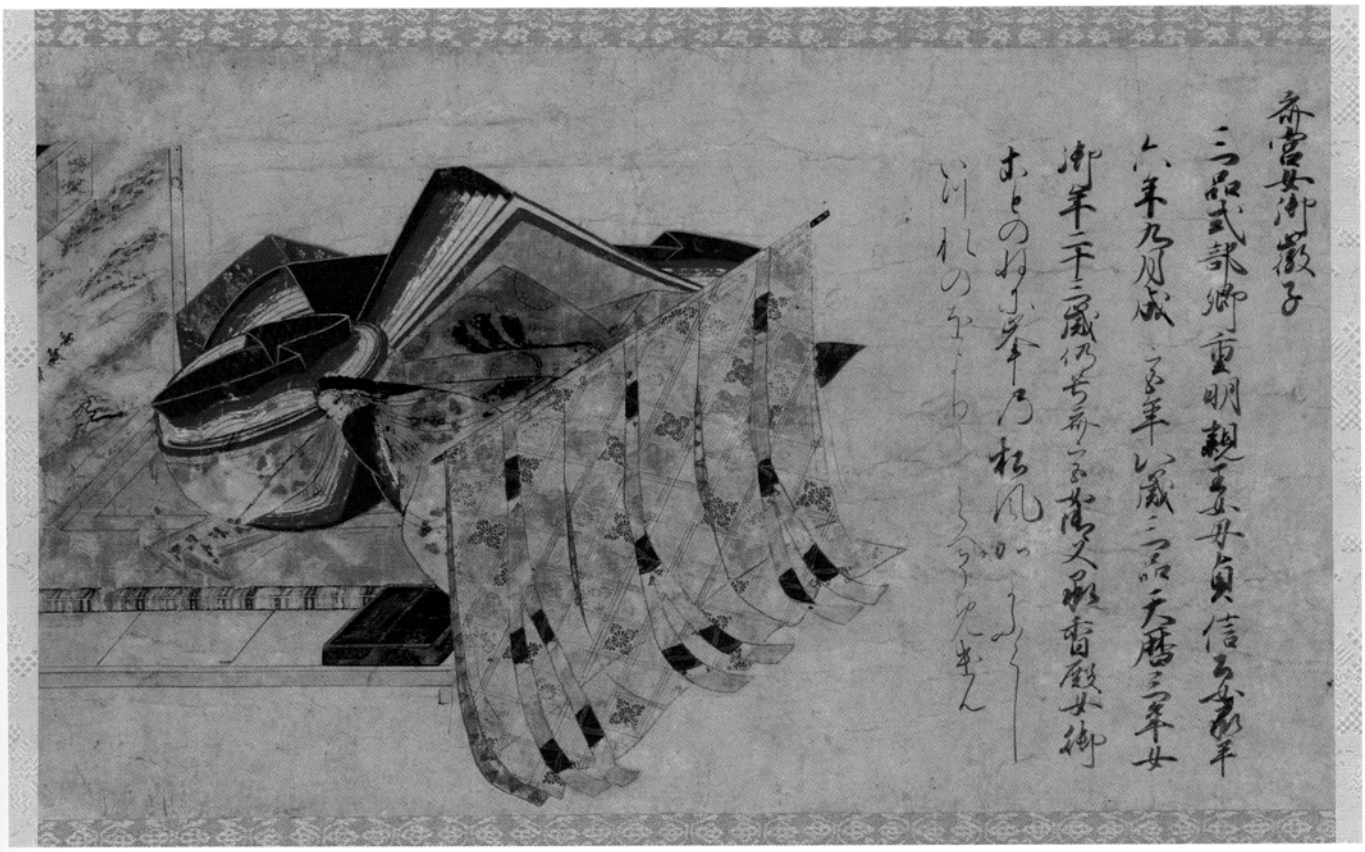
In one compilation of poetry dating to around 1112, each verse of the poem has become a complete mixture of ***kana*** and *hiragana* with the difference between them blurred by the use of a **running-grass script** (JAP. *sōsho*) for both (Fig. 136). This particular collection is known as the *Sanjū rokunin kashū*—the poetry of the thirty-six immortal poets. These poets date from the eighth up to the end of the tenth century, and in addition to including several male masters, such as Ki no Tomonori, there is also a significant minority of poetesses.

Women of Letters

The page illustrated here is of a poem by the earliest female master, known only as Ise (c. 877–c. 940), although she was a daughter of the Fujiwara clan and a favorite of Emperor Uda (r. 889–98). The decorated paper of which this page is made demonstrates one of the crafts which first came to great prominence in the twelfth century, and for which even contemporaneous Chinese connoisseurs and aesthetes expressed admiration and envy. A collage of different colored papers is molded together to suggest a hilly landscape. Details of clouds, birds, trees, vegetation, fences, and buildings have been added in gold and silver ink. Over this runs the Lady Ise's poem in black ink in an elegant running-grass script, offering the reader a rich and many layered experience.

Another of the Sanjū rokunin was the imperial consort Saigo Nyōgo Yoshiko (929–85), who is depicted in an early Kamakura-period picture scroll of the thirty-six immortal

136 Page from the *Ise shū* from *San jūrokunin kashū*. Late Heian period, c. 1112. Page from a book mounted as a hanging scroll; ink, silver and gold ink on paper, with collage of colored papers; 7 ⅞ x 6 ¼ in. (20 x 15.8 cm). Yamato Bunkakan, Nara.



137 *Portrait of the Poetess and Imperial Consort Saigo Nyōgo Yoshiko* (929–85), with at right a brief biography in "standard cursive" characters followed by one of her poems in "running-grass" script, attributed to Fujiwara no Nobuzane (1176–1268). Late 12th/13th century. Ink and color on paper; 11 x 20 ⅛ in. (27.9 x 51.1 cm). Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC (Purchase F1950.24).

poets—the *Sanjū rokunin emaki* attributed to Fujiwara no Nobuzane (1177–1265). The painter and calligrapher of the image has inscribed the empress's name and biography in Chinese characters in a clerical script, followed by one of her most famous pieces in *hiragana* using a running-grass script (Fig. 137). The empress herself is then depicted, according to propriety behind a curtain of state, almost engulfed by her many-layered robes. Reclining on her tatami, with her head modestly obscured, she leans to the edge of her dais, where there rests a black lacquer writing-box. The scene fairly accurately evokes the position in which Heian ladies would have composed a great deal of their poetry, or the diaries or romantic novels for which they were equally famous.

Sometimes appended to the list of thirty-six are the names of two other prominent women of letters: Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon. Mention has already been made of the diary of Fujiwara no Michitsuna's mother, the *Gossamer Years*, but the greatest and most famous diarist of the entire Heian period is undoubtedly a lady-in-waiting to the imperial-consort Teishi (970–1001), known as Sei Shōnagon (965?–after 1000). Her *Makura no Sōshi* (*Pillow Book*) in fact inaugurated its own literary form, the *zuihitsu* ("by the line of the brush"), which in addition to recording events, includes various thoughts, opinions, observations, and stories by the author on any manner of subject. The *Pillow Book* is particularly famous for its lists of "things." For example, her "Embarrassing Things" include:

> A man whom one loves gets drunk and keeps repeating himself.
>
> Parents, convinced that their ugly child is adorable, pet him and repeat things he has said, imitating his voice.
>
> A man recites his own poems (not especially good ones) and tells one about the praise they have received—most embarrassing.
>
> Lying awake at night, one says something to one's companion who simply goes on sleeping.
>
> An adopted son-in-law who has long since stopped visiting his wife runs into his father-in-law in a public place.
>
> Ivan Morris, trans., *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*, London, 1967, vol. 1/155.

If Sei Shōnagon's work offers us the best account of imperial court life at the height of the Heian period, Murasaki Shikibu's

epic romance, the *Genji monogatari* (*Tale of Genji*) provides a more personal, in-depth look at the aristocratic culture of the period. Several ***monogatari***, or "tales told," emerged from the Heian period, written by both men and women. However, Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji* is unquestionably the greatest, its psychological exploration of its characters launching its own kind of literary genre in Japan, and having no real parallel elsewhere until the eighteenth century in Europe. In the *Genji*, the entire world of the Heian aristocrat is brought to life in three dimensions, and even arguably for all five senses, so powerfully does the author evoke even the sounds and smells of her world. We know the author today by the name of the novel's heroine, Lady Murasaki, in which her contemporaries recognized the author's own personality. Aside from that, we know she was a lady-in-waiting at the imperial court, in her case to the imperial-consort Shōshi (988–1074), and, as previously mentioned, she kept a diary of her life at the court (see page 107).

Her fictional tale of Genji, the Shining Prince, recounts the story of an imperial prince born of the emperor's favorite wife, a lady too low in rank for her son to be designated an heir to the throne. Nevertheless, Genji was a handsome, cultured, and sensitive man, one who not only loved women but continued to care for them even when he no longer loved them. His intrigues and affairs take up two-thirds of the novel; the last third deals with the lives and loves of two young men, Genji's heirs, after his death. That her prose powerfully conjured up the Heian world is evinced by the immediate acclaim with which it was received by contemporaries. It was almost immediately copied into illustrated editions which will be discussed in the next section (see Figs 140 and 141), and continues to this day to be widely read and to provide the inspiration for numerous other works of art.

The Rise of *Yamato-e*

In painting, as in poetry and literature, the Heian period was a time in which the Japanese no longer unquestioningly accepted Chinese models and aesthetic standards. In painting they wanted to see the world as they knew it: the low hills and gentle valleys of the area around the capital of Heian, the flowering shrubbery they enjoyed in spring, the maple leaves scarlet and orange against the green pines in autumn. In Japan, as in China and Korea, calligraphy is the basis of all painting, and, given the high level to which the Heian aristocrat had taken the former, it also followed that many noblemen and women also turned their hands quite successfully to painting. As there were poetry competitions and parties, so were there contests and gatherings specifically devoted to painting. Murasaki's hero Genji, that paragon of the Heian gentleman, is an accomplished amateur painter who could hold his own against the great masters at court competitions. However, the foundation of painting in the Heian period is still to be discovered among largely non-aristocratic professionals, who made visible the tastes and favorite subjects of their aristocratic patrons.

The terms *yamato-e* and *kara-e* were coined in the Heian period to distinguish between the Japanese and Chinese pictorial traditions. In the broadest sense, Yamato means Japan and Kara means China. More specifically, Yamato is the ancient name of both the imperial family and the homeland centered on the Kansai region, of which Heian/Kyoto is also a part. Therefore, in the Heian period Yamato meant what today we call Japan. The *yamato-e* style is characterized not only by a softer contoured landscape, but also by a rich, but not brash palette of colors. Its themes, drawn largely from the imagery of nature evoked in poetry, were primarily secular, although *yamato-e*-style landscapes do begin to appear in religious imagery (see Fig. 177). *Kara-e* refers to the contemporaneous tradition of Chinese-style painting, in which Chinese narrative themes, ferocious mythical creatures, and landscape of rugged mountains are the chief subject matter.

A large-scale work that demonstrates one stage in the transition from *kara-e* to *yamato-e* is a group of ten paintings on silk, the *Shōtoku taishi eden*, illustrating events in the life of Prince Shōtoku (574–622), the imperial prince who played such an important role in establishing Chinese-style government and cultural reforms and in introducing Buddhism to Japan. In the eleventh century, the veneration of Shōtoku developed into a full-blown cult, and pictures depicting important events in his life were painted as wall decorations in temples associated with him, particularly Shitennōji and Hōryūji. However, these pictorial biographies were complicated paintings and needed to be explained to the faithful. Thus the custom of *etoki* developed. The term is used to refer to either the explanation or the explainer. A monk would memorize an account of Shōtoku's life and, much like a museum docent today, would present it orally to adherents as they looked at the pictures. At one time, Shitennōji, the temple founded by Shōtoku after 587, possessed a major cycle of Shōtoku paintings, but today the earliest extant pictorial biography is the one originally made for the prince's temple, Hōryūji. This was painted in 1069 on silk panels attached to three walls of the *edono* (picture hall) in the eastern precinct by Hata Chitei, an itinerant painter from Settsu province.

The paintings, now removed from the walls and fashioned into ten panels installed in the Hōryūji Treasure House of the Tokyo National Museum, present events in the life of Prince Shōtoku in a geographical sequence (rather than in a chronological one), moving from right to left, with each episode labeled in a cartouche affixed to the painting. Thus, in one panel, the prince is depicted at the ages of sixteen, seventeen, twenty-one, twenty-seven, and thirty-five. The narrative elements are fitted into pockets of open space between mountains, rocks, and trees, and the vertical composition is held together by the landscape, which flows around the episodes and leads the eye upward and back into the distance at the top of the panel. This use of mountain-defined space cells to unify a composition while at the same time separating figurative passages is a Chinese pictorial convention seen frequently in paintings of the Tang dynasty (618–907).

138 Section of the fifth panel, showing Shitennōji and, above, Prince Shōtoku crossing the Japan Sea to China, from the *Shōtoku taishi eden*. One of five panels by Hata Chitei, originally in the *edono* (picture hall), Hōryūji. 1069. Color on figured silk; 73 x 116 in. (185 x 291 cm). Hōryuji Treasure House.

However, even though the artist uses a Chinese pictorial convention, he also makes a clear distinction between the landscape of Japan and that of China. In the two panels to the extreme left of the set of ten, Shitennōji is shown surrounded by the low lands of Naniwa, in what is now Osaka (Fig. 138). A sturdy ocean-going vessel is tied up in the harbor, while further to the left three demons of the deep can be seen bobbing among the waves of the Japan Sea. Along the left edge of the painting are the mountains of China, tall and irregularly massed together, some of them displaying the sharply undercut faceting frequently seen in *kara-e* landscapes, but seldom in *yamato-e*. At the top of the two panels Shōtoku appears in a magical flying chariot, crossing the Japan Sea to China. In a dream he has remembered where, in a previous incarnation, he saw a particularly important Buddhist text, and upon waking he sets off to retrieve it.

The panels of the *Shōtoku taishi eden* represent a stage in the Japanization of secular painting, in which a native theme, the prince's biography, is set forth in a composition that still makes considerable use of a Chinese pictorial convention, the space cell. Nevertheless, new elements, such as a recognition of the difference between Chinese and Japanese mountain styles, herald the beginning of the Japanese style.

Another transitional painting dated to the Middle Heian period is the *Senzui byōbu* (Fig. 139). *Byōbu* means folding screen, and this six-panel screen depicts an elderly gentleman, usually identified as the Chinese poet Bo Juyi (JAP. Hakurakuten; 772–846), seated on a fur rug outside a thatch-roofed hut and holding an ink-dipped brush as though he had just looked up from writing something. The theme of this screen is thought to be the Chinese poet who has retired from life in the capital but is constantly visited by young men wanting to learn his skills. And approaching from the right is a young gentleman who has just dismounted. Bo Juyi also held office in the Tang government and was a man who spoke his thoughts plainly and forcefully. As a result he was banished from the capital of Chang'an for several years. When he was permitted to return, he did so only to retire formally from service to the emperor. He then moved back to the country, built a simple hut from which he could see his favorite mountain, Mount Lu, and devoted himself to the pleasures of writing poetry and drinking wine. Bo Juyi was arguably the favorite of all the Chinese poets during the Heian period, and Lady Murasaki in *Genji monogatari* makes reference to his poem

139 Detail of *Senzui* (landscape) *byōbu*, a six-panel screen from Kyōōgokokuji (Tōji). 11th century. Color on silk; each panel 57 ⅝ x 16 ¾ in. (146.4 x 42.7 cm). Kyoto National Museum.

"The Song of Everlasting Sorrow" as though it was something with which her audience would themselves be completely familiar and required no introduction.

The Middle Heian period even produced a great Bo Juyi expert, Fujiwara no Tametoki (949–1029), who wrote a commentary on his poems and is also known to have commissioned a painting on the theme of the poet in retirement. This particular screen has, since the fourteenth century, been an essential ritual object in Shingon *kanjō*, or initiation, ceremonies at Tōji, a fact that has long puzzled modern scholars, as its secular literary theme contains no discernible esoteric Buddhist symbolism. Its acquisition by the temple is best explained by the theory that a nobleman attending a Buddhist ceremony at Tōji, perhaps someone like Tametoki, brought it with him to screen himself from the view of other worshippers, and afterward donated it to the temple.

The screen represents a transitional phase in the development of *yamato-e* because it combines a Chinese theme and Chinese-style figures in a landscape that is distinctly Japanese. The poet's hut is set among wisteria-covered pines and other