

Screens from the 16th to 17th Century:

Bamboo Grove of Spring and Autumn and Crows

Golden Week Lecture Series— Four Masterpieces of Japanese Painting: A Symposium

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First of all, I would like to congratulate the Seattle Art Museum for the successful conservation of two important Japanese folding screens. These works of art show the characteristics of late 16th and early 17th century Japanese painting in this category. I would like to celebrate and share the revived inspiration that these artworks present to you. Today I would like to discuss three important things. First of all, the time period in which these screens were produced, second the theme, and third the stylistic characteristics.

Byōbu folding screens originated in the 8th century, and at this time Japanese artists began painting on these screens. This is an example from *The Tale of Genji*, a folding screen from the 12th century.¹ At far right is a folding screen and above is *shōji*, which functioned as a sliding door.

The topics or themes depicted in these screens are Japanese nature and life in that era, as well as some ceremonial events of the time. These themes often alluded to or had connections with Japanese literature. This is another example from *The Tale of Genji*, and here is another example of *shōji* screen art.² This, however, is different from what you saw earlier because it is more like a Chinese painting. I will not have time to go in-depth into the differences between Chinese and Japanese style painting, but this one has perspective, which was derived from the Chinese painting style, while the Japanese folding screens did not have that type of perspective.

We refer to the Chinese painting style as *kara-e*, or “Chinese mode.” The Japanese painting style is referred to as *yamato-e*, or “Japanese mode” as seen in the example to the right. I will now show more of these different examples. This is the pictorial story of the priest Hōnen from the 14th century.³ On the left you can see the Chinese mode, *kara-e*, and on the top-right the Japanese mode, *yamato-e*. Chinese mode and Japanese mode painting motifs were both used in the same period and developed from the 13th century onward. Here I would like to clarify the difference between the terms “mode” and “style.” The reason for the differentiation is that one

artist may be able to paint in either Chinese mode or Japanese mode, even though he has his own style.



Bamboo Grove in Spring and Autumn, Japanese, 16th century, pair of six-panel screens, ink, color and gold on paper, 63 x 143 in. each, Gift of Duane Shipman, 91.235.1,-2

The Seattle Art Museum's *Bamboo Grove of Spring and Autumn* was executed in the Japanese mode.⁴ This is from the mid-16th century, around 1550. Let's examine the motifs to see if it is truly the Japanese mode I described above. In the left side panel you can see yellow Japanese pond lilies (the red one is a Chinese lily) and plum blossoms in both red and white. The moon above the mountain is reflected in the water below, as you can see through the reeds. In the right side panel you can see bamboo shoots, and a thin bamboo stalk that is still very young. Mature bamboo plants can be seen in the left panel, and to connect these two panels the artist used sparrows flying from left to right. These sparrows signify the season of early spring to early autumn. Sparrows are actually around all year as you know. So, they can at times represent winter. Therefore, this screen may depict all four seasons.

The theme and motif of bamboo and sparrows are seen in many examples of Japanese painting. Priest Hōnen's biographical pictures clearly show these motifs.⁵ All four seasons are depicted here and the moon has strong literary connotations in this painting.

During the process of conservation, the conservator, Mr. Mitsuhiro Abe discovered something very interesting that revealed some new facts and information about this painting. It has to do with the moon [seen below the cloud] – when carefully examined, a crack was discovered in its center. He carefully peeled the top layers and revealed the white backing paper. When the backing paper was carefully peeled away it revealed what was underneath. Under the clouds were patterns, and under the patterns was an under-drawing. In place of the moon, however, there was no under-drawing. Instead, pieces of gold leaf were found. At some point in

the history of this painting, someone removed the paper in the shape of the moon and applied gold leaf as if it were the sun. So it was the sun at one point, and now it is once again the moon. To explore the reason for this I will show some examples.

This is a 15th century Japanese-mode painting in which both the sun and moon are depicted, showing the Eastern philosophy of yin and yang.⁶ At some point after SAM's bamboo screen was painted someone wanted to include both the sun and the moon to represent the universe. Sometime after that, someone else thought that this was not rational, as the sun is up in the sky and the moon is reflected in the water. This scientific-minded person decided to revert the sun to the moon, replacing the sun with gray pigment and silver powder to match the reflection on the water. This person was more interested in a naturalistic depiction and decided to make such changes in order to express that. What this shows is how one painting can reflect the different time periods in which it existed, giving clues to what the people of the time thought art should be, how they wanted to view this art, and the aesthetics of that particular era.

Considering the changes made in the history of this painting, we need to re-examine the original intent and purpose of this piece. An important element of this painting is the motif of the moon and the plum blossoms. It may refer to the work of classical literature *Kokin Wakashū*, an anthology of *waka* poems from the 10th century. Another example was written by Ōshikouchi no Mitsune, in which he talks about the moon at night and the fragrance of the plum blossoms. The theme of bamboo and the sparrows is also seen in literature and tales from the 13th and 14th centuries. The moon, plum blossoms, bamboo and sparrows are the four significant motifs found in *Bamboo Grove of Spring and Autumn*. These are all motifs that come from literature. Therefore I claim this is a Japanese mode painting, *yamato-e*, which depicts classical literature.

Next I would like to examine the styles to see the differences between the Japanese mode and Chinese mode of painting. In this Japanese mode example from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, we see *Bamboo Grove of the Four Seasons*.⁷ The seasons go from spring, to summer in the right screen, some ivy with autumn colors in the left screen representing fall, and to the snow on the far left representing winter. If you look at the composition of the motifs in this piece, time changes showing the four seasons, but everything is depicted in a very parallel manner, simple and flat. It does not give any indication of perspective. Similar to the folding screen depicted in *Tale of Genji*, painted in the Japanese mode that did not have perspective.¹

This is *Flowering Plants of the Four Seasons* from the Idemitsu Museum of Arts.⁸ Again, the four seasons are depicted in a similar way, although this one was painted a little later than the one you saw earlier of the *Bamboo Grove of the Four Seasons* from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. You can once again see the seasons going from right to left. There are rocks and water, but still not the kind of perspective you will see in other examples. However, this has a little more sense of depth than the earlier example of *Bamboo Grove of the Four Seasons*. *Flowers and Birds of the Four Seasons* is a painting by Kano Motonobu from the 1540s, and is

definitely in the Japanese mode, but with elements of Chinese visual style.⁹ These paintings have layers of stages, from foreground to middle to back, and uses clouds or mist as a transitional device. This indicates the influence of Chinese painting mode from the Song or Ming Dynasty.

Let's examine the rocks. In the Idemitsu Museum's example of Japanese mode in *Flowering Plants of the Four Seasons* there are similarities with the Seattle Art Museum's *Bamboo Grove of Spring and Autumn* rock. Whereas, in a painting by Kano Motonobu's grandson from 1586, and now in Nanzen-ji it is possible to see the difference between Japanese mode and Chinese mode.¹⁰ As a means of providing some comparisons: the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Bamboo Grove of the Four Seasons* is an extreme example of the Japanese mode. And Kano Motonobu's *Flowers and Birds of the Four Seasons* is an extreme example of the Chinese mode. This situates Seattle Art Museum's *Bamboo Grove of Spring and Autumn* in the middle because it has some transitional elements of Chinese mode but is still in the Japanese mode. For this reason I estimate the date of the Seattle Art Museum's piece at around 1550. The introduction of clouds and mist to give a slight sense of depth was influenced by paintings like the *Flowers and Birds of the Four Seasons*. The piece from the 16th century in Japanese mode was discovered at the Seattle Art Museum and, after a successful conservation, can now be viewed and enjoyed.



Crows, Japanese, early 17th century, pair of six-panel screens, ink and gold on paper, 61 3/4 x 139 in. each, Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection, 36.21.1,-2

Let me move on to the *Crows* screens.¹¹ I consider this to have been created, based on a Chinese mode painting and I will explain why. If you look at the lower left of the left screen, there is a rock, and a foreground is established in this painting. The third crow from the left is actually behind a rock, and is partially hidden. This indicates space in the foreground. *Flying Crows amidst Pine and Cypress Trees* is another folding screen with crows, very similar to the Seattle Art Museum's, currently at Daigo-ji in Kyoto¹² This piece is a more abstract rendition of crows and does not indicate foreground space, although there is a pine and a cypress on the left to show the presence of ground or earth. This piece is considered to have been done in the second quarter of the 17th century, and there is a reason for it. The cypress motif from painting

on the wall (*kabe-haritsuke*) and the pine tree motif from painting on the wall of the alcove (*toko-haritsuke*), by one of the Kano school artists, from Nijō Castle in Kyoto, is believed to have been done in 1626.¹³ There is a similarity in how the cypress is depicted and how the pines are drawn. Thus, it is attributed to the same school of artists. The *sumi* painting screen of *Myna Birds and Pine Tree*¹⁴ was done by one of the Kano Motonobu school artists in the late 16th century. This work is very close to the Seattle Art Museum's *Crows*, with a similar background. Focusing on the left-hand area of the screen, you can see the ground with rock and birds. With the *sumi* painting technique the artist can do gradations to show perspective, or depth of the area. Seattle Art Museum's *Crows* has stronger design elements and the artist wanted to create imaginary space in the gold painted area, which is actually a characteristic of the early 17th century painting. During this time artists became very efficient at alluding to, and expressing, that kind of imaginary space. So the area that does not have any crows is the area where people would imagine space. The crows are very lively in Seattle Art Museum's screens and create a very vast space all together. These examples from the first quarter of the 17th century strongly depict the aesthetics of that era. If you know of the *Wind God and Thunder God Screens* by Tawaraya Sōtatsu, which depicts thunder and wind it has a very similar feeling.¹⁵ Comparing the *Flying Crows amidst Pine and Cypress Trees* from Daigo-ji, you can see that it does not have the same dynamism as Seattle Art Museum's *Crows*.

Let me show you this progression just within the Kano School. The first is Kano Motonobu's *Flowers and Birds of the Four Seasons* from 1540, next is *Cypress Trees* by Kano Eitoku from 1590¹⁶, and then *Plum Tree and Pheasant* by Kano Sanraku from 1631.¹⁷ There is a great deal of progression in these three paintings. The first one has, as I expressed, a lot of perspective and many design motifs. As you progress to Kano Sanraku's piece the background has disappeared and there is no attempt to create depth of space. The composition is becoming less busy and there is more attention paid to individual motifs.

Now I will switch gears and talk about the design elements of this painting. I do not know where the late 17th century jar by Nonomura Ninsei was found, but it was shown in 2003 at a New York Japan Society Show.¹⁸ You can see the similarities with the design of the crows to Seattle Art Museum's *Crows*. It is of course an example of pottery, a teapot, which is considered a craft. In Japan the art of painting was very similar to the art of craft and you can see the similarities for example in Hon'ami Kōetsu studio work. It is not a *sumi* painting but a writing box adorned with cranes painted in lead.¹⁹ Hon'ami's Kōetsu's calligraphy and Tawaraya Sōtatsu's painting can be seen in their *Crane Scroll*.²⁰ They have a very similar artistic design expression. This can be seen in two examples from the Seattle Art Museum, in their *Deer*

*Scroll*²¹ and *Crane Writing Box*.²² This is further illustrated in an example and it is a Japanese flute in the collection of the Museum of Yamato Bunkakan.²³ You can see there is really no distinction between paintings and craft, especially after the 17th century. This is a unique characteristic of Japanese art in relatively recent centuries. It might have started in the 15th century so we can go back a little further. Artists used motifs from literature in the disciplines of both painting and craft. Strong design elements make them very close. Seattle Art Museum's *Crows* screens have elements that are very close to the art of craft and this tells me it must have been done in the early 17th century.

At times painting and craft are distinguished as fine arts and applied arts. It used to be that arts and crafts were very close, but after the 19th century with the influence of European distinctions in art concepts, the two were separated into the categories of fine arts and applied arts. There are current movements to re-examine the separation of these two, and recently scholars have been re-evaluating Japanese art from that point of view. Therefore the Seattle Art Museum's *Crows*, attributed to the first quarter of the 17th century, is extremely important for scholars who are re-examining Japanese art and its' characteristics.

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¹ *Narrative Picture Scroll of The Tale of Genji*, "Kashiwagi II," National Treasure, first half of 12th century, Tokugawa Museum of Arts, Aichi.

² *Narrative Picture Scroll of The Tale of Genji*, "Yokobue," National Treasure, first half of 12th century, Tokugawa Museum of Arts, Aichi.

³ *Biographical Stories of the Priest Hōnen*, the 4th scene from volume 4, National Treasure, 14th century, Chion-in, Kyoto.

⁴ *Bamboo Grove of Spring and Autumn*, ca. 1550, Seattle Art Museum.

⁵ *Biographical Stories of the Priest Hōnen*, the 2nd scene from volume 7, National Treasure, 14th century, Chion-in, Kyoto.

⁶ *Sun and Moon Landscape*. Important Cultural Property, late 15th century, Kongō-ji, Osaka.

⁷ *Bamboo Grove of the Four Seasons*, 15th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

⁸ *Flowering Plants of the Four Seasons*, Important Cultural Property, end of the 15th century, Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo.

⁹ *Flowers and Birds of the Four Seasons*, Kano Motonobu, ca. 1540, Hakutsuru Museum of Art, Hyōgo.

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- ¹⁰ *Musk Cats and Peonies* (part), Important Cultural Property, attributed to Kano Eitoku, 1586, sliding screens of the Central Hall, Nanzen-ji, Kyoto.
- ¹¹ *Crows*, first quarter of the 17th century, Seattle Art Museum.
- ¹² *Flying Crows amidst Pine and Cypress Trees*, second quarter of the 17th century, Daigo-ji, Kyoto.
- ¹³ *Cypress Motif* from painting on the wall, *Pine Tree Motif* from painting on the wall of the alcove, Important Cultural Property, Kano school artist, 1626, Jōdan-no-ma at Ninomaru Palace, Nijō Castle, Kyoto.
- ¹⁴ *Myna Birds and Pine Tree* (right screen) from *Flowers and Birds*, attributed to Kano Motonobu, late 16th century, owner unknown (former Hara Sankei collection, Japan).
- ¹⁵ *Wind God and Thunder God Screens*, National Treasure, Tawaraya Sōtatsu, early 17th century, Kennin-ji, Kyoto.
- ¹⁶ *Cypress Trees*, National Treasure, Kano Eitoku, 1590, Tokyo National Museum.
- ¹⁷ *Plum Tree and Pheasant*, Important Cultural Property, Kano Sanrauku, 1631, sliding screens at Tenkyū-in, Myōshin-ji, Kyoto.
- ¹⁸ *Tea-leaf Jar with Myna Birds*, Nonomura Ninsei, late 17th century, Asia Society, New York.
- ¹⁹ *Writing Box with Cranes*, Hon'ami Kōetsu studio, late 17th century, Tokyo National Museum.
- ²⁰ *Crane Scroll*, Important Cultural Property, Hon'ami Kōetsu and Tawaraya Sōtatsu, first quarter of the 17th century, Kyoto National Museum.
- ²¹ *Deer Scroll*, Hon'ami Kōetsu and Tawaraya Sōtatsu, first quarter of the 17th century, Seattle Art Museum.
- ²² *Writing Box with Crane*, Hon'ami Kōetsu studio, late 17th century, Seattle Art Museum.
- ²³ *Flute Case with Deer*, Important Cultural Property, Hon'ami Kōetsu studio, late 17th century, the Museum of Yamato Bunkakan, Nara.