

# MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS ST. PETE



Unknown Japanese Artist, *Folding screen depicting scenes from The Tale of Genji*, Genroku period (1688–1704), Ink, color and gold on paper, Museum purchase with funds donated by John E. Schloder in memory of his father, Charles Schloder

## **Wild Creations Digital Access – Workshop 4: Murasaki Shikibu and *The Tale of Genji* with Stephanie Chill, MFA Curatorial Assistant**

### **The Impact of a Female Author**

Murasaki Shikibu (c. 973–1014 or 1025) was born into a lower branch of the powerful Fujiwara clan during the Heian Period (794–1192). Descended from a long line of renowned poets, she was called to the Imperial court in 1008 partly due to her family connections, but also as a result of her own

notoriety as the author of *The Tale of Genji*. At court, noblewomen were identified by their position and the title of a close male relative. In this instance, “Murasaki” was the name of the main female character and love interest of Prince Genji, and “*Shikibu-shō*” was the position the author’s father held in the Bureau of Ceremonial.

During this time, the Heian Period, it was improper for a woman to learn or use Chinese. Women of the court used a developing writing system of uniquely Japanese syllabaries based on Chinese, while Chinese characters and language were reserved for men and bureaucratic affairs. However, Murasaki took it upon herself to learn classical Chinese literature alongside—and quicker than—her brother. Her intelligence did not go unnoticed, and her diary has mention that her father lamented the fact that she had not been born a son. Her knowledge of scholarly Chinese writings combined with her natural storytelling abilities enabled her to write such a novel – it resonated with all who read it, particularly those at the Imperial court. More than just a fable, the exploits of Prince Genji navigating aristocratic customs in pursuit of love was a psychological tale that upheld the moral ideals of the time, but also encouraged the reader to consider their personal ethics.

While in service to Empress Shōshi (988–1074) at court, Murasaki secretly taught her Chinese and introduced her to classical literature and informally recorded court events in her diary. Unlike diaries kept today, diaries written by Heian era women chronicled major events of the day and were not always in linear order. In her diary (written at court between 1008 and 1010), Murasaki spends much time detailing the births of the Empress’ children, but also comments on courtly dress and poems, and records personal thoughts and critiques on life at court. Her unique pattern of writing shows some of the earliest documented experimentation with recording spoken word and inner thoughts in written form. Whereas earlier writers and contemporaries of her day wrote documents, poems, and dialogues as they would be spoken aloud, Murasaki gave vivid descriptions that provided the secondary, visual cues we normally receive from eye contact and gestures in a conversation.

*The Tale of Genji* had a profound impact on literature, and was studied alongside other classical literature of the educated classes of society at that time. *Genji* prompted an entire genre of art and entertainment for over 1,000 years, including contemporary versions in literature, manga and anime. Today, Murasaki's tale is often recognized as the world's first novel, and it continues to inspire new translations and artwork for audiences worldwide.

### ***The Tale of Genji* Folding Screen**

In the Heian Period, the structure of palaces and grand homes consisted of large open rooms with a few thin permanent walls as well as a few movable walls or paper doors. Private "rooms" were created by setting up fabric partitions (*kichō*), or folding screens (*byōbu*). As architecture evolved, buildings became more enclosed and screens could help brighten a room. By the Edo Period (1615–1868), screens were an important part of a bride's dowry.

Folding screens were made in a variety of sizes, but for the most part, they all had the same basic functions: blocking the wind, creating privacy, and adding light and color to the space. Translated directly from Japanese, *byōbu* means "wind wall." Small screens, often made of just one panel, were placed on desks so one could gaze upon the outdoor garden undisturbed by the wind. Larger screens were used to delineate resting quarters, as well as protection from the wind and outside elements. As screens developed and became more collectable, illustrations made of gold leaf were favored as they displayed the owner's wealth and functioned well in dim interior settings. Early screens would have displayed landscapes or scenes recalling Buddhist teachings. Later themes also included battle scenes, domestic settings, and, of course, *The Tale of Genji*.

As with the MFA's folding screen, traditional images of Murasaki's tale are most often drawn in the *Yamato-e* style, the classical Japanese style of painting. This style was fully developed by the late 900s, and seen as part of a wave of innovations that sought identification within the boundaries of Japanese society, rather than from external influences like China. The *Yamato-e* style often includes figures with non-descript facial features, idyllic landscapes, large swaths of clouds that break up different parts of the

narrative, and interior settings where it appears the roof has been removed—a technique which translates as “blown off roof” (*fukinuki yatai*). Drawn from a bird’s-eye aerial perspective, the sense of intimacy is heightened when viewing the interior of restricted palace areas.

The scenes are drawn from multiple chapters of *Genji* and are not arranged in chronological order, which is typical of folding screens. The scenes included in the MFA’s screen are four of the more popular scenes from *The Tale of Genji*. Starting at the middle of the screen and moving in a clockwise rotation, the chapters depicted are Chapter 1 “The Paulownia Pavilion” (Kiritsubo), Chapter 3 “The Cicada Shell” (Utsusemi), Chapter 9 “Heart-to-Heart” (Aoi), and Chapter 7 “Beneath the Autumn Leaves” (Momiji no Ga).

*The Tale of Genji* is a reflection of Murasaki’s world, the societal norms that controlled it, and her own subtle critique. Though we cannot apply our understanding of gender or equality to Murasaki’s world, her characters struggle with the human experience and condition, and her life story and words continue to resonate to this day.

## QUIZ

1. What were some of the key elements that made Murasaki a successful writer and member of the Imperial court?
2. Many societies throughout history have limited or curtailed education to young women, as in Murasaki's case. Can you think of other examples of noted female authors who were also denied an early education in writing or literature? How do you think that informed the topics they explored and the perspective they bring to their writing?
3. *The Tale of Genji*, commonly recognized as the first novel, depicts court norms as witnessed and documented by Murasaki, a topic that continues to be explored in literature and film to this day. Why do you think that, despite years of feminist progress, this continues to grip the public's imagination?
4. Communicating through poetry was an important aspect of the Heian court. Instead of writing a letter to someone you know, write what you want to say in poem form. Use a tanka format (similar to a haiku, but with two extra lines - 5/7/5/7/7), which is common in Japanese literature.

*[Submit your quiz](#) answers to be eligible for prizes.*

### EXTRA CREDIT

[The Tale of Genji, Murasaki Shikibu](#), translated by Royall Tyler, 2002

[The Tale of Murasaki: A Novel](#), Liza Dalby, 2001 (book and website)

[The Tale of Genji Review](#), Virginia Woolf, originally published in *Vogue*, July 1925 (begins at the bottom of page 264)

[A brief description of the 54 chapters](#) in *The Tale of Genji*, Liza Dalby

[Fifth chapter of oldest 'Tale of Genji' copy found in Tokyo](#), The Asahi Shimbun, Oct. 9, 2019

[Yamato-e Painting](#), The MET

**DOUBLE EXTRA CREDIT**

[The Diary of Lady Murasaki](#), Murasaki Shikibu, translated by Richard Bowring, 1996

[Byōbu: The Grandeur of Japanese Screens Exhibition Brochure](#), Yale University Art Gallery, 2014

[The Sensualist: What makes “The Tale of Genji” so seductive](#) by Ian Buruma, *The New Yorker*, July 2015