

Kanō Eitoku (1543-1590), *Birds and Flowers of the Four Seasons*, c. 1573-1590



Key facts:

- Size: Pair of six-panel folding screens, each 176.2 x 377.3 cm overall (image: 160.7 x 360.7 cm)
- Materials: ink, colour, gold, and gold leaf on paper; each 176.2 x 377.3 cm
- Location: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- Patron: individual unknown, but one of the *daimyō* (feudal lords) of the Azuchi-Momoyama period.

ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter and theme

The screens depict the changing of the seasons from spring to winter, read from right to left (as columns were read in the traditional Japanese writing system). Cherry blossom (*sakura*) is prominent, echoing the importance of cherry blossom as sign of transient beauty and turning point in the seasons (cherry blossom trees flower magnificently for a short time in April), celebrated in *hanami* festivals in Japan. Different identifiable flora include bamboo, bamboo shoots, bullrushes, cedar trees, dandelion, cherry blossom, Japanese lily, kerria rose, lantern flowers, lichen, and peonies. The most prominent animals are cranes.

On one (spring-summer) screen is a red-crowned crane (also called a Japanese crane), one of the longest-living bird species with an average adult lifespan of 30-40 years and as long as 75 years in captivity, and therefore a Japanese symbol of luck and longevity. This crane's life cycle is shown as a parallel of changing seasons, with juveniles in the right, 'spring' section calling to an adult further towards the left and the summer flowers. On the other (late summer to winter) screen are two further cranes of a different species, based on their plumage, which are either hooded cranes, white-napped cranes or the artist's composite of the two. Both species breed in Siberia and Mongolia but winter in Japan and are seen here amongst the snow. There are songbirds and ducks on both screens also.

Screens depicting the changing seasons through flora and fauna were an established genre in Japanese art by this point, as seen in Tosa Mitsunobu's *Bamboo in the Four Seasons*, late 1400s - early 1500s, from the Muromachi period (1392-1573), also in the Metropolitan Museum. Themes of nature's endurance and transience were common, influenced by prevailing religious sentiments which encouraged the contemplation of natural phenomena (Shintoism and Zen Buddhism). The human figure did not occupy a central place in Japanese representational art, except as a foil for natural phenomena; instead, non-human phenomena were invested with human meaning.

Composition and pictorial space

The flat picture plane is almost evenly divided between areas of coloured flora and fauna and the 'negative' gilt space representing clouds and ground. Compositional balance is also achieved by the way positive forms like the branches of the cedar tree give a horizontal counterpoint to the vertical panels of screen. The plants also extend across the panel edges, weaving the picture together and leading the idea horizontally from one group to the other, following the implied passage of time. Almost every one of these dark, 'positive' forms is connected to the next one, if only by a single blade of grass, emphasising the narrative continuum. While there is some overlapping of forms, there no clear diminution of scale or linear perspective to give pictorial depth; the picture instead loosely conforms to Japanese conventions of 'vertical perspective' in which relative distances between objects are suggested by their relative heights up the

flat plane, necessitating the 'blank' areas of cloud or ground to cover or stand for intervening spaces. In turn, rather than encompassing a unified three-dimensional space frozen in a single moment as in Western perspectival painting, the viewer's eye travels along with the screen a section at a time, as when reading a scroll.

Form: Linear form prevails, emphasised by the relative lack of tonal modelling and the 'silhouette' aesthetic created by the gilt areas of negative space. The extreme delicacy of line is shown in the painting of individual blades of grass or pine needles. The artist also showcases his versatile command of line by juxtaposing the diverse forms of bamboo, peonies and cedar. While the complex, naturalistic forms show intense observation (see how the peonies are depicted from different angles, for instance), the artist has nonetheless exaggerated the curvilinear forms of the tree boughs, trunks and roots and echoed them in the mossy ground below. This muscular exaggeration is typical of Eitoku's manner and the 'monumental' style of his Kanō school in the Azuchi-Monoyama period. Delicately raised in the gilt negative space (and therefore receding from attention until light shines on the panels) is brushwood fencing, significant as the only evidence of human interaction with nature.

Colour, light and tone: The dominant colours are gold, green, white and red, each of these repeated in ways that lead the eye across the whole composition. Green and gold provide the composition's structure; white connects the cranes and snow across the two screens; red connects cherry blossom with the lilies, peonies, lantern flowers, and red dashes in the birds' plumage. This use of colour gives a sense of rhythm to the looking experience which further promotes the temporal unfolding of the subject. The primary tonal contrast is not between depicted light and shadow but between positive forms and negative space, highlighting the precise outlines of species. The use of gold conveyed opulence within daimyō castles. It also would have reflected real sunlight or lamplight and helped light interiors, suggesting connections between the real natural world outside the castle and that depicted in the screen.

Stylistic developments: Eitoku's style represents a dialogue and partial fusion between older Japanese and Chinese painting styles. The Kanō school was established by Kanō Masanobu (1434-1530) and engaged in the gestural, monochrome *sumi-e* (ink-wash) style of scroll painting introduced from China by Zen Buddhists, most famous among them Masanobu's contemporary, Sesshū Tōyō. Eitoku was trained in the ink-wash style of his great-grandfather Masanobu and some vestiges of this may be seen in the broader brushwork and bold design of the tree trunks and moss in *Birds and Flowers* (though it is far more obvious in his equally famous *Cypress Trees* screen). The equal and symbiotic importance of positive and negative space, of object and atmosphere, was also a characteristic of *sumi-e*. Eitoku departed from *sumi-e* dramatically, however, in his lavish polychromy, opaque colour, gilt spaces, the imposing size of foreground motifs, the more uniform dispersal of forms across a composition, and the precise, linear, naturalistic drawing that articulates flora and fauna. The opaque colour, compositional

arrangement and precise naturalistic drawing owe more to the native Japanese *yamato-e* tradition of scroll painting, though Eitoku is thought to have been the first to use gold leaf as background. The derivation of this screen painting style from scroll-painting traditions may have influenced the temporal nature of the composition detailed above. The resultant ‘monumental’ style is the Kanō family’s most famous contribution to Japanese painting.

CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Religious factors

The importance of flora and fauna in Japanese art draws upon the twin roots of medieval Japanese religion, Shinto and Zen Buddhism. Key to Shinto, Japan’s indigenous religion, is ritualised reverence for *kami*, spirits believed to inhabit all natural phenomena. Shinto reverence for *kami* also dovetailed with Zen Buddhism, a naturalised form of Chinese ‘Chan’ Buddhism (‘Zen’ was a Japanese pronunciation of ‘Chan’) introduced to Japan from the sixth century. Zen Buddhists encouraged a contemplative and intuitive attention to nature as part of self-knowledge, and the ritual exercise of painting became an important part of this process for many Zen monks. The work of Zen priest-painter Sesshū Tōyō was a key influence on the Kanō school of Eitoku, while Zen and Shinto together shaped the religious outlook and *habitus* of Eitoku’s elite patrons.

Political factors

During the Azuchi-Momoyama period of 1573-1600, new shōguns Oda Nobunaga and his successor Toyotomi Hideyoshi gradually asserted order over Japan after a period of civil war, paving the way for the long-lasting Edo period and Tokugawa shogunate. (Shōguns were the military overlords and *de facto* rulers of feudal Japan, the Emperor being a largely ceremonial figurehead. The ruling elite below the shōguns were their vassals, the daimyō, who were served in turn by a warrior class, the samurai, a relationship that roughly echoed that between king, lord and knight in medieval Europe. The periods are named after the locations from which the shōguns ruled; Nobunaga and Hideyoshi ruled from Azuchi in Shiga and Momoyama in Kyoto respectively.) The shōguns and daimyō were leaders of taste and the patrons of the Kanō school of Eitoku. (Nb. the first name, Kanō, designates the family and the second name the individual.) Eitoku’s great-grandfather and grandfather had established the Kanō school as court painters in the previous shōgunate, while Eitoku himself painted for both Nobunaga and Hideyoshi. These new shōguns had risen to power through military skill rather than immersion in the sophisticated culture of Buddhist monasteries and the imperial court, and Eitoku developed the bold style seen here, in distinction to more delicate Chinese-inspired styles favoured under the previous shōgunate, to appeal to these new overlords and furnish their new castles (see details below).

DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Eitoku's lavish use of gold testifies to the opening of new gold and silver mines across Japan in the early modern period, which precipitated a so-called 'golden age' of screen painting and coincided with the need for a new stylistic vocabulary to express the status of the new shōguns and daimyō of the Azuchi-Momoyama period. It is possible that Eitoku and his contemporaries were also influenced by the use of gold in newly imported Spanish and Portuguese religious paintings.

The picture is not painted onto a wooden ground but instead onto paper in inks, again showing the legacy of scroll-painting traditions. The raised areas in the gilt surface (the brushwood fencing, for example) were created using chalk-powder (*gofun*). Gilt screens like these always came in pairs.

WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

The gilt screens of Eitoku and the Kanō school helped showcased the status and tastes of their daimyō patrons. These tastes were deliberately distinct from the rarified court styles cultivated by previous shōguns and Zhen painters in its grandiose style and the splendour of gold. Yet the screens were still part of highly cultivated, ritualised practices of contemplating nature. Daimyō elites would use screens as aids to reflection on natural subjects during readings of *renga* poetry (a highly formalized genre of collaborative poetry), for instance. In 1588, the shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi is said to have assembled a walkway between 100 painted screens as the approach to a *hanami* (cherry-blossom viewing) party.

Gilt screens complemented the architecture and functions of daimyō great houses and castles of the period. These were stacks of near-square stories created with wooden beams, often on top of formidable battened stone bases (built to withstand the new threat of cannon), internally divided with sliding screens. While echoing the rectilinear formality of these environments, the pairs of screens could also be freely folded and repositioned to give variety and relief to them, as well as to subdivide rooms for different functions. Daimyō houses of the period were also typically surrounded by ornamental gardens with groomed trees and ponds, offering vistas to be seen from the high stories or enjoyed *via* verandas, sometimes separated from the interior only by sliding partitions. Painted gilt screens helped connect the interior and exterior by echoing the gardens in painted images of flora and fauna, and by bringing golden reflected sunlight into rooms.

Subsequent influences

The style of 'monumental' gilt screens realised by Eitoku continued with his son, Kanō Mitsonobu and continued well into the Edo period (from 1603), during which lavish gilt screens became popular with the rising merchant class. The screens of Ogata Korin

(1658-1716) are of particular note. During Eitoku's own lifetime, he competed for daimyō patronage with Hasagawa Tōhaku (1539-1610), who established the Hasegawa school, which readopted and developed the *sumi-e* ink wash tradition by contrast with the 'monumental' turn of the Kanō school at that point.

In the 1850s Japan was forcibly opened to western trade in the 1850s following centuries of relative economic and cultural isolation, prompting an influx of Japanese decorative art and prints to western Europe and a craze in both France and Britain for Japanese-inspired aesthetics entitled 'Japonisme'. Through this, design traditions like those exhibited in the Kanō school screens, involving stylised arrangements of fauna and fauna with bold colours across flat planes, had a great impact on the major artistic movements of western Europe such as Impressionism and Aestheticism.

FURTHER READING:

- Mason, Penelope, *History of Japanese Art* (N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004)
- MET Dept of Asian Art, 'The Kano School of Painting', *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2003): https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/kano/hd_kano.htm
- Shimizu, Yoshiaki (ed.), *Japan: The Shaping of Daimyo Culture, 1185-1868* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1988)
- Watson, William (ed.), *The Great Japan Exhibition: Art of the Edo Period* (London: RA, 1981)