

Fall 2020 Arts of Asia Lecture Series
Heroes & Villains in Asian Art and Culture
Sponsored by the *Society for Asian Art*

**The “Women’s Hand” in *The Tale of Genji*:
Illuminated Manuscripts through the Ages**

John Carpenter, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
October 30, 2020

This lecture celebrates the spectacular artistic tradition inspired by *The Tale of Genji*, a monument of world literature, and traces the evolution and reception of its texts and imagery over the course of ten centuries. Authored by the noblewoman Murasaki Shikibu it tells the story of its “hero” Genji, referred to as “the radiant one” (Hikaru Genji), an emperor’s son demoted to commoner status, who pursues numerous romantic liaisons, experiences great personal loss, and undergoes a period of exile, before eventually triumphing politically. It is a work of insightful political and social commentary, as well as tremendous spiritual depth, told against a backdrop of dazzling courtly splendor, through vivid descriptions of courtly society and religious life, gardens, and architecture of the mid-Heian imperial court (794–1185).

Narrated in a way that immerses readers inside the minds of characters as they act out amid a fully realized fictional world, *Genji* has long been recognized as the world’s first novel. Though Genji is the “hero” of tale, we must remember that his character was created by a woman writer, and female characters within the tale take on special prominence. Furthermore, throughout the centuries, countless women readers, artists, calligraphers, and commentators played a crucial role in ensuring the tale’s transmission to the present day. Beginning soon after it was written in the early eleventh century, *The Tale of Genji* inspired every possible art form. The only comparable literary work that inspired a common visual language and iconography for knowledgeable readers is the Bible. This thousand-year tradition of artistic engagement with the tale not only reflects historical understandings of the work but also actively shaped readers’ interpretations.

Useful Terms to Know:

kanji 漢字, Chinese characters

kana 仮名, Japanese phonetic writing

onna-de 女手, literally, the “women’s hand,” referring to *kana*

otoko-de 男手, literally, the “men’s hand,” referring to *kanji*

chirashi-gaki 散らし書き, “scattered writing”

Online Resources:

The Tale of Genji: A Japanese Classic Illuminated, by Carpenter, John T., and Melissa McCormick with Monika Bincsik and Kyoko Kinoshita, preface by Sano Midori (2019).

Read online, or download a PDF copy for free at:

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications> (search for works on *The Tale of Genji*, or on Met publications on Japanese art in general)

For the special exhibition website, with over 150 illustrations and related label texts, see:
<https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2019/tale-of-genji>

Central Characters of *The Tale of Genji*, by Murasaki Shikibu:

(in 54 chapters, completed by 1019)

Genji: the tale's protagonist, son of the **Kiritsubo Emperor**.

Kokiden Lady: consort of the **Kiritsubo Emperor** and Genji's main political rival.

Fujitsubo: consort of the **Kiritsubo Emperor**, mother of **Emperor Reizei**, born of an affair with Genji.

Aoi: Genji's official wife, dies after giving birth to Genji's son **Yūgiri**.

Yūgao: former lover of Genji's rival **Tō no Chūjō**; dies while spending the night with Genji.

Lady Rokujō: Genji's older lover, whose jealous spirit appears to kill **Yūgao** and **Aoi**; mother of **Akikonomu (Umetsubo Empress)**.

Suetsumahana (Safflower Princess): famous for her red nose and poetic incompetence.

Lady Murasaki: Genji's lifelong companion, raised by Genji to be his ideal wife.

Akashi Lady: woman whom Genji meets while in exile; mother of future **Akashi Empress**.

Characters of the Next Generation:

Kashiwagi: son of **Tō no Chūjō**, secretly fathers **Kaoru** with Genji's wife the **Third Princess**.

***Kaoru:** son of **Kashiwagi**, raised as Genji's son, famous for his scent.

***Prince Niou:** Genji's grandson, son of the **Akashi Empress**, known for his perfumed aroma.

The Uji Princesses: two sisters raised in Uji, pursued by **Kaoru** and **Prince Niou**.

***Ukifune:** half-sister of the **Uji Princesses**, entangled in a love triangle with **Kaoru** and **Prince Niou**.