

### Writers of the Heian Era: Painting, Tale of Genji Scroll 1



See: **Writers of the Heian Era**

The greatest work produced during the Heian era was *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu, lady-in-waiting to Empress Akiko. Considered the world's first novel, *Genji* is written as an absorbing portrait of Heian court life, the splendor of its rituals, and aesthetic culture. *The Tale of Genji* has been, through the centuries, the subject of visual illustration and dramatization, from paintings to modern full-length films, cartoons, and anim .

The picture here is from the 12th-century *Tale of Genji Painting Scroll* (*Genji monogatari emaki*), which was created over a century after Murasaki Shikibu's literary work, but is one of the oldest surviving illustrations of it. Only four of the original ten scrolls have come down to us (20 paintings and some 70 fragments of calligraphic text) and the paintings are severely damaged, with layers of paint peeling off, faded, or completely gone in places. Nevertheless, they remain an invaluable historical source today on how readers then visualized the novel, which particular scenes they thought should be illustrated and which passages excerpted. The pictures also constitute visual evidence of court costumes, interior furnishings, and court manners, as well as the way in which faces are depicted in a stylized fashion.

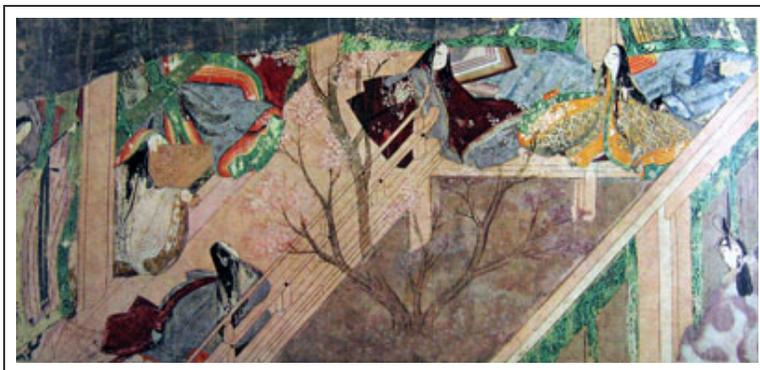
For our purposes, it is sufficient to notice such aspects as the women's elaborate silk robes, which could be from six to twelve layers in all, depending on the weather and the formality of the occasion. An indication of a lady's cultivation and taste, the set of robes,—each layer shorter than the last at the hem and sleeves—aimed to create a distinctive color harmony and aesthetic effect appropriate to the season and occasion, and is also an index to the wearer's creativity. Note the openness of Heian-period architecture: latticed windows and wall panels could be taken away, leaving only bamboo blinds to screen the interior.

In this painting from the Bamboo River (*Takekawa*) chapter scroll, we see a courtier, the lieutenant Kur do no Sh sh  (in the lower

right corner), stealing a glimpse, from a facing gallery, of Tamakazura's two daughters seated half-hidden behind green blinds and a band of mist (now darkened) as they play go by the veranda in the company of their waiting women. The rich costumes of the women, in predominant red, yellow, and green hues, along with the pinkish white blossoms of the cherry tree in the middle of the picture, evoke the splendid beauty of a day in springtime. By the time Murasaki Shikibu wrote *Genji*, the cherry blossoms already had an important place in the poetic and cultural language of Japan, as did many other flowers, trees, birds and other natural phenomena, whose symbolic values would only deepen with their reiteration in the cultural products of subsequent centuries.

Source: "Bamboo River II," *Tale of Genji Painting Scroll*. Tokugawa Museum, Japan, ca. 1120-1140 CE. In Ivan Morris, *The Tale of Genji Scroll*. Introduction by Yoshinobu Tokugawa. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1971.

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