

# The Canons of Courtly Taste

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During Japan's classical age, a small civilian aristocracy produced a body of literature that would inspire later generations. Moreover, many of these aristocrats actively participated in the visual and performing arts and patronized the calligraphers, painters, sculptors, and many others with specialized skills needed to construct and decorate the buildings that served as the stage upon which the nobility conducted their lives, private and public, secular and religious. These works of art are also seminal elements in Japan's artistic heritage. In modern times, the most notable literary classics have been translated into many languages, and some are now counted among the masterpieces of world literature. The visual art also has found an international audience, and examples can be viewed in major Western museums. These works, both the literary and the visual, can be characterized as courtly because they were associated with an elite society, centered on Japan's imperial court, that prized elegance. Looking at the products of this courtly taste, one is apt to be struck at first glance by their apparent uniformity and the continuities that persisted over many centuries, in some cases down to the present day. Closer examination, however, reveals both diversity and change over time.

This essay covers the roughly five hundred years that constitute the Nara and Heian periods, with some attention to the following Kamakura period. During these centuries, Japan's culture went through many changes. The literature of the Nara period incorporated elements from earlier times that, by the refined standards of the Heian court, seemed primitive. By the Kamakura, elements of medieval Japan's warrior culture were blended into the aristocratic arts.

The Nara period began with a burst of enthusiasm for the cultures of continental Asia. Chinese culture may have dominated, but Buddhism, an Indian

religion, and Central Asian elements such as music and dance had already been absorbed by the cosmopolitan Chinese of the Tang dynasty (618–907). Koreans, who helped convey this culture to Japan, added elements of their own to the blend. Borrowing high culture from the Asian continent predates the Nara period by at least a century, as Hōryūji, the great Buddhist temple about ten kilometers from Nara, reveals. The temple, first constructed in 607 on Chinese models, burnt in 670 and was soon rebuilt. Objects from the original compound survive and the reconstructions are among the oldest wooden buildings in the world. Today, the most familiar monument in Nara, the Great Buddha of Tōdaiji temple, may be a later reconstruction; but nearby stands the Shōsōin, a storehouse built in 756 to preserve the personal treasures of Emperor Shōmu, who had sponsored the temple's construction. The objects in the Shōsōin come from many lands, including even Roman-style glass from the eastern Mediterranean, but most are distinctly Chinese and vividly convey a sense of the elegant, cosmopolitan tastes of the Nara aristocracy.

At first, written literature, too, was Chinese in appearance. Japan's earliest works that might be classified as literature were two histories, *Kojiki* (*A Record of Ancient Matters*) and *Nihon shoki* (or *Nihongi*; *Chronicles of Japan*), compiled in 712 and 720 respectively, both written exclusively in Chinese characters. Like most of the world's peoples, the Japanese adopted the writing system of a nearby culture. Since Chinese script does not easily lend itself to writing other languages, the Japanese often wrote in Chinese. This choice also reflects the great prestige attached to the Chinese language as a mark of civilization in East Asia. Although these two early works may have used Chinese script, certainly parts of both, and perhaps all of the first, were meant to be read in Japanese. Both begin with stories of Japan's creation by its native deities and the establishment of its imperial line by one of their descendants. Although these may appear to be ancient myths and were even taught as history in pre-World War II Japan, modern scholars assume they were specifically designed to legitimate the imperial family, which had sponsored their writing, and to establish the status of other aristocratic families, whose ancestors appear as lesser deities. *Nihon shoki* goes on to recount Japan's history down to 697 and appears to offer a reasonably accurate version of events from later centuries. In form, it is modeled closely on the "basic annals" sections of China's dynastic histories, which offer chronological accounts of events.

The system the Japanese used when writing their own language in Chinese characters was clumsy, but it allowed the Japanese to compile their first unambiguously literary work, *Man'yōshū* (*Myriad Leaves* [or possibly *Generations*] *Anthology*), a collection of approximately 4,500 poems compiled around 760. Although most of the poems (roughly 4,200) were in the *waka* form, consisting of only thirty-one syllables in five "lines" (or, more accurately, "phrases"), some

of *Man'yōshū*'s most admired poems are *chōka*, which could have as many as 149 "lines." After *Man'yōshū*, long poems became rare in Japanese literature until modern times. The content of *Man'yōshū*'s poetry, too, seems remarkably diverse, at least compared to that in the canonical anthologies of later times. Some *Man'yōshū* poems appear to be ancient songs in simple language that someone chose to write down. Others were written by commoners; for example:

*To frontier guard duty,  
at the dawn I set off,  
but as I left the gate,  
she would not let go my hand:  
my beloved in tears.*

In some respects, this poem anticipates later courtly literary taste, for love—particularly unhappy, tearful love—would remain a central concern of classical literature. On the other hand, in later times, the more courtly literary genres avoided even mild suggestions of physical love, such as holding hands, and major anthologies did not preserve poetry by such commoners as mere guardsmen. Even poems by members of the elite showed distinctive features. One poem ponders the fate of a corpse spotted on a lonely seashore. Although life's uncertainties would remain a persistent theme in Japanese literature, corpses were avoided as the subject of poetry.

At one time, nationalists admired *Man'yōshū* for preserving a pure Japanese spirit unsullied by foreign influences, but in fact Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist ideas are conspicuous in some of the poetry. If *Man'yōshū* may not be as "pure" as Japanese enthusiasts once believed, it does reveal distinctive Japanese tastes. For example, love was, at best, a secondary theme in Chinese literature. Furthermore, *Man'yōshū* included notable compositions by women, and women would remain important participants in literary life at court. They were far less conspicuous in the literature of traditional China. Another pattern begun by *Man'yōshū* was that anthologies would come to define key periods and styles in the history of court poetry. *Man'yōshū* is a remarkable collection of poetry. It includes some of the most cherished Japanese poems; here is but one:

*The world of ours,  
to what might it be compared?  
Like the dawn departing  
of a boat, rowed away,  
without a trace.*

This poem by the monk Mansei uses natural imagery to convey the idea that our world is one of impermanence, a key teaching of Buddhism that would



Figure 14.1. Byōdōin, a Buddhist monastery not far from Kyoto, built in 1052 as a retreat for a high-ranking courtier. Consisting of buildings connected by corridors and facing a garden with a pond, its layout hints at that of Heian aristocratic mansions such as those depicted in a version of *The Tale of Genji*. (Photograph by Robert Borgen.)

become central to classical Japanese literature. In some ways *Man'yōshū* may be idiosyncratic, but in others it set significant patterns for later court taste.

If the Nara period tends to be seen, not quite accurately, as an age that valued foreign culture, the conventional view is that, in the Heian period, aristocrats assimilated continental elements to produce a distinctively Japanese culture. Again, the situation is more complicated. The start of the Heian period was followed by a few decades in which esteem for things Chinese, notably its literature, reached a peak. Between 814 and 827, Japan's emperors sponsored the compilation of the three anthologies of literature, written in classical Chinese, by Japanese authors. Although these anthologies are no longer widely read, they set an important precedent for imperial sponsorship of literary activity. Particularly after imperial sponsorship turned to poetry in Japanese at the start of the tenth century, enthusiasm for literature in Chinese waned, but Japanese court men (not women) continued to compose official documents and other works in Chinese, and educated women, too, were familiar with at least some of the Chinese classics.

Literary composition in Chinese declined, in part because the Japanese developed a convenient phonetic script for writing their own language based on

simplified forms of Chinese characters. Very little writing in Japanese survives from the years between the compilation of *Man'yōshū* and the middle decades of the ninth century when a generation of noteworthy poets established a style that would come to be associated with *Kokinshū* (*Anthology of Poems, Ancient and Modern*), the first imperially sponsored collection of poetry in Japanese, compiled around 905. By this time, the short *waka* form was predominant, and poems tended to focus on certain elegant themes, notably the beauties of nature and the unhappiness of love. Poems often seem to present an aesthetically logical argument, as in the following example:

*In this world of ours,  
if cherry blossoms absolutely  
did not exist,  
our feelings in the springtime  
would be tranquil.*

Japanese admired their cherry blossoms, at least in part because they bloom spectacularly but for only a short time and then scatter—another sad metaphor, like the disappearing boat in Mansei's poem, for the uncertainties of our world. Here, the poet is arguing that if only we did not have the blossoms, we would not be reminded of our unhappy fate. This poem is by Ariwara Narihira (825–880), one of the pioneers of this new style of poetry and also the hero of *Tales of Ise* (*Ise monogatari*) a collection of anecdotes, largely centered on his poems—and his love affairs—that was compiled later in the Heian period. *Tales of Ise* was long admired particularly as a guide to poetic practice, and it is still counted among the masterpieces of Heian literature.

*Kokinshū* offers insights into Heian courtly taste. Unlike the haiku of a much later time, *waka* in the *Kokinshū* manner have not found a wide audience outside Japan. This may in part be due to their verbal complexity. The best haiku display great subtlety but are apt to be linguistically uncomplicated and hence relatively easy to appreciate, even in translation. Composers of *waka*, particularly in the *Kokinshū* style, delighted in complex wordplay. For example, words with double meanings—puns for serious rather than comic effect—allowed poets to squeeze an extraordinary amount of meaning into a mere thirty-one syllables. Such effects are apt to be lost, not only in translation but even in the original to readers unfamiliar with the art.

This was poetry for an educated elite. Heian aristocrats may not all have been great poets, but most, both men and women, were capable of producing a competent poem when needed, since exchanges of poetry were a standard form of social interaction, notably courtship. Inept poets risked ridicule or, in the case of courtship, rejection. The best poets aspired to have their work in-

cluded in one of the imperially sponsored anthologies, of which twenty-one were compiled, the last in 1439. They may be said to define an age in which courtly tastes, as displayed in elegant *waka* poetry, held a preeminent place in the culture of Japan's literate elite.

In the Heian period, this was a civilian aristocracy, but at least some warriors, too, acquired a taste for poetry and the values associated with it. A famous episode from *The Tale of the Heike* (*Heike monogatari*), the story of the wars that led to the establishment of the Kamakura Shogunate, tells of a warrior who, after first fleeing the capital, sneaks back to deliver a scroll of his best poems, hoping one will be included in the next imperial anthology once peace is restored. The compiler does select one for the anthology, although the name of the warrior, who has died in battle, cannot be used as he has been declared an enemy of the court. The story underscores the importance of poetic reputation, even to a warrior.

In Western literature, poetry and prose are typically distinct genres. In Japanese court literature, the two are difficult to keep apart. Perhaps to clarify ambiguities that result from their brevity, *waka* sometimes appeared in anthologies with short prose passages explaining their context. Today, *Tales of Ise* is classified as prose, but some of its episodes consist of little more than such introductory notes followed by poems. In fact, poems were a conspicuous element in most literary prose, which, like the poetry, was apt to focus on love. But, in contrast to the concision of the poems, works of prose could be quite long. The most important work of Heian fiction, *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*), is about eleven hundred pages in English translation. Men and women wrote both prose and poetry, but major poets were apt to be men. The greatest prose authors, however, were all women. Poems tell us much about courtly ideas and aesthetics. To that, prose works add extraordinarily detailed accounts of aristocratic life, or at least certain aspects of it. We learn many details regarding courtship and marriage, for example, but little about household kitchens and budgets. Love was a literary topic; food and finance were not.

Classical prose can be divided into different genres, though the distinctions were blurred, as were those between prose and poetry. The boundary between fiction and nonfiction was not always clear, either, as the following examples, each from a key genre, will reveal. "Diaries" were an important part of classical Japanese literature, "diaries" being in quotation marks because the literary ones do not meet the modern definition of that word. The only one that, in form, is a daily record of events, *A Tosa Journal* (*Tosa nikki*), was obviously fictionalized for artistic effect. A more interesting diary is *Kagerō nikki* (in English translations, *The Gossamer Years* or *Kagerō Diary*), by an aristocratic woman from the Fujiwara family whose given name is unknown, as are the given names of all the major women writers of the day. She begins by explaining that the numerous old tales

she has read are fantasy, so she wants to offer a more realistic picture of the life of a woman married to an important nobleman. Her husband would become the most powerful man at court. As was the custom, he had many “wives,” a term that is problematic when applied to Heian marriage practices. A man would have one principal, formally recognized wife, and ties, some long-standing and openly acknowledged, with other women whose relationship with him seems to have been only loosely defined.

The diarist was one of these secondary wives. Around 971, as relations with her “husband” were deteriorating, she started a memoir, beginning with their courtship seventeen years earlier. Courtship, as recounted in the memoir, consisted largely of exchanging poems. Poetry is found throughout the text, which contains 119 *waka* and two long poems. Aside from the long poems, this pattern is typical of Heian “prose.” As the author writes, she completes her memoir and her text becomes more diary-like, describing recent events. It can be read as an indictment of Heian marriage practices, in which secondary wives remained in their own residences and waited for their husbands to come visit. The author was devoted to her husband and was distraught when his visits became infrequent. By the end of her diary, the marriage has fallen apart. As she promises at the start of her text, she demonstrates that real life is not always the stuff of romantic fantasy, a conclusion unlikely to surprise modern readers. Perhaps more remarkable is the focus on her personal thoughts and feelings, not always pretty ones. She offers little in the way of plot or action. The resulting psychological realism, to use an anachronistic term, would become characteristic of much court prose.

A prime example of this is *The Tale of Genji*, surely the most admired work of classical Japanese literature, both in Japan and throughout the world. *Genji* was written at the start of the eleventh century by a woman we know as Murasaki Shikibu—her actual name, again, unknown. In the manner of the tales that had displeased the earlier diarist, it starts out by recounting the birth of its splendid hero, who comes to be known as Genji, the Shining Prince, to an emperor and one of his lesser concubines. Great things are foretold of him. Soon, however, Genji’s life gets complicated, as Murasaki, in her fictional narrative, presents complexities beyond the predictably self-centered view of a diary. Again, the focus is often on romantic attachments, but now we are shown a variety of them, for Genji is a womanizer. The women in Genji’s life are presented with recognizable, individual personalities, as are his male friends and a few of his enemies too. Although the story may center on Genji’s romantic liaisons, political intrigue often lurks in the background. The tale consists of fifty-four chapters. Chapter 42 begins by announcing that Genji has died, and afterwards two of his descendants, one actual, the other putative, become the central figures. Despite repeated assertions that Genji is all but flawless, time and again he reveals his very human failings. Most scandalously, he has an illicit

affair with one of his father the emperor's concubines, a woman who is said to resemble his own mother. She not only becomes pregnant, but her son later becomes emperor. Buddhist teachings underlie much of *Genji*, which illustrates the fundamental Buddhist idea that life is suffering. As if to demonstrate the workings of karma—in this case, the concept that people will be punished for their misdeeds—a princess whom Genji was asked to take as his wife, though he has little interest in her, ends up being seduced by the son of his best friend. She has a son that Genji realizes cannot be his own. Although the emperor has treated as his own the son Genji in fact fathered, Genji realizes that the emperor too may well have known the truth. Genji may be flawed, but he matures and learns as he—and the author who created him—grows older.

As these examples suggest, Heian courtly taste in literature tended toward the lachrymose—with one notable exception. *The Pillow Book* (*Makura no sōshi*) by a woman we know as Sei Shōnagon, a contemporary of Murasaki, consists of more than three hundred short sections. Where other women wrote of difficult human relationships, Sei described the pleasures of life at court as a lady-in-waiting to an imperial consort. Some of her sections are amusing lists of things she liked or disliked. Others are brief descriptions of incidents in the daily life of a court lady: a nocturnal visit by a lover, a pet dog and cat, a contest to guess how long a pile of snow will last. Literary works such as these, mostly written by women—some fiction, some nonfiction, and others somewhere in between—leave modern readers with a remarkably vivid sense of Heian aristocratic life. Nonliterary sources, mostly written by men in Chinese, fill in further details, and actual objects extant from the period reveal the exact appearances of many things. Surviving artifacts include examples of calligraphy on beautifully colored paper, elegantly lacquered household items such as small boxes or low tables, elaborately decorated swords, Buddhist ritual objects, and scroll paintings.

The scrolls came in two forms. Some were hung on walls in the manner of Western paintings. Surviving examples are all religious. Others could be over thirty feet long and were meant to be slowly unrolled and viewed horizontally one scene at a time. Typically they tell a story, combining text and illustration. The earliest extant examples, several fragments of a Buddhist work, have the text on the bottom with pictures illustrating it above. These works, dating from Nara period, appear to be copies of Chinese originals. In the Heian period, scroll paintings evolved into distinctly Japanese styles. References in literary works reveal that they were already popular in the tenth century, but the earliest extant examples are from the twelfth. Many continued the tradition of illustrating Buddhist stories, but now some told of Japanese holy men, portrayed in distinctly Japanese style.

Perhaps the most famous of these Late Heian scrolls is an illustrated version of *Genji*. Unfortunately, it survives only in fragments, but they are glorious fragments indeed. By this time, the Japanese had adopted the format of alternating



sections of text with sections of illustrations. The text is written in a delicate hand that seems to flow down the pasted-together sheets of paper, each in slightly different brown tones and decorated with patterns of gold and silver foil. Although Heian courtiers prized a good calligraphic hand, modern readers not acquainted with the art may have trouble appreciating it. That is less true of the pictures. They offer detailed images of aristocratic mansions, with their roofs removed so the interiors are visible. Inside one sees, for example, a nobleman coming to visit a friend who is lying in bed, ill. The picture shows various types of screens that were used to partition interior space, some adorned with landscape paintings and framed with brocade. Discretely screened off from the men are a group of ladies. All the costumes are elaborate, particularly those of the ladies. In the next scene a man tenderly holds an infant, ladies attending by his side. The pictures are touching, even if one does not realize that the bedridden man is suffering from guilt because he has fathered a child by the wife of another man, Genji. It is Genji who is looking at that infant, knowing full well that he is not the true father. Although much of the pigment has fallen away from the pictures, enough remains to show that they once were brightly colored. Whereas Heian literature was often dark in tone, the story here being a case in point, court taste in the visual arts and crafts tended toward the vibrant and colorful.<sup>1</sup>

At one time, scholars writing in English noted the great emphasis Heian courtiers placed on aesthetic values and argued that success both in courtship and in court careers might depend on one's skills as a poet. In fact, a clever poem may have helped win a woman's hand, but it was unlikely to earn one a good position in the government. The best poets held only modest official posts; the most powerful politicians were not known for their literary skills. The once common view that Heian courtiers devoted most of their attention to love of the arts and of the opposite sex resulted from selective reading of the sources; that is, from looking only at works in Japanese that have been admired through the centuries, which do give the impression that romance and poetry were all-important. Other sources leave a different impression. Court histories, of only limited interest as literature, detail unseemly struggles for political power. In the imperially sponsored anthologies of poetry, love consists mostly of longing for a person whom one almost never actually sees. Other literary sources, in both Chinese and Japanese, depict a more robust form of love, as may be seen in the following:

*Wine cups and  
Fish that cormorants eat and  
Women:  
One never tires of them.  
Let's sleep together, the two of us!*

That is an *imayō* (literally “modern style”), the lyric to a type of song that had originated among women entertainers similar to modern geisha. Despite that somewhat disreputable provenance, these songs found an audience among aristocrats. Both Murasaki Shikibu and Sei Shōnagon mention them. Surviving examples come from *Ryōjin hishō*, freely translated as *Songs to Make the Dust Dance*, a work compiled in 1179 by the retired emperor Go-Shirakawa consisting of song lyrics and essays on the form. Despite their plebeian origins and unrefined language, these songs appealed to the same people who admired the more elevated poetry of *Kokinshū*. Go-Shirakawa demonstrates this. In addition to compiling *Ryōjin hishō*, he also sponsored an important anthology of *waka* even as he collected these popular songs. Despite this imperial patronage, *imayō* did not share the prestige of *waka*, and *Ryōjin hishō* disappeared from view in the fourteenth century. The few fragments rediscovered in 1911 provide an important counterbalance to the imperial anthologies of *waka* by presenting a glimpse into the lyrics of common people and the less refined side of court taste.

Today, Go-Shirakawa is remembered less for his artistic interests than his involvement in the civil wars that led to the establishment of Japan's first warrior government in 1185. The political power of the aristocratic court may have been diminished, but the prestige of its culture remained high. Emperors continued to sponsor anthologies of poetry. One of the most important imperial anthologies, *Shin Kokinshū* (*New Anthology of Poems, Ancient and Modern*), dates from the early decades of the thirteenth century. The title of the collection and the poems it contains show a blend of continuity and innovation, as well as a consciousness of a classical past upon which the poets deliberately drew. Styles evolved, but poets continued to compose *waka* that are still admired. Court ladies maintained the tradition of literary diaries describing their private lives. They also continued to enjoy narrative tales that described affairs at court and beyond. Artists produced picture scrolls illustrating episodes from court life and literature. In other words, the end of the Heian period was not the end of courtly tastes associated with the age. As in the political realm, the ancient culture survived for centuries in parallel with new cultural elements more closely associated with the new warrior society.

### Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading

*See the bibliography for complete publication data.*

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### Note

1. Many examples of Heian art can be found online by searching for images. Searching for “Tale of Genji Scroll,” “Heian period art,” or “Heian period clothing,” for example, you will find many authentic Heian works of art or, in the case of clothing, accurate modern recreations. Unfortunately searches will also yield items that uninformed bloggers or mistaken links will identify as examples of Heian art. Be sure to check the actual website to determine the reliability of sources.