
NATIONAL TREASURE
THE TALE OF GENJI
ILLUSTRATED HANDSCROLLS

SPECIAL UNVEILING OF
ALL FIFTEEN NEWLY RESTORED VOLUMES

Foreword

The National Treasure "The Tale of Genji Illustrated Handscrolls" in the Tokugawa Art Museum collection is the oldest surviving illustrated version of the early eleventh-century narrative *The Tale of Genji* and is famous worldwide as one of the great masterpieces embodying the classical culture of the Heian period.

The work was originally created in handscroll format but was separated and mounted in frames in 1932 in the interest of preserving the work and allowing for easier viewing by the public. Although this was the best decision for the work at the time, the framed format resulted in some adverse effects on the work. A recent conservation project spanning five years has now restored the work to its original handscroll format, which allows the text and images to respond directly to each other as first intended.

In commemoration of the completion of the restoration of all fifteen scrolls in 2020, the entire set will be unveiled in a special two-part rotating exhibit.

Section 1

The Tale of Genji Illustrated Handscrolls in the Edo period

The set of picture scrolls known as the National Treasure *The Tale of Genji Illustrated Handscrolls* is regarded to have been produced about 900 years ago, in the first half of the 12th century, during Japan's Heian period. Initially, the complete work must have consisted of illustrations of all 54 chapters

of the classical narrative, but today the majority are believed to have been lost. Surviving sections represent portions from a total of 20 chapters, including the 13 chapters consisting of (a) 10 chapters (16 sections of text and 15 pictures) in the Tokugawa Art Museum collection (Tokugawa version) and (b) 3 chapters (4 sections of text and 4 pictures) in the Gotoh Museum collection (Gotoh version), along with a handful of additional fragments passed down in various other families.

Much of the history of the provenance of the scrolls is shrouded in mystery, but it is known that in the late Edo period three illustrated handscrolls came into the possession of the Owari Tokugawa family (Tokugawa version) and one came to the Hachisuka family of Awa. Of the three scrolls in the Tokugawa version, the first was stored in the Ninomaru Palace at Nagoya Castle, while the latter two were stored at the daimyo's main Edo residence in Ichigaya. Because they were stored separately, it was not until the Meiji era (1868-1912) that they were discovered to be parts of the same work.

Section 2

The Early Modern to Modern Eras: Remounting and Copying

In 1881, a survey conducted by the Museums Bureau of the Ministry of Education revealed that the three illustrated scrolls of *The Tale of Genji* that had been passed down in the Owari Tokugawa family were all parts of the same work. From that point onward, the scrolls came to be known as one of the greatest treasures of the Heian period and were exhibited more frequently.

At the same time, Tokugawa Yoshichika (1886-1976), the 19th Lord of Owari, was concerned that the repeated rolling and unrolling of the scrolls was causing increasing damage and he sought a way to protect them. After much deliberation, he decided to have the scrolls preserved by separating the sections of paper where they were joined and mounting the sections of text and pictures separately on stiff, flat backing. These sections were enclosed in frames and copies of the scrolls were made to be used in place of the originals for everyday viewing and study.

Since the early modern era, several replicas have been

produced, including, in recent years, a reconstruction of the original based on scientific research as well as a precise copy of the work in its current state created by students at the Tokyo University of the Arts.

Section 3

The Tale of Genji Illustrated Handscrolls Post-Restoration and Remounting

Although the decision to frame the *Tale of Genji* picture scrolls was the best choice for the work at the time, the negative effects of framing gradually became more noticeable. Consequently, in the interest of preserving the scrolls for the future, it was decided to return them to the handscroll format. The project was conducted in two phases over the period from 2012 to the spring of 2020.

With the restoration of all of the text and picture sections and the conversion to handscroll format, all folds and wrinkles in the primary support have been eliminated and the paper has been smoothed and stabilized, allowing the scrolls to be rolled and unrolled without causing any damage. In addition, since the text and picture sections that were previously framed independently have now been joined together forming a continuous whole, the elegant flow of calligraphed characters and the subtle changes in color of the ornamentation in the paper are more clearly recognizable. Through this project, the effect of calligraphy and paintings resonating with each other that is inherent to the handscroll format, has been revived.

