Dissemination of the Genji Tale

The Tale of Genji attracted many readers, irrespective of gender, through the beauty of the text and its thorough depictions of every aspect of classical court life, its skillful psychological portrayals of the characters, and its diverse world view based on Japanese and Chinese literature, various arts, and Buddhism. Not only did it have a significant impact on later literary works, but its influence can also be seen in Japanese performing arts, such as Noh theater, and cultural arts, such as incense ceremony (kōdō), and tea ceremony (sado), as well as the arts and crafts that accompany them.

At the same time, as a narrative that features numerous distinctive female characters, Genji became a model book of proper behavior and lifestyle for women and themes from the story were also adopted into designs for wedding and dowry furnishings.

In the late Edo period, when The Tale of Genji had reached an even wider public, a parody entitled The False Murasaki’s Rustic Genji (“Nise Murasaki Inaka Genji”) by Ryūtei Tanehiko (1783–1842) gained great popularity and was even taken up as a subject in Ukiyo-e woodblock prints. Such secondary works of fiction based on the tale still flourish even today, and there continue to be many opportunities to experience the world of Murasaki’s tale without reading the original. The Tale of Genji has coursed through the veins of Japanese culture for more than a millennium and is a rare classic of classics surviving to the present day.

Avasegai, Shells for Kai-awase shell-matching game. Part of 375 pairs. [The Tokugawa Art Museum] <Exhibit No.29>

Princess Chiyō (1637–1698), the eldest daughter of the 3rd Tokugawa shogun Iemitsu, received this bridal tsumugi in 1639, when she married Mitsutomo, the 2nd lord of the Owari clan. The motif on the matching ensemble comes from a poem in “The First Warbler,” chapter 23 of The Tale of Genji, which reads: “The old one’s gaze rests long on the seedling pine, waiting to hear the song of the first warbler, in a village, which reads: “The old one’s gaze rests long on the seedling pine, waiting to hear the song of the first warbler, in a village, where it does not sing.” The poetic design is elegantly embedded in the lacquered furnishings with scattered letters and pictorial motifs. Designated a National Treasure, the Hatsune Trousseau represents the finest example of the decorative lacquer technique of maki-e (sprinkled metal decoration) in Japan as well as the power of the Tokugawa shogunate.

Symbols of each chapters of The Tale of Genji from the Genji-kō Incense Game

“Genji-kō” is a name of the kumikō incense game which is tasting different fragrances and guessing the name, developed in Edo period. Participants would taste 5 different fragrances and draw a horizontal line to connect the same fragrance. Thus drawn, figures appear in 52 different shapes, matching the number of chapters of The Tale of Genji except the first and the last ones, and they are called “Genji-kō” design. The “Genji-kō” design often appears in various traditional craft works as well as design of Japanese confectionery associated with the story of The Tale of Genji.

National Treasure
The Hatsune (First Warbler) Trousseau

“The Tale of Genji,” written by Murasaki Shikibu, is a masterpiece of classical literature that has been read and retold for over a thousand years. While there are many old tales written by unknown authors, this work is noteworthy even for the simple fact its author is clearly known. The tale has been continuously read mostly among upper class readers ever since its first appearance. During the Edo period, however, due to the spread of publishing culture, it acquired a broader readership even beyond just the upper classes, bringing about a wave of interest that could even be called a “Tale of Genji boom.” Many commentaries and summary digest versions have also been published and illustrated version in a variety of formats, including folding screens, handscrolls and printed booklets were produced. The tale also had a great influence on various traditional cultural practices such as tea ceremony, Noh theater and kōdō (the art of appreciating incense).

This exhibition will include the special featured loan of the National Treasure Diary of Murasaki Shikibu Illustrated Handscroll from the collection of the Gotōh Museum, Tokyo, and masterpieces of Genji Paintings from the collection of the Museum of the Imperial Collections, Sannomaru Shōzōkan as well as from private collections. This exhibition will thus throw light on the charm of Japan’s world-famous Tale of Genji by tracing the course of the cultural history pertaining to the tale.
Murasaki Shikibu and The Diary of Murasaki Shikibu Illustrated Handscroll

Murasaki Shikibu (ca. 973–1014), the author of the courtly narrative The Tale of Genji, served as lady-in-waiting to Fujiwara no Shōshi, the empress consort of Emperor Ichijō (980–1011). Shōshi was also the daughter of Fujiwara no Michinaga (966–1027), one of the most powerful aristocrats of the time. The Diary of Murasaki Shikibu is a memoir of Murasaki’s days in service at the imperial court. It vividly depicts details such as the happy events surrounding the birth of Shōshi’s son with a keenly observant eye. Indeed, without this diary, it is possible that we might never have known that Murasaki Shikibu was the author of The Tale of Genji. In her diary, Murasaki references the tale by the same name by which we know it. It is invaluable that Murasaki Shikibu was the author of The Tale of Genji. In her diary, Murasaki references the tale by the same name by which we know it.

The Diary of Murasaki Shikibu Illustrated Handscroll (designated National Treasure) is a pictorial work based on Murasaki’s diary that is thought to have been created in the first half of the 13th century. It is an important piece demonstrating that the golden age of classical court culture centered on Fujiwara no Michinaga and Shōshi had already become the object of much admiration by that time. It is invaluable that both The Tale of Genji and The Diary of Murasaki Shikibu have survived to the present day, and they have had a significant impact on deepening our understanding of classical court culture among later generations.

Reading and Re-envisioning The Tale of Genji: Research and Manuscript Copies

Although The Tale of Genji was quite long, it was highly acclaimed and became popular from the time of its writing, so many copies of the book were made. However, over the course of repeated transcriptions, certain parts became so far altered from the original that they no longer made sense. Scholar poets Fujiwara no Sadale (1162–1241) and father and son Minamoto no Mitsuyuki and Chikayuki edited and revised these confusing sections of the text in the early Kamakura period (1185–1333). Numerous commentaries were produced, and the tale came to be regarded as an essential reference for composing waka poetry in the Kamakura period, elevating the authority of The Tale of Genji as a classic.

Initially limited to the upper classes, readership quickly spread thanks to advances in printing technology in the Edo period (17th century), spurred by Yamamoto Shunshō’s E-iri Genji Monogatari (“The Tale of Genji with Pictures,” 1650). Excellent commentaries, such as the Kogetsushō (1673) by Kitamura Kigin and Genji Monogatari Tama no Ogushi (1796) by Motoori Norinaga, were also produced during this period.

The research of our predecessors that has been handed down to us continues to have significant influence on our modern reading of The Tale of Genji.

Pictorialization of The Tale of Genji and the Blossoming of Genji Painting in the Edo Period

One section of The Tale of Genji (the “E-awase/Picture Contest” chapter) details a competition debating the relative merits of illustrated versions of stories such as The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter (“Taketori Monogatari”) and The Tale of the Hollow Tree (“Utsuho Monogatari”). Similarly, it is believed that Genji itself was also illustrated soon after the story was written. The Tale of Genji Illustrated Handscroll (designated National Treasure) is the oldest example of the many Genji paintings that survive today. Already in the Muromachi period (14th–16th century), the scenes that were selected for illustration had become standardized to a certain extent, with a preference for celebratory scenes with rich seasonal associations, but as new interpretations of the story multiplied, the selection of scenes and their expression also diversified.

During the Edo period (1603–1868) especially, the number of paintings taking the Tale of Genji as their subject increased dramatically. The Tosa school specialized in Genji pictures, but many other schools, such as the esteemed Kanō school, also took up the subject, and the tale was pictorialized in a wide variety of formats, including illustrated scrolls, folding screen paintings, picture books, shikishi square papers, fan-shaped paintings, and woodblock-printed books, creating a diverse and colorful world of Genji pictures.