Dog chasing (inumono), approx. 1640, Japan. Early Edo period (1615–1868). Pair of six-panel screens; ink, colors, and gold on paper. The Avery Brundage Collection, B60D1 and B60D2.
What activity is taking place here?
Dog chasing was one of three archery drills popular during the Edo period (1615–1868). Originally an exercise to improve martial skills, it became a formal sport with defined rules as early as the fourteenth century.

The right-hand screen represents an early stage of the game. Around a circle formed by a heavy rope laid on the ground, archers wait for a dog to be released. The archers wear a special costume, which includes a hat, sword, and fur chaps. Two additional groups of seventeen archers each are lined up along the fence on either side of the field.

The rules of the game stipulate that when the dog passes over the rope it may be shot with heavily padded arrows, only in the torso, with hits on the head or limbs counting as errors with penalty points. If the dog escapes without being hit, the archers may pursue it into the outer field, as shown in the left-hand screen. The archer’s skill and accuracy was judged according to the accuracy of his hits (each had three arrows) and the length of the ensuing chase.

What is the relationship of this activity to samurai life? Who are the people watching the spectacle?
By its very nature, dog chasing required great equestrian and archery skills, making it the domain of the samurai class. First mentioned in a historical account dating to the early thirteenth century, dog chasing gained importance in the Kamakura period (1185–1333) as a means of honing the skills of the newly dominant warrior class. It remained popular throughout the Muromachi period (1333–1568), but in the late sixteenth century, fewer dog chases were held as samurai became occupied with civil wars instead of martial sports.

When peace returned and the Edo shogunate restored traditional festivals, the Shimazu clan of Satsuma Province organized a dog chasing event in 1646. The popularity of the game quickly revived, and it soon began to attract crowds of townspeople who regarded it as lively entertainment. In addition to samurai, the viewers’ stands in these screens are filled with spectators from all walks of life—housewives, children, monks, Shinto priests, nuns, and doctors.

Who would have owned a screen like this?
Given the subject matter and expense of this elaborate pair of gold-ground screens, the owner was likely to have been a wealthy samurai, perhaps a particular fan of the dog chasing event. By the seventeenth century when this screen was made, ritualized displays of martial prowess like dog chasing had come to replace real military experience for many samurai.