

LOOKING AT JAPANESE FOLDING SCREENS

FORMATS AND MATERIALS



SIX-PANEL FOLDING SCREEN*

The earliest surviving Japanese folding screens, from the 700s, are single screens with six panels. This format is still used by artists today.

*Sometimes single screens are actually only one of a pair for which the other screen is missing. You can often tell from the composition whether a work was made as a single screen or as part of a pair (see the "Design" section of this panel).



PAIR OF SIX-PANEL FOLDING SCREENS

Screens began to be made in pairs around the 1300s. Often a single unified composition would span the two screens. Though most six-panel screens are about 5½ feet tall, there are also smaller varieties.



TWO-PANEL FOLDING SCREEN

Two-panel screens are a convenient size for corners and entranceways. One type of low two-panel screen borders two sides of the hearth in a tearoom.



FOUR-PANEL FOLDING SCREEN

This type of screen, less common than its six-panel counterpart, provides the artist with a more compact painting surface. It was also used for rituals associated with death. (The Japanese words for *death* and *four* sound alike.)



EIGHT-PANEL FOLDING SCREEN

The eight-panel screen is an extravagant format providing the artist with a large surface for paintings on a grand scale. Very rarely, screens are found in ten- and twelve-panel formats.



INK

Ink (*sumi*) is found in almost all Japanese painting, alone or in combination with colored pigments and/or gold or silver leaf. It is made from carbon soot mixed with animal glue and formed into cakes. Before use, the cake is ground with water on an inkstone to form a thick, dark liquid. Though most ink is black, it also comes in dark-colored tones.



COLORS

Colors on traditional Japanese paintings come from ground mineral pigments, such as azurite (blue), malachite (green), and cinnabar (red), or from powdered dyestuffs. The pigment powders are mixed with animal-based glues before painting. Lighter colors can be produced with finer grinds.



GOLD AND SILVER

Gold and silver are used in two forms: foil and paint. Gold and silver foil (or "leaf") comes in squares that can be pasted over large areas. Foil can also be cut or torn into smaller shapes and applied decoratively to specific areas. Metallic paints are made by grinding foils into animal-based glue. These are applied with a brush and have a less lustrous effect than foil.



PAPER

Hand made from vegetable fibers, Japanese and Chinese papers are the most common supports for screen paintings. Typically each screen panel comprises several large sheets placed in tiers, each sheet extending the full width of the panel. In addition, multiple layers of lining paper serve to reinforce the painted surface of the paper or silk.



SILK

Woven silk was a standard support for early screen paintings. After paintings on paper became more common, silk came to be reserved for luxurious commissions or particular artistic effects. Richly patterned silks are also used as borders for screen mountings.



OTHER/NEW MEDIUMS

Ink, colors, and/or gold and silver on silk or paper were the standard mediums for Japanese screen paintings for centuries. In recent years, however, artists have begun producing screens using unusual or entirely new mediums on supports of wood, ceramic, and other materials.

SUBJECTS



LANDSCAPES

Japan adopted the tradition of landscape painting from China and developed it in two main directions: "Japanese-style" landscapes with gentle hills and bright green pigments, and steep, mountainous "Chinese-style" landscapes in monochrome ink.



LITERARY IMAGERY AND TEXT

Poetry and episodes from Japanese or Chinese stories can be represented on folding screens through visual imagery, calligraphic inscription, or a combination of the two.



BIRDS AND FLOWERS/ ANIMALS AND PLANTS

Painting birds or animals in combination with specific flowers or plants (often with auspicious meanings) comes out of Chinese tradition and was adopted early on by Japanese painters.



PLANTS

Japanese artists painted Chinese-inspired images of single plants such as plum, orchids, and bamboo in ink, as well as Japanese-style botanical subjects, including native flowers and grasses, often done in colors on gold.



FIGURES AND HUMAN ACTIVITY

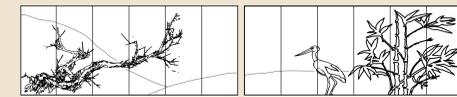
Folding screens have been used to depict human beings in various poses and situations. Common subjects include the Japanese aristocracy, legendary Chinese figures, the pleasure quarters, famous festivals, historical battles, and scenes from daily life.

DESIGN



INDEPENDENT COMPOSITIONS

Some of the oldest surviving Japanese screens, from the 700s, have independent compositions pasted on each panel. Another type of independent composition is made by pasting individual fan paintings or poetry cards on screen panels.



UNIFIED COUNTERBALANCED COMPOSITIONS

In this standard screen composition, the weight of the design is on the outer panels of each screen, with more open space on the inner panels, where the screens meet. Artist signatures, if any, usually appear on the outer edges of each screen.



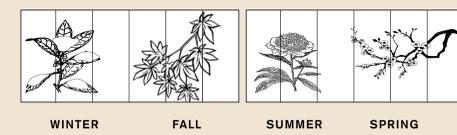
UNIFIED CENTRALIZED COMPOSITIONS

In the late 1500s and early 1600s, many artists produced pairs of screens with large motifs spanning the center of the composition for greater impact.



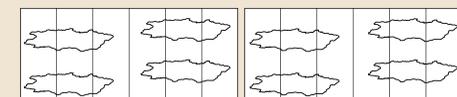
CONTRASTING COMPOSITIONS

Pairs of screens sometimes juxtapose seasons, animals, or other contrasting subject matter.



PROGRESSIVE COMPOSITIONS

In this type of composition, the scene progresses over time, usually from right to left. This technique can be used to show the passage of the seasons or to unfold a narrative.



INDIVIDUAL SCENES AMIDST GOLD CLOUDS

This type of screen includes multiple scenes, usually separated by golden clouds, which are scattered in a progressive or random arrangement. Such compositions are used to illustrate episodes from Japanese literature such as *The Tale of Genji* or *Tale of the Heike*, scenes of festivals, and scenes of famous places.



DECORATIVE COMPOSITIONS

Some compositions feature simplified motifs used as stylized design elements in a graphic or symbolic representation. These may be repeated and are often placed over simple gold or silver backgrounds. Such screens are usually associated with Japanese-style painting (*yamato-e*), usually the Rinpa style.