Byōbu
The Grandeur of Japanese Screens
The material culture of a society can tell us much about its creators and the environment in which it developed. Japanese folding screens, or byōbu (literally “wind screens”), are a prime example. Free-standing, portable, and ornamented with calligraphy or pictorial images, byōbu commonly appear in pairs, each screen consisting of two, four, six, or eight panels. In addition to providing protection from wind, folding screens serve as attractive room dividers, enclosing and demarcating private spaces in the open interiors of Japanese palaces, temples, shrines, and elite homes.
A prototype for byōbu, in the form of separate panels with silk borders, came to Japan from Korea in 686 C.E. By the mid-eighth century, one hundred screens—sixty-five of which included fabric designs typical of earlier screens. The washi (Japanese paper) hinges connect one panel to the next in a secure and durable fashion, which can withstand extended use. When the screen is unfolded and displayed stably in a zigzag formation, which is the standard method of use, the washi hinges allow the presentation of a continuous image (fig. 1). Prior to this invention, each screen panel was surrounded by a silk border, which broke up the composition. In the late fourteenth century, paper-hinged byōbu became the preferred format in Japanese art for painting panoramic views of nature. Knowledge of Japanese byōbu and a few actual specimens reached Europe through Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch traders, and arrived in Mexico by the seventeenth century, where they were known as biombos.3 Architecture played a large role in the development and use of byōbu. Early Japanese buildings followed the post-and-lintel method of construction that was imported from Tang China sometime in the Nara period (710–94 C.E.). Architectural weight was born by wooden posts, which allowed for a large, otherwise uninterrupted interior space. Floors were raised and constructed of wooden planks left bare or covered with tatami mats, which were used for seating. Japan was, and still is to a certain extent, a culture that prefers mat seating. An aristocratic example of this traditional “floor culture” can be glimpsed through surviving fragments of picture scrolls illustrating The Tale of Genji.

Byōbu, often as tall as a person, were adopted as the most portable and versatile type of room divider. Positioned anywhere in a room, they blocked unwanted gazes and instantly created a private or intimate area. Embellished with gold foil and placed behind an icon or a person, byōbu highlighted the importance of the religious image or the exalted status of the high-ranking individual. When completely folded, the byōbu's painted or inscribed panels were protected from light and dust. Their compact nature allowed for easy and tidy storage with an elegance of design in harmony with Japanese aesthetics. The prototype for the gold-leaf-covered byōbu that were typical of the Momoyama period (1573–1615) appeared in the preceding Muromachi period (1333–1573) in relation to the popular practice of Pure Land Buddhism. For its adherents, gold-embellished pictorial depictions of Amida Buddha in his Western Paradise came into high demand to serve as vehicles by which the dying soul of the devotee could enter into Amida’s paradise. In the succeeding Momoyama period, the ruling samurai class continued to support the production of gold-leaf byōbu, but as a commodity in the ostentatious display of wealth and, implicitly, power in addition to aesthetic sensibilities. The generally large size of byōbu, the employment of the best artists, and the high cost of production enabled the owner to flaunt his assets.

The subject matter of paintings and calligraphy on Japanese folding screens has evolved greatly. This diversity is reflected in the works installed in this three-part byōbu exhibition, which range in date from about 1550 to 2004 and cover the major subjects and styles of Japanese painting. Selected from the collection of the Yale University Art Gallery and supplemented by generous loans from the collections of Gallery supporters, the objects tell the story of how Japanese painters and calligraphers of the past five hundred years have transformed the literature, philosophy, social ethos, cultural trends, and physical environment of their time to create art of enduring appeal. The artistic currents and the diversity of Japanese aesthetics are reflected in this selection of byōbu, at times taking the form of monochromatic simplicity and at others grand-scale opulence. In each installation, a few examples of other functional objects contextualize and reinforce the three successive thematic treatments of this exhibition: Tales and Poems in Byōbu, Brush and Ink in Byōbu, and Nature and Celebration in Byōbu.
With opulent colors and glittering gold, the first installation of byōbu presents the subjects of indigenous Japanese waka poems and of fictional and historical tales that were produced at the height of byōbu production, during the seventeenth century. The poems and tales are written in an innovative and uniquely Japanese script that was developed during the Heian period, which consists of a mixture of kanji (Chinese characters) for meaning and kana (Japanese syllabic writing) for phonetics. Deciphering this mixed script is often difficult and is further complicated by stylistic variations among individual calligraphers for abbreviating characters, as is the case in a thirty-one-syllable waka that accompanies the cherry-tree screen of Flowering Cherry and Autumn Maple with Poem Slips (fig. 2). Two byōbu featuring illustrated tales are also superb examples of traditional literature written in this mixed script. The first, from The Tale of Genji (fig. 3), relates the amorous adventures of the courtly Shining Prince in a retelling with Buddhist overtones; the second depicts the military episodes of a historical twelfth-century clan in The Tale of the Heike (fig. 4). Another beautifully illustrated tale, written only in kanji, is The Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety (see cover). This im- ported Chinese tale claimed renewed popu- larity in Japan when the Tokugawa shogunate adopted Neo-Confucianism in the seventeenth century to buttress the legitimacy of its rule.

The installation contains an eclectic array of artistic treatments of poetry. Birds and Flowers of the Twelve Months (fig. 5), by...
Yamamoto Soken (died 1706), is based on Fujiwara Teika’s famous waka poems and presents an orderly succession of paintings reinforced by calligraphic poem cards placed above each image. *Flowering Cherry and Autumn Maple with Poem Slips* pursues an unabashed celebration of nature that is luxuriant in vibrant reds and whites. A counterpoint is an unusual calligraphy screen, *Waka Byōbu* (Poetry Screen) (fig. 6), which presents waka poems composed by famous women poets of the ninth to the twelfth century. The calligraphy was brushed solely in monochrome ink by Konoe Nobutada (1565–1614), a court noble in the early part of the seventeenth century. Through works such as this, Nobutada transformed the brush writing of waka—traditionally a courtly pursuit, which previously had been rendered with attenuated and delicate lines on a small scale, as seen in Soken’s *Birds and Flowers of the Twelve Months*—into bold calligraphy on a monumental scale. This unprecedented execution of waka shows Nobutada displaying his aristocratic origins in the face of the new military order. At the same time, his adoption of forceful lines executed in a vigorous manner reveals his admiration for the direct and disciplined ethos of the warrior class.

Also included in the first installation is a rare, two-panel wooden screen from the nineteenth century by Suzuki Shuitsu (1823–1889; fig. 7), which is painted on both sides with depictions of a lyrical stream and flowering plants. The surface is inlaid with precious metals and a sprinkling of gold dust, providing a stylistic continuity between the bold and refined beauty of the Rinpa school established by Ogata Kōrin (1658–1716) and early modern painting.
The second installation features the dynamic power of ink when applied by the skilled brush of artists trained in calligraphy, whether on plain paper, paper covered with gold or silver foil, or wood. In works ranging from the early seventeenth to the nineteenth century, artists from the dominant Kano school, the rivaling Hasegawa school, the Kōetsu school of samurai origin, the Nanga (Literati) school, and the pre-Nihonga Shijō school, as well as individualist painters from the eighteenth century, all demonstrate their inexhaustible skills.

Two byōbu with a dragon theme are included in the exhibition, both by painters with significant artistic legacies. The first is a screen of a dragon and a tiger paired with a leopard, by Kaihō Yūsetsu (1598–1677; fig. 8), son of the famous Yūshō, a warrior-turned-painter. The other is a single-screen byōbu by Kano Tōun Masunobu (1625–1694; fig. 9), an adopted son of the famous Kano Tan'yū (1602–1674), who began the Kaihō branch of the Kano school in Edo (present-day Tokyo). In both dragon paintings, expanding dark-ink washes create a sense of moisture while spiraling strokes coalesce into the whirlwinds generated by the force of the dragons. Particularly in Yūsetsu’s work, dark-ink washes around the dragon lend three-dimensionality to the creature’s body, head, and claws. Yūsetsu treats the dragon comically while Yūshō’s dragon is a hallmark depiction of this auspicious, heavenly creature who brings mankind needed rain. As evidenced by these byōbu, it is customary for an artist to dot extremely dark ink onto the pupils of the eyes of dragons and tigers at the very end of the painting process, giving “living breath” (ki) to the beasts.

Fig. 8. Kaihō Yūsetsu, left screen from Dragon and Tiger with Leopard (detail), Edo period (1615–1868), mid-17th century. Pair of six-panel folding screens: ink and light color on paper. Lent by Rosemarie and Leighton R. Longhi, b.a. 1967

Fig. 9. Kano Tōun Masunobu, Dragon Screen (detail), Edo period (1615–1868), ca. 1650–1700. Six-panel folding screen: ink on paper. Collection of Peggy and Richard M. Danziger, ll.b. 1963

Fig. 10. Ike Taiga, Moonlight Bamboo, Edo period (1615–1868), ca. 1758–60. Six-panel folding screen: ink on paper. Yale University Art Gallery, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., Class of 1913, Fund, 2005.12.1
The other works demonstrate, in a range of subjects and styles, what an artist can achieve with a restricted palette. In Moonlight Bamboo (fig. 10), by the innovative and versatile calligrapher and literati artist Ike Taiga (1723–1776), the darkest ink was applied last in a twisted stroke representing the bamboo joints.4 Like the pupils in the dragon byōbu, it was added just before the artist put his brush down, to add “living breath” to the bamboo. Taiga’s relaxed calligraphic strokes, executed in a range of ink tones, suggest bamboo touched by a gentle breeze and moonlight. The wide trunks were executed by a flat brush and enriched by tarashikomi (pooling of ink) to indicate the bamboo’s age. Another striking work is the expansive Waves and Rocks (fig. 11), which is attributed to Hasegawa Tōgaku (died 1623), a son-in-law of Tōhaku who founded the revolutionary Hasegawa school that rivaled the entrenched orthodoxy of the established Kano school. The screen exhibits Tōgaku’s talent for creating design-rich compositions with a series of undulating parallel brushstrokes of varying tonality to represent waves in motion. The white caps foaming at the crest of each wave are depicted as finger-like swirls and splashes.5

The work of Itō Jakuchū (1716–1800), an innovative, individualist painter from Kyoto, is represented by the witty Chickens (fig. 12). The artist’s humor and skill are evident in, for example, the tactile contrast between the wavy plumage of the chicken’s tail and a dotted stone lantern in the first panel, and between the curling chicken tail and a woven basket in the fourth panel. Jakuchū’s whimsical rendering of chickens can be contrasted with the front side of Wooden Sliding Doors (Itado) (fig. 13), by Mori Kansai (1814–1894), a pair of panels which bears a more realistic image. Kansai’s depiction of cranes in a landscape was likely based on a sketch from nature. The reverse side is decorated with turtles, which, like the cranes, symbolize good wishes for prosperity and longevity. The auspicious creatures, painted with a touch of red cinnabar and white gofun pigments, usher in Nihonga (“Japanese-style painting”), which adopted Western realism but retained traditional Japanese materials. Nihonga was established as a reaction to the Western-style painting that swept through Japan after the Meiji Restoration, in 1868.
The third and last installation celebrates both the beauty of nature and the festivities of the Japanese people. The commissions for the byōbu in this group came from a wide range of social groups: from high-ranking samurai lords to nouveau riche merchants, and from literati intellectuals to communities of shrine and temple supporters. While paintings of natural subjects may initially appear similar, they can contain a variety of purposes and meanings. A pair of unusual screens portraying exotic phoenix and peafowl in a dramatic and restless landscape dates to around 1550 (fig. 14). The work is by the atelier of Kano Motonobu and may reveal the aspirations of the patron, who, like the Ōuchi family who commissioned similar works, likely desired increased trade with Ming-dynasty China; the theme and the motifs celebrate the anticipation of meeting the expectations of a foreign recipient.6 In contrast, Kano Tan’yū’s Screen of Birds and Flowers (fig. 15), which dates to 1672, presents a tranquil and stable landscape, reflecting the peace and prosperity achieved by Tokugawa rule in the latter half of the seventeenth century. The white blossoming cherry tree in the embrace of a tall evergreen pine, the many birds, and the red sun are all auspicious motifs conveying wishes for marriage and longevity. This screen was likely made for a high-ranking family, as it bears Tan’yū’s title and signature: “Tan’yū with the rank of Hōin bestowed by Imperial Agency, brushed at the age of seventy-one.” Many artists followed this particular pictorial vocabulary and produced similar works, indicating the high demand for screens with auspicious themes. By the time of Tan’yū, the orthodox canon of Kano-school landscape painting enjoyed a wide following throughout Japan. The paintings of nature and celebration in this group all exhibit careful observations of the world. A panoramic view of the Hie-Sannō Festival (fig. 16) by the hands of Lake Biwa in northeast Kyōto was likely executed in the 1590s and is one of the earliest paintings in this exhibition. It records with great detail and sensitive brushstrokes the exuberant scenes of this major springtime Shinto festival at the Hie Shrine during the month of April. The screen contains eight panels, which is unusual, as six is the most common number of byōbu panels. Early Edo art (fig. 17), which depicts a theater scene on the dried riverbeds of the Kamo River in Kyōto, was likely painted in the early seventeenth century and is rendered in wider and more expressive brushstrokes than those seen in the earlier festival scenes. Its street scenes include a boisterous fistfight; a young boy hitting eight flat gongs hung around his neck, creating a spectacle known as hacchōgane; and groups of animated townspeople strolling toward the makeshift theater. Both screens were painted by anonymous artists who vividly captured the local color of celebration. Elegant Tea Gathering, a pair of screens by Nagasawa Rosetsu (1754–1799; fig. 18), depicts a literary gathering of scholars by a mountain stream. The figures are enjoying conversation and sencha-style tea. On the left-hand screen, two attendants crack ice to make water for brewing the steeped tea. The painting is served in style compared to many of Rosetsu’s other works, but the brushstrokes used for the rocks reveal the exceptionally intricate shading gradations characteristic of his late style. Although a disciple of Maruyama Ōkyo (1733–1795), the founder of the Naturalistic school, Rosetsu freed himself from his teacher and developed an unconventional and eccentric handling of brush, ink, and color that is greatly admired by modern connoisseurs. The only contemporary screen in the entire exhibition is the double-sided Wind Screen for Tea Brazier, by Maio Motoko (b. 1950).
Fig. 16. Hie-Sannō Festival (detail), Momoyama period (1573–1615), 1590s. Eight-panel folding screen: ink, color, and gold pigment on gold-foiled paper. Lent by Rosemarie and Leighton R. Longhi, b.a. 1967

Fig. 17. Early Kabuki (detail), Edo period (1615–1868), early 17th century. Six-panel folding screen: ink, color on paper. Lent by Rosemarie and Leighton R. Longhi, b.a. 1967

Fig. 18. Nagasawa Rosetsu, Elegant Tea Gathering, Edo period (1615–1868), after 1792. Pair of six-panel folding screens: ink and light color on paper with sprinkled gold dust. Lent by Rosemarie and Leighton R. Longhi, b.a. 1967
and exciting ways.

modern period, where they thrive in new

development unbroken into the
tinier art and culture
missioned for use during the tea ceremony,

during this screen was also com-

conscious reference to the grandeur of gold-

cord, and metal hinges. For illustrations, see Yujiro

century. For more on this work, see Janice Katz, “Hidden

attributed to Zhou Wenju, a Chinese artist of the tenth

original belonged to Emperor Shōmu. The repository

in the Shōsōin Repository, a storehouse of relics that

1948 (fig. 19). The front side is embellished

Alan Woodhull in collaboration with Armins Nikovskis

Chinese screen, which looks as if it were made of paper

was dedicated in memory of him by Empress Kōmyō

feathers (Torige byōbu). These works are preserved in the Shōsōin Repository, a storehouse of relics that

1. Although the Japanese popularized the use of paper

On 1571 the Portuguese king, Don Sebastian, issued a

In these paintings, the painting is perhaps from the fifteenth


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more


5. For a more detailed discussion on

6. During the sixteenth century, Japan enjoyed much more