THE TALE OF GENJI

BY ALAN PRIEST
Curator of Far Eastern Art

The Tale of Genji was written in the early part of the eleventh century by the Lady Murasaki, who was in her early thirties attached to the court as a lady in waiting to the Empress Akiko, at the time a girl of sixteen. Book I of the Tale of Genji was read to the emperor in 1008. Lady Murasaki was still at court in 1025. In 1031 she was no longer at court, and there is no later record of her.

The Tale of Genji consists of fifty-four chapters or episodes. The romantic affairs of Prince Genji are the subject of the first forty; those of his supposed son Kaoru those of the last thirteen. Only the chapter title exists for episode XLI—The Death of Genji. Apparently it was never written.

The Tale of Genji is best known to the English speaking and reading public in the translation of Arthur Waley. Mr. Waley is a master of the English language, and in his hands Genji becomes in English, as it is in Japanese, a novel of great literary quality. Had it been presented as a contemporary British work by a British writer it would surely have been applauded as a historical novel and admired as an imaginative reconstruction of court life in Japan in the eleventh century. Archaeological reviewers would doubtless have raised a dubious eyebrow as to the entire accuracy of the background and conversation. But it is not a contemporary English novel—it is eleventh-century Japanese—and no one can question Lady Murasaki’s details much. After all she was there. Japalogues (if Sinologues, why not Japalogues or Nippologues?) can fuss about niceties of translation or the choice of original texts, but these are not matters that bother most of us who are enchanted with any glimpse into the life of other peoples and other times.

As an authoress Lady Murasaki is sensitive and perceptive. She writes a good story, largely concerned with young love and its troubles, which she deals with with sympathy and delicacy. She pays great attention to the dress of both sexes and describes court functions and progresses in great detail. She includes letters and poems and glimpses of nature.

Scenes illustrating episodes from the life of Genji have been favorites with Japanese painters down to the present day. Genji himself has not yet appeared in the inspired series of historical movies which are coming to us at the present time. He probably will, and meantime we can see in full color and motion in the other movies the figures and costumes which we are accustomed to seeing frozen in prints and paintings, and wonderful they are to see.

Three scenes from The Tale of Genji are the subject of a pair of very handsome Tosa screens lately acquired by the Museum. They are attributed to Mitsuyoshi. The screens each have four panels and were originally not screens but sliding panels in a room. There is an inscription on the left-hand panel which may be rendered: “Paintings of Miyuki, Sekiya, and Ukifune from the Genji Monogatari. My forebear Mitsuyoshi painted them, but there was a place lacking [or perhaps damaged] at the end, and the head of

1
ON THESE PAGES: A pair of screens with episodes from The Tale of Genji by the Lady Murasaki. Attributed to Mitsuyoshi (1539–1613). Fletcher Fund 1955
Detail of the screen illustrated on page 2, with a mountain gorge and trees seen through golden clouds
Detail of the screen illustrated on page 3, showing an episode from the story of the Lady Ukifune
is the Meeting at the Barrier House from Chapter xvi.

“Though on this lake-side Fate willed that we should meet, upon its tideless shore no love-shell can we hope to find.” Thus sadly does Prince Genji write to the Lady Utusemi when he and his retinue arrive at the Barrier at Osaka on their way to Ishiyama. Utusemi was the wife of a provincial governor who had halted his train to let Prince Genji pass. She was also the heroine of a fragile and frustrated affair recorded in Chapters ii and iii. Her “sleeve, so often wet with tears, was like the cicada’s dew-drenched wing,” she had written him in farewell. And here they are again—at the Barrier at Osaka. Here once more they exchange sad notes of unfulfill-

our house Josho repaired it. The fifth year of the Genroku Emperor and the [cyclical year] jin shin, mid-spring between the twentieth and the thirtieth day, [signed] Tosa Sakonoye-no-shogen Fujiwara Mitsunari.” The date corresponds with the period of April 6 to April 17, 1692.

The whole panel on which the inscription appears is in different mood and style from the other seven panels. It is true that the shafts of the chariot which appears in the adjoining panel are carried over and the group of figures in that panel completed by three seated figures at the shaft ends, but it is clear that the drawing of the figures is by a different hand. The landscape is also quite different from that of the other seven panels, and it is probable that the entire panel was painted by Josho. If a makeshift it is a brilliant one. The dazzling greens of the mountain gorge seen through the broad parting in the clouds make, in this panel, the landscape more important than the figures.

The subject of the four panels of this screen is the Meeting at the Barrier House from Chapter xvi.

“Though on this lake-side Fate willed that we should meet, upon its tideless shore no love-shell can we hope to find.” Thus sadly does Prince Genji write to the Lady Utusemi when he and his retinue arrive at the Barrier at Osaka on their way to Ishiyama. Utusemi was the wife of a provincial governor who had halted his train to let Prince Genji pass. She was also the heroine of a fragile and frustrated affair recorded in Chapters ii and iii. Her “sleeve, so often wet with tears, was like the cicada’s dew-drenched wing,” she had written him in farewell. And here they are again—at the Barrier at Osaka. Here once more they exchange sad notes of unfulfill-

The subject of the four panels of this screen is the Meeting at the Barrier House from Chapter xvi.

“Though on this lake-side Fate willed that we should meet, upon its tideless shore no love-shell can we hope to find.” Thus sadly does Prince Genji write to the Lady Utusemi when he and his retinue arrive at the Barrier at Osaka on their way to Ishiyama. Utusemi was the wife of a provincial governor who had halted his train to let Prince Genji pass. She was also the heroine of a fragile and frustrated affair recorded in Chapters ii and iii. Her “sleeve, so often wet with tears, was like the cicada’s dew-drenched wing,” she had written him in farewell. And here they are again—at the Barrier at Osaka. Here once more they exchange sad notes of unfulfill-

The subject of the four panels of this screen is the Meeting at the Barrier House from Chapter xvi.

“Though on this lake-side Fate willed that we should meet, upon its tideless shore no love-shell can we hope to find.” Thus sadly does Prince Genji write to the Lady Utusemi when he and his retinue arrive at the Barrier at Osaka on their way to Ishiyama. Utusemi was the wife of a provincial governor who had halted his train to let Prince Genji pass. She was also the heroine of a fragile and frustrated affair recorded in Chapters ii and iii. Her “sleeve, so often wet with tears, was like the cicada’s dew-drenched wing,” she had written him in farewell. And here they are again—at the Barrier at Osaka. Here once more they exchange sad notes of unfulfill-

The subject of the four panels of this screen is the Meeting at the Barrier House from Chapter xvi.

“Though on this lake-side Fate willed that we should meet, upon its tideless shore no love-shell can we hope to find.” Thus sadly does Prince Genji write to the Lady Utusemi when he and his retinue arrive at the Barrier at Osaka on their way to Ishiyama. Utusemi was the wife of a provincial governor who had halted his train to let Prince Genji pass. She was also the heroine of a fragile and frustrated affair recorded in Chapters ii and iii. Her “sleeve, so often wet with tears, was like the cicada’s dew-drenched wing,” she had written him in farewell. And here they are again—at the Barrier at Osaka. Here once more they exchange sad notes of unfulfill-
heroine of this chapter is the Lady Tamakatsura. “The most fashionable viewpoint was just before the Bridge of Boats. Here the really smart equipages were seen in greatest abundance; among them, that of Lady Tamakatsura.” On the screen we see only various elements of the procession converging by various golden roads and paths upon the bridge. A lively procession it is with palanquin bearers in striped uniforms, galloping horsemen, hastening equerries, and bits of pretty landscape all seen between gold clouds like those in the companion screen. But the chariots, including that of the Lady Tamakatsura, do not appear in the picture at all. We must imagine them lined up with much the same view that we ourselves have of the gala screen, a use of screens I have not hitherto come across.

Ukifune was an unlucky lady who got herself involved in parallel affairs with two princes, Kaoru and Niou. Kaoru had hidden her away at Uji, which he could safely visit as a pilgrimage, for had he not studied Buddhism there with Prince Hachi? Niou, who was also infatuated with her, discovered this and managed to get by the maidservants disguised as Kaoru.

“Ukifune saw at once that it was not Kaoru . . . . But now that the worst had happened, what use was it to cry for help?”

Ukon, the maid, was dumbfounded. But “to make a fuss of any kind could do no possible
good; moreover it was not for her to keep royal princes in order, much as they might need it.”

It was all too much for poor Ukifune. “Not here, but in a place by the world’s dreams and omens undefiled, doubt not that we shall meet!” she writes and vanishes from the human scene—we fear into the depths of the cold Uji River. She vanishes and there is a good deal of talk about it.

“. . . But when I looked the gossamer-fly had vanished—vanished, or never been in my hand.”

Such was the poem Kaoru recited, sitting alone.

As can readily be seen, I have drawn a great deal on Mr. Waley’s six-volume translation of The Tale of Genji. Archibald Wenley very generously did a translation of the inscription for me. The last character in the inscription is illegible, but Aschwin Lippe suggests that it might well be read “nari,” which is very logical as Mitsunari lived from 1646 to 1710.