ON THE COVER: Four panels from one of a pair of eight-panel screens, attributed to Kano Sanraku (1559-1635). Pulitzer Bequest

ABOVE: Detail from the second screen of the pair
Autumn Millet

by ALAN PRIEST, Curator of Far Eastern Art

The Kano family gave its name to a school of Japanese painting that for almost two centuries was the largest and most influential of all the schools. Through successive generations and under the sponsorship of the prevailing feudal lords, painters who inherited this name by birth or adoption held a commanding position in Japanese art. Assimilating the strong Chinese influences that carried over from such noted earlier painters as the great Sesshu, and the peculiarly native qualities of the aristocratic Tosa school, the Kanos developed what has been termed the most brilliant school of secular art in the world.

The traditional founder of the Kano school is Masanobu (1434-1530), chief court painter for the shogun of his day. He, like Sesshu, admired the Chinese painting of the Sung dynasty, especially the poetic landscapes done in monochrome. The most important of Masanobu's sons, Motonobu (1476-1559), married a daughter of Tosa Mitsunobu (about 1430-about 1521), the Emperor's chief court painter of the day. The families married and so in their way did the two schools of painting. The aristocratic subject matter, the gold and the color of the Tosa school became part of the Kano style. Thus neatly does Ernest Fenollosa, in Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art, explain the beginning of Kano painting.

After the death of Motonobu in 1559 his second son, Kano Shoyei (1519-1592), became the head of the Kano painters and was employed by the great military commander Nobunaga (1534-1582), who made the city of Kyoto his headquarters in 1568 and began the great walled and moated castle still known as Nijo castle.

The Kano school as we usually think of it was a school of gorgeous palace and temple painting. The most prominent artist of this brilliant phase was Kano Eitoku (1543-1590), who was Hideyoshi's chief court painter and rose to fame with him. Of all the shoguns of Japan, Hideyoshi, who came to power in 1582, was the most spectacular. He was not of one of the great families but fought his way up to the shogunate from stable boy. In matters of temperament and taste he has been likened to Napoleon. Certainly he surrounded himself with a blaze of splendor, which gave opportunity to Eitoku and his adopted son Sanraku (1559-1635) to decorate on a very grand scale, an opportunity which they and their descendants took. In Kyoto alone, Nijo castle with its seemingly endless suites of state ceremonial rooms (there was and is a second more livable palace enclosed within a second moat) and many temples still exist as proof to the historian, as a cherished National Treasure, and as a constant pleasure to visitors whether Japanese or not Japanese.

We get only the smallest idea of all this from a pair of screens or sliding doors, which is the most we can see of the style in Western museums. From these we must imagine suites of rooms with as many as twenty or more screens or panels in each room. In Nijo castle these rooms are two stories high with screens, sometimes arranged in two tiers, on a much larger scale than those with which we are familiar. The state reception rooms of Nijo castle follow one upon the other, all

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Quail feeding in an autumn field

with gold backgrounds emphasizing particular themes—huge stark pine trees, bamboos, willows, paeonies (surely one prefers the spelling paeony to peony for these noble flowers), egrets, pheasants and lesser birds, tigers (and surely if one speaks of a pride of lions one should speak of an ecstasy of tigers). So it goes on.

The Imperial Household guide as he leads from room to room says merely that they are by the “Kano painter” and does not like it if some pert tourist asks “Which Kano?” My sympathies are with the guide. In these accredited palace and temple works the Kanos are more difficult to distinguish than the Giotteschi, and it is obvious that a great many competent studio workers helped carry out the master painter’s design.

While it is true that the Kano painters worked also in monochrome and many individually painted in the tradition of Sesshu and China, we think of them, and rightly, as the great Japanese school of public decorative painting.

Aside from palace and temple works the Kano painters supplied screens and paintings for the households of the rich—many, as we can see as examples emerge from private collections. The Museum has lately acquired two small screens attributed to and bearing the seals of Kano Sanraku, the adopted son of and successor to Eitoku. The subject of these screens is autumn millet.

These screens were not painted as part of a palace or temple decoration. Until they came to the Metropolitan they had always been in private collections. Even in modern times many Japanese do not care for publicity and its many dangers. The screens do appear in that magazine of art, the *Kokka*, which in itself was an innovation; when it was issued in 1889 it was the first magazine of art to be published in the Orient. They appear in the *Kokka* of October 1893 with a murky illustration and a laudatory note. Then they were the property of Baron Kuki; now, fortunately, they are ours.

They are small in size and are in a very different mood from the typical palace and temple paintings of their day. It is almost as if the painter had said to himself, “I am tired of being grand. I will do a little thing to please myself for once.” There is, however, one room in the Tenkyu-in, which is one of the complex of temples known as Myoshinji, which is painted in much the same mood. The room in the Tenkyu-in is often referred to by Western visitors as the Morning Glory room. It is one of a series of rooms attributed to Sanraku. The other rooms are painted with pine trees, bamboos, and tigers in the grand manner. The Morning Glory room is painted lightly. When you come on it after a day of tigers and pine trees you come upon a presentation of early morning in which the chief thing is sky-blue morning glories. To be sure, the morning glories are supplemented with a few other garden flowers, with birds and bits of fence.

And in mood the Metropolitan screens are like it. The one speaks of early morning, the other of late afternoon. Both speak of a perfect moment of the day and both speak of little things. Both speak of the country and small farms as against the splendor of state gardens. Both the Morning Glory room and the Metropolitan screens are attributed to the same painter. They are in the same mood. A contemporary
authority on the Kano school ascribes the Morning Glory room to Sansetsu, the son of Sanraku. It is true that many paintings generally ascribed to Sansetsu are lighter in treatment than those ascribed to Sanraku. By father or son, the millet screens have much in common with the paintings of the Morning Glory room.

The Kokka refers to them as the "autumn millet" screens. We are free to accept that title or to give them another, such as "quail and millet." Whichever we choose, the two screens together are a small pictorial poem of autumn.

The painters of the Far East, especially the painters of Japan, pay great attention to the seasons—more, surely, than do the painters of the West. It is true that there are many excellent representations of the four seasons in Western painting, and even of the twelve months, notably in the Très Riches Heures of the Duke of Berry. But in the seasonal pictures of the West, summer and winter, however excellently depicted, are usually a background for the activities of human beings who appear appropriately clad according to the season.

The Japanese, to be sure, can produce scenes of the twelve months in which the human figures are the important thing, but much more often they paint the seasons with human beings left out. There are very many pairs of screens which by means of trees and flowers alone indicate the four seasons. The Metropolitan has, for instance, a pair of screens once attributed to Koyetsu and now ascribed to an unknown master of the great school of decoration in which Sotatsu, Koyetsu, and Korin were leading figures. This pair of screens (which has no specific name) is one of the most beautiful of all. Against a subdued background a stream moves and curves with considerable force, continuing from one panel to another and from one screen to the other. The trees and shrubs selected for these particular screens are modest ones, often four seasons will blaze with prunus against snow, with paeony, with lotus, with chrysanthemum; but in this example have been chosen, as from a stream in the countryside, white peach flowers, pine trees, pear blossoms, and iris.

It is quite possible that for ordinary living the Japanese prefer screens of this nature, screens without people or stories which might well distract their guests, and that they use the court and historical scenes for more formal occasions. We are told at long length of the care and thought that go into every object used in the tea ceremony, and there is every indication that the same careful planning goes into any party at all.

While it is very common to find all four seasons together on a pair of screens, the Japanese often devote a pair of screens to one particular season, and more than that to a selected phase of the season. That is what the painter has done in our two small screens that bear the seal of Sanraku. They are done in subdued colors and gold on paper.

The screens are unusual in size. It is true that, like paintings, Japanese screens vary a great deal in size, from the large panels of Nijo castle to the small twofold screens used for the tea ceremony and to miniature dolls' screens; but the greater number of screens average some six feet in height and are of six panels which add up to about thirteen feet in width. Our screens are only 38 3/4 inches high and have eight, not six, panels. The six center panels of each screen measure 17 1/2 inches in width. It is their height rather than their width that is unusual. However the choice of this size was arrived at, the result is very agreeable. The measurements are worth meticulous recording because in them is hidden some clue to a harmony of proportion that pleases the human eye.

They are autumn screens. Although no building appears in them it is clear that they are very close to human habitation, part of a humble farm, because there are bits of bamboo fence and a light rope with scarecrow rattles depending from it. One kind of plant predominates, the useful and nutritious millet. The grain is fully ripened, with its rich depending heads carefully delineated, its stalks and twisted leaves displayed. The soft browns of the millet are lightened with a few sprays of single-petaled wild aster and a bit of weed bursting into a tiny candelabra of gossamer seed. The weed, H. L. Li of the Morris Arboretum in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania tells me, may be a species of the genus Senecio, commonly called ragwort.

If one walks in the countryside in Japan in October one cannot fail to be attracted by the small farms and the grains and the very few weeds that grow among them. There is also the wild life that comes to feed upon them. In this screen the wild life is restricted to small birds, mostly of the finch and sparrow family. It is better not to be too dogmatic about the particular species of most of these birds. We can recognize some of them. The quail feeding on the ground are easy to identify. The long-tailed
birds proceeding to the feast are imaginary and no amount of comparison with the long-tailed flycatchers of Eastern embroideries will get them into any scientific bird book. Let us not be too precise about this merry flight of little birds. It is clear that they should be seed eaters, the sparrows and the finches. In this matter I have asked for comment from Dillon Ripley of the Peabody Museum of Natural History at Yale University. He gives me possibilities: a tree sparrow, a pine bunting. And on others he remarks, quite rightly, that he is "defeated."

Sanraku was a good observer. He knew what millet was and set it down meticulously; millet was his subject. He offset the millet with a white flower, some sort of aster which he was not nearly so careful about. He added a few stalks of a ragwort gone to seed. This he did as one might make and balance a flower arrangement, with no thought of botany in his mind.

Millet, asters, ragwort will stay still for a painter. Birds will not. To most human beings,
The second of the "autumn millet" screens. Height 38 7/8 inches. Pulitzer Bequest, 1957

Details from the screen illustrated on pages 104 and 105
wherever they live, birds are no more than a frisk of wings. The painter of these screens was neither a professional botanist nor a professional ornithologist. He was aware of wings. The quail, ground birds, stayed still long enough for him to draw quite accurately. Finches, sparrows, and buntings flew in and out. He saw beaks and wings and caught what he could of them. What he caught with both growing things and winged things was an enchanting moment of autumn.

It is just a thing to enjoy. Here is millet, here are thieving birds. The traces of human beings are the bits of fence and the rattles intended to frighten birds away. Westerners often smile when they see a real crow seated upon the dummy made to scare it. Sanraku has made the same point here, with his finches lighting at will right beside the rattles. These rattles are pretty things. Against a small wooden plaque bits of bamboo are hung, fashioned hopefully like firecrackers. The background has been treated in two ways, mottled in the upper part to suggest the golden haze of autumn, solid in the foreground to catch the light.