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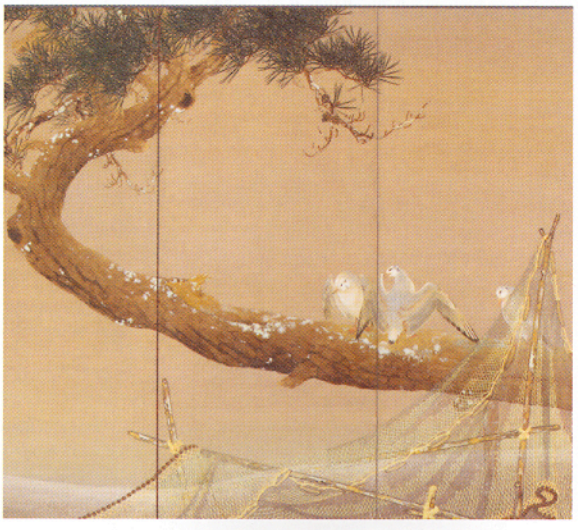
Art &ANTIQUES

Screen Stars

JAPANESE FOLDING SCREENS, DELICATE BUT DURABLE, ENSHRINE CENTURIES OF PAINTING TRADITION. BY JOHN DORFMAN

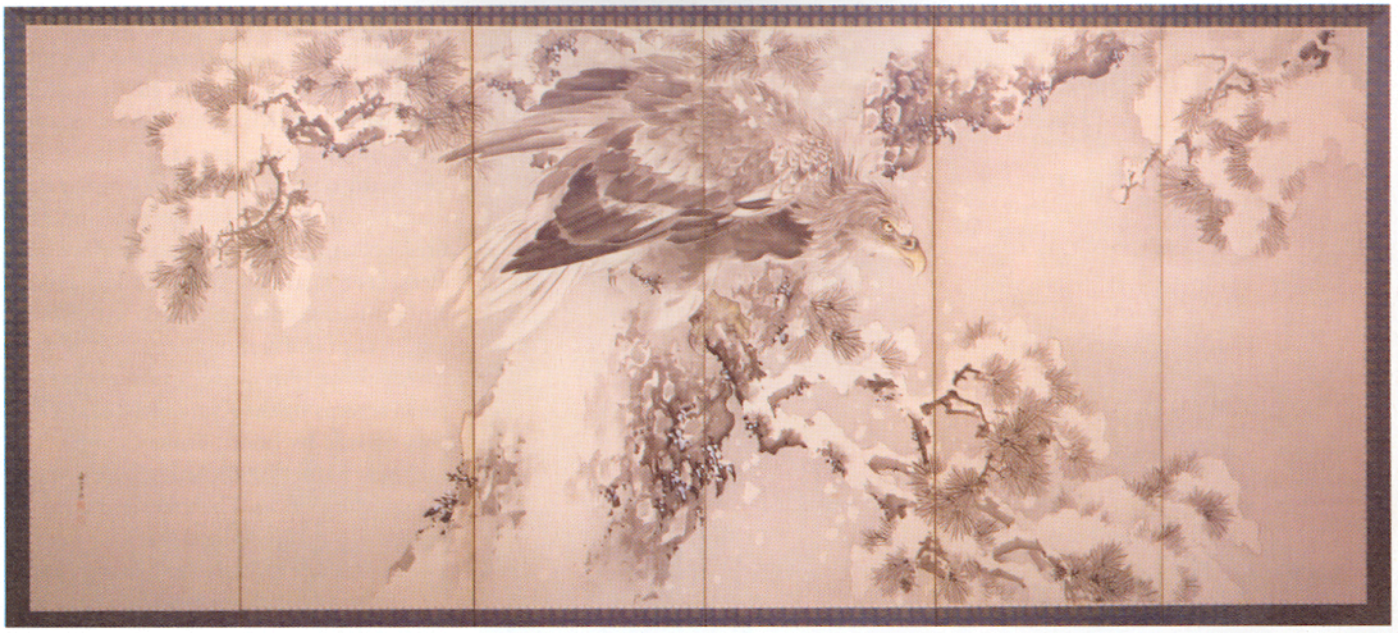
Above: Furuya Korin, *Shoreline at Dusk*, 1910, one of a pair of six-panel folding screens, ink, mineral colors, gold and silver on silk. Below: detail from *Shoreline at Dusk*.



WHEN GILBERT and Sullivan's courtiers in *The Mikado* bragged that their images appeared "on many a screen and fan," they were testifying to the graphic possibilities of Japanese screens, which at that time—the 1880s—were beginning to be appreciated in the Western world. More than just room dividers, folding screens (known in Japanese as *byobu*) are one of the main forms of Japanese painting, the others being hanging scrolls and hand scrolls or album paintings. While they were utilitarian, screens were conceived of by the artists and artisans who made them as far more than just decorative elements—they lavished on them the full scope of figurative creativity that the fertile and often fantastic imagination of Japanese art was capable of, during its heyday from the Momoyama period of the late 16th century to the early 20th century. Trees, flowers, birds, animals, landscapes and scenes from courtly life parade across these delicate surfaces, transporting the viewer out of the space in which they enclose him.

"Screens represent the whole world of Japanese painting before 1900," says Helga Fleishman, owner of Imari Gallery in Sausalito, Calif., a specialist dealer. "That's totally different from Chinese screens and European screens, which are decorative. There's no other country for which you can say that all the major painters did screens." In fact, all large paintings ended up on screens; only smaller-scale works were displayed as scrolls. This situation came about because of the distinctive structure of traditional Japanese homes, in which there were no internal walls. Screens were used to create rooms or domestic spaces that were not fixed but fluid, and screens could easily be moved around to accommodate changing practical or social needs.

Of course today, even in Japan, people don't live in such spaces and don't use the screens for their original architectural purpose. "To today's collector or museum cura-

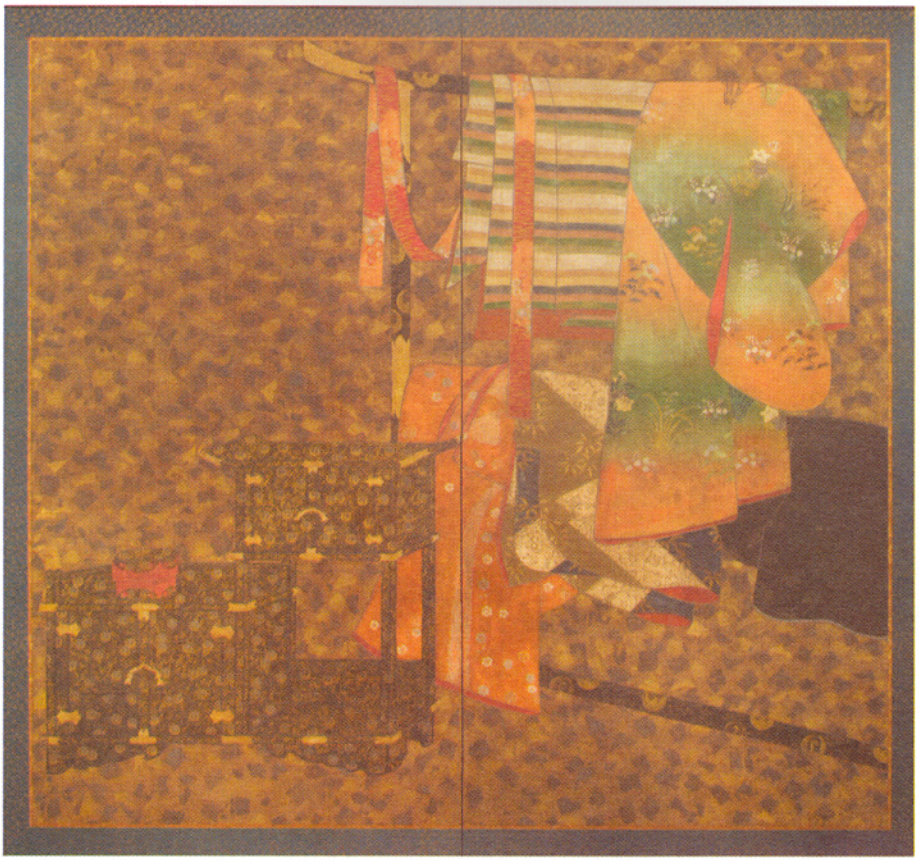


tor, the original function of screens as room dividers is of no relevance in their pursuit of great works," says New York dealer Joan Mirviss, a specialist in several areas of Japanese art. In addition, the physical position of the viewer has changed: In traditional Japan, indoor life was conducted on tatami mats; a screen standing on the floor would present its images directly to the eye of someone sitting on the floor. Fleishman says, "If we're not in a tatami room, you have to raise them up so they're at eye level. So they are almost always mounted on a wall or on a raised platform, which really honors the painting for what it is."

"The serious collector," adds Mirviss, "might have an area in their home with low-level plinths that can accommodate a screen, so that the collection may be rotated. There is a tradition of rotation in Japanese art. You wouldn't leave a screen of red maples on display in the springtime, as you would not exhibit a painting of cherry blossoms in the autumn. Japanese art, by its very nature, is intended for seasonal rotation, and as such it is moveable and storable." Mirviss points out that Japanese collectors in pre-modern times had warehouses, or *kura*, where they stored their art collections, and there were special types of wooden storage boxes made to protect these screens when they were not on display or might need to be transported offsite. In present-day collections, one exception is that sliding-door screens are sometimes still used for their original function.

Of course, what really attracts collectors to these screens is the quality of the painting, which is a characteristically Japanese mixture of overstatement and understatement, riotous imagination and a sense of subtle withholding, even vanishing. "Good Japanese painters are masters at using negative space," says Mirviss. "In screens and scrolls, the artist creates trees that move in and out of the picture plane and clouds that stimulate the viewer's imagination. They require the viewer to complete the picture, almost like a pre-modern form of interactive art." One of the typical and most interesting themes in screen art is known as *tagasode* ("whose sleeves?"). In this genre, we see garments, usually a woman's, draped over some furniture element, with the long, graceful sleeves emphasized. "The implication," says Mirviss, is that one's possessions in and of themselves are evocative and revealing of the personality or character of their owner." The absence of

From top: Kishi Renzan, *Eagle in a snow covered pine tree,* circa 1850, one of a pair of six-fold screens, ink and light color on paper; Kitagawa Fujimaro, *Travelers at Shichirigama Beach pass Enoshima Island as Mount Fuji appears at the distant shore,* circa 1820–early 1830s, two-fold screen, color, ink, gold, and gofun on paper.



From top: *Tagasode* ("Whose Sleeves") screen, late 17th century, ink and color with torn and scattered gold and silver leaf flakes on paper; Kishi Renzan, *Eagle in a snow covered pine tree*, circa 1850, one of a pair of six-fold screens, ink and light color on paper.

the human figure from the picture can be thought of as an extension of the idea of negative space. Mirviss has a two-fold *tagasode* screen from the late 17th century, in ink and color with gold and silver flakes applied. It shows four striped and patterned robes, a black outer coat and sashes draped over a lacquer-and-gold kimono stand, all observed with a very detail-oriented eye. The various objects in this still life were likely part of a wedding trousseau.

Another two-fold screen in Mirviss' stock shows a whole different side of screen painting. It was done in the 1820s or 1830s (Edo period) by Kitagawa Fujimaro, a follower of the ukiyo-e master Utamaro, and like many a woodblock print (which Fujimaro also made) it shows elegant female figures, colorfully dressed. Here they are travelers, seen against a contrastingly monochrome background of a beach with Mount Fuji in the far distance.

A pair of 18th-century Edo-period six-panel screens by the Kyoto artist Hara Zaichu, offered by Imari, evoke the power of untamed nature by depicting ocean waves breaking over rocks. The water and stone are rendered in a fairly stylized way with ink and soft color, while extensive application of gold leaf conveys the negative space. Instead of trying to paint the whole seascape, the artist has chosen to zero in on a portion of the scene, to heighten its power and sense of motion.

New York dealer Erik Thomsen has a pair of six-panel screens from 1910 that also depict nature, but in a far more naturalistic way that shows the influence of Western painting. *Shoreline at Dusk*, by Furuya Korin, depicts water birds perched on sweeping, sinuous tree branches from which hang some fisherman's nets. Using glue and crushed seashells, the artist imparted so much texture to the nets that they actually rise from the picture plane. Here the confines of traditional Japanese screen art are clearly being extended.

The availability of high-grade screens in the West is a relatively new phenomenon. When Europeans and Americans started exporting art objects from Japan in the 1850s, says Mirviss, "The Japanese weren't selling them their best treasures. Rather than great paintings, they sold them *netsuke*, *ukiyo-e*—art forms considered plebeian by the Japanese." Some mediocre screens did make the Westward journey, but really good ones didn't start coming out of Japan until the post-World War II period, particularly in the 1960s and '70s. A collector named Harry Packard, who came with MacArthur's army and stayed, is responsible for many great screens ending up in U.S. museums and private collections—and according to Mirviss, there is more in pri-

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vate collections than in public ones. The Joe and Etsuko Price collection can be viewed, in part, at LACMA, and in the East, the Met will soon be exhibiting portions of the collection of Robert and Betsy Feinberg of Boston.

Most of the screens on the market are 19th-century, though examples can be found from the 17th century and even the 16th (the earliest part of the period of pictorial screen greatness, although decorative hinged screens were being made as early as the Heian period, 794–1185). The durability of screens can be ascribed to their construction—wooden lattices overlaid with layers and layers of paper, shingled so they can expand and contract with temperature and humidity—"an extremely durable, quite brilliant construction," says Fleishman. Still, cautions Mirviss, "in a heated, un-humidified New York apartment, screens can start to warp and bend, which in turn can cause the paper or silk of the painted surface to crack. It's important to keep consistent temperature and humidity where the artwork is stored and on view." Such modern concerns aside, screens need to be remounted every 200 years or so, according to Fleishman.

As for what collectors can expect to pay for these marvels, Mirviss says, "A screen that is in its original format and not a copy of earlier tradition, is something of quality and in excellent condition, can be found at prices starting as low as $20,000. Fleishman notes that prices have remained generally stable over the past several decades. "Even when the Japanese economy collapsed in 1990 and real estate went down 65 percent, screen prices did not go down. Then again, the Japanese economy has been in a slump for 20 years, so they haven't gone up much, either," although she notes that prices for early 20th-century screens have recently jumped quite a bit.

Mirviss stresses that one does not have to be extremely wealthy to collect even at the high end of the screen market; examples by "A-level artists" of the 18th or 19th centuries generally go for prices in the low to mid-six figures. "What can you buy in American art under a quarter of a million dollars—and you're talking 24 feet of art with a pair of six-fold screens! Japanese painting is still one of the great bargains."

From top: Tani Buncho, *Mount Tsukuba*, 1804–18 (Bunka era), six-fold screen, ink and color on gold leaf; *Majestic Pine*, two-fold screen, Edo period, early 19th century.

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