



## *Southern Barbarians (Namban byōbu)*

Mid 17th century

Artist unknown (Japanese)

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Six-panel screen (one of a pair); Ink, colors,  
and gold leaf on paper

170.8 cm x 369 cm

Robert Allerton Endowment Fund, 1965.401

Among the most unusual products of the Momoyama period (1568–1603) in Japan were the *namban byobu* or Southern Barbarian screens. These large, painted folding screens depicted the earliest Europeans (the “barbarians”) to come to Japan—the Catholic missionaries and merchants of Portugal and Spain. Their ships reached the Southern tip of the Japanese islands during the Momoyama period. In this screen, the Japanese go about their daily living and enjoy picnics while awaiting the arrival of the Portuguese galleon (a three-masted ship with two or more decks used by Spain during the 15th and 16th centuries as a merchantman or warship) carrying the European merchants and their exotic products. The Japanese wear full-length, flowing, patterned robes, and sandals. They carry fans, long, thin pipes, and swords. The Portuguese wear pantaloons, pointed shoes, and tall hats with broad rims. Some carry swords; two are on horseback. The screen documents the curiosity of the previously isolated islanders about the foreigners from Europe.

Screens have a long history in China and Japan. Painted Japanese screens may be divided into three types. The *tsuitate*, which came from China, is a small, one-panel, wooden screen supported by low legs. The artist may paint directly on the wooden surface of the *tsuitate* but more often first paints the image on paper and then pastes it on the wood. The second type, a sliding screen, was developed in the early Japanese Heian period (794–897) as a partitioning device and a semi-permanent fixture in buildings. Sliding wooden screens are often installed in corridors to separate one section of a building from another. Some sliding screens are made of wood, with decorations painted directly on the surface. The *fusuma*, a type of sliding screen, is made of several layers of paper stretched over light, wooden lattice doors. The selected design is painted on the final layer of paper (or less often cloth). In ancient Japan, *fusuma* were known as *soji* or *shoji*. *Shoji* require tracks in the transverse beams of the ceiling and parallel tracks in the floor below so the sliding screens can open and close.

The third type is the folding screen or *byobu*, an example of which is reproduced on this poster; its origin dates back to the Han dynasty (206 BCE–221 CE) in China. *Byobu* literally means enclosure or protection against (byo) the wind (bu), and the screen was used as a temporary divider of interior space or as an enclosure outdoors. They are constructed with hinges made of strips of paper woven horizontally from the front of one panel to the back of the other. Each adjacent strip is applied in the reverse direction. The process is repeated at least three times to strengthen the hinges. The separations between panels are thus minimized and all sections of the screen are united visually within one large frame. The screen format is inherently challenging for artists, because the zigzag folds necessary to stand the screen upright would fragment a poorly conceived composition. *Byobu* gained popularity because of their portable size and easy storage.

The alliance of screens with traditional Japanese architecture cannot be over-emphasized. Screens of all three types functioned to section off interiors and to establish atmosphere within that space. They were not necessarily works of fine art as defined in the West, but with the somewhat bare interiors of traditional Japanese residences, screens created a controlled decorative focus. In the Momoyama period, Japanese warlords, rich merchants, and other powerful figures required hundreds of painted screens and fusuma for their huge castles; there are anecdotes of dozens of such paintings lining the entryway where the shogun entered the castle.

Screen ink paintings with Chinese figures and landscapes were chosen for the lord's private living quarters. Paintings depicting Japanese narrative or genre (daily life) scenes, such as the example on the poster, were favored for smaller, less formal reception rooms. Large audience halls designed for grand ceremonial receptions were usually embellished with screen paintings of flowers, birds, and animals in brilliant colors.

**Note**

Japanese screens are not always on display at the Art Institute, due to their fragility. Please check the [Collection page](#) on our Web site.

## Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

- Discuss and summarize the purpose and significance of Japanese interior screens. Screens function to section off interiors and to establish atmosphere within that space. Think about the weather conditions surrounding Japan. Due in part to frequent typhoons and earthquakes, interior walls of traditional Japanese buildings are not load-bearing. Screens, then, have both a functional and artistic purpose.
- Examine the screen closely and identify the materials used in its production (wood, canvas, paint, gold leaf.) As a class project discuss the process of constructing and decorating a screen.
- The artist of this screen depicted the arrival of a Portuguese ship in Japan during the late 16th century. On the screen, magnificently composed pine trees and golden clouds form the background for the welcoming party that is eagerly awaiting the visitors. Have the students discuss the use of gold leaf as both a decorative and visual device. Was the artist successful using the material to depict land, cloud, mist, and sky? The first use of gold leaf as a background in Japanese screen painting has been attributed to the Kano school, which began in the Momoyama period (1568–1603).
- Japanese screens are read from right to left. Have the students describe what is going on in the painting, starting from the right side. What are the Japanese doing? What are the Portuguese doing? Have students discuss to what extent the Portuguese are being portrayed realistically or stereotypically. Discuss what the Portuguese may have brought to Japan (wine, fabrics, food products, weapons, horses, Christian beliefs). Why was their arrival a curious event to the Japanese (a new and different race of people, new products, language, and ideas)?
- The artist incorporated many smaller events into the larger scene. There are one or two gatherings in each of the six panels. Some are assemblies of Portuguese and others of Japanese or a combination of both. Have students provide evidence to prove that the artist was an actual observer in order to paint the scenes. Divide the students into groups and assign each group to focus on one of the smaller assemblies of people, locate the most important individuals, discuss the action, and write a brief dialogue. While each group of students acts out its scene, have the remainder of the class determine which gathering of people is being depicted.
- Have students make a screen. Have students cut out four to six equal-sized rectangles of foam core to make the screen. Each rectangle can be covered with gold foil or wrapping paper. Join each rectangle with strips of plastic book tape or

duct tape. Have students discuss the use, placement and subject of their screen to be painted. Will it be a scene from nature, a story, or a historical event? Have students decide on the images and design a border. Use pencil or chalk to lightly draw the design on the gold or silver paper. Using acrylic paint and/or permanent markers, have students paint their screens.

- Transferring the idea of the Japanese screen to a familiar setting, have students choose a room in their school where they could use a screen to redesign the space. What subject or mood would the screen convey (school spirit, peacefulness, athleticism, scholarship)? Have pairs of students make a model-sized, multiple-panel folding screen by using plastic book or duct tape to create the face-to-face folds. Because the zigzag of the screen can disrupt a poorly conceived pictorial design, the challenge for artists is to use the folds to create visually dynamic compositions. Have students paint their screens. While the screens are displayed around the room, have students discuss the intended subject of each. Have students select the one that best represents their school.
- Divide the class and have one half research and report on Japan and the other half research and report on Portugal. Have students use an atlas to research the geography. They can make maps and research major cities, elevations, climates, agriculture, minerals, and industries.
- Over the centuries, European artists have been influenced by Japanese screens. Have students examine screens in the Art Institute's European Decorative Arts galleries and compare them to Japanese screens. How are they similar and different in materials, production, subject, and purpose? Also, visit the Collections page on our Web site and look at the surrealist screen by artist Yves Tanguy. (*Untitled*, 1928; oil on wood; each panel: 200 x 59.7 cm; Joseph Winterbotham Collection, 1988.434)

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The Art Institute of Chicago

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