



## *Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips*

c. 1675

by Tosa Mitsuoki

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO  
Department of Museum Education  
Division of Student and Teacher Programs  
The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center

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# Tosa Mitsuoki (Japanese, 1617–1691)

## *Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips*, c. 1675

Six-panel screen (one of a pair); ink, color, gold leaf, and gold powder on silk

144 cm x 286 cm

Kate S. Buckingham Endowment, 1977.156

Cherry blossom viewing (*hanami*), a tradition going back many centuries, has always been a favorite theme depicted by Japanese poets and artists in word and image. In this screen painting, premier court painter Tosa Mitsuoki pays tribute to courtly and literary customs by portraying the tradition of viewing cherry blossoms to celebrate the arrival of spring.

Bursting with delicate white petals, a firmly anchored cherry tree looms out of a mist of golden powder. Wafting slips of paper, embellished with gold leaf and inscribed with classical poems about spring, hang from the twisted tree branches that stretch uninterruptedly across all six panels of the screen painting. The interspersed bright whites of the blossoms and colors of the poem slips add to the colorful, patterned design of the screen. Visual play is continued with the curving lines of the tree trunk and branches, wafting poem slips, and bamboo leaves that project diagonally behind the cluster of rocks, creating a sense of energy and movement. Circles of green fungus speckled on the cherry branches, tree trunk, and rocks suggest that this site might be laden with heavy mists and moist air. Dwarf bamboo leaves indicate this site is in the mountains because this plant grows only at high altitudes. The sum of these clues might lead a Japanese viewer to conclude that this is Yoshino, a mountain that became famous during the Heian Period (784–1185) as the setting for imperial cherry blossom viewing parties. A narrow strip of brocade encloses this continuous picture along the top and bottom of each panel and down the exterior sides of the lateral panels.

Folding screens (*byōbu*), such as the *Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips* and its counterpart, *Autumn Maple with Poem Slips*, were an important element in Japanese interiors. They separated spaces, protected from drafts, and offered visual pleasure to viewers through their painted surfaces. Layers of paper made from the pulp of the mulberry tree are placed over a light wooden foundation. The *byōbu* stands by itself; double hinges, also constructed of paper, allow the owner to fold the panels in two different directions, creating a zig-zag arrangement. Silk borders covering the edges make it possible to move a screen without touching the glued painting. A screen's layout follows that of the hand scroll—the viewer reads it from right to left. In this pair of screens created by Tosa Mitsuoki, *Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips* is read first. When placed together, a mighty tree stands on the right- and left-hand sides of these paired screens, giving it a sense of greater openness through the central panels.

At a time when unrefined **samurai** ruled and civil wars left the imperial court of Kyoto financially and spiritually broken, members of the aristocracy looked back to the classical age of the 11th and 12th centuries to reaffirm their cultural identity. Tosa Mitsuoki fulfilled this melancholic longing for the romantic past by painting for Tofukumon-in (1607–1678), wife of retired Emperor Gominzuno-ō (ruled 1611–1629), a screen that recalls the artistic, literary, and intellectual elements of the Japanese court culture during the Heian and early Kamakura (1185–1333) period. **Courtiers** of the Heian period observed the rites of spring through outings that centered on the viewing

of flowering cherries. Elegantly attired aristocrats brought **sake** and sweet treats made especially for the occasion. Inspired by the blossoms, they composed poems with 31 syllables (*waka*) which were later recorded in imperial poetry anthologies.

In *Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips*, the *waka* inscribed on the slip come from these earlier anthologies.<sup>1</sup> While viewing cherry blossoms, the empress and her courtiers engaged in a contest of recalling these verses of classical poetry associated with spring. Contestants wrote their verses in **calligraphy** on vertical strips of paper, which were then tied on tree branches. In homage to the empress, the 17th-century courtiers, ministers, and princes who may have participated in these spring excursions personally inscribed each particular poem slip painted on this screen. Mitsuoki's painting thus serves as tribute to the continuity of generations and native Japanese traditions.

Tosa Mitsuoki was born in Sakai, Japan, in 1617. He belonged to a hereditary line of painters, the Tosa School, where he trained as an **apprentice**. Mitsuoki moved to Kyoto in 1634 with his father, Mitsunori, and continued his training under other artists in the workshop after Mitsunori's death. The Tosa family and other **ateliers** maintained their profession by passing on their vocational skills and property from generation to generation within the professional family or *ei* (house or household). Promising workshop apprentices were incorporated into the household through adoption or marriage. Members of the Tosa workshop used the same family name and a characteristic personal name, usually taking on *mitsu* (bright) or *hiro* (extensive) as the first of a two-character name. Elders maintained a family's lineage and reputation by selecting the family/workshop head or *eimoto* (literally "household foundation") from a pool that included the first-born son, a gifted junior relative, an adopted workshop employee, or an in-law. Artistic and business abilities were major criteria in making such a decision.

Mitsuoki, throughout his life, tackled a diverse range of subject matter and styles in response to the interest of his patrons and as a means by which the Tosa workshop was able to survive. His "canvas" also varied from picture albums to folding fans, some of which were imbued with symbolic and ceremonial prestige. Before becoming the superintendent and chief painter in the imperial court in 1657, the Tosa family struggled to survive. Nearly one hundred years earlier, their workshop left Kyoto due to the loss of its *eimoto*, Mitsumoto, in the midst of a civil war battle. Decades of war left the imperial court in shambles. Military generals throughout Japan battled together and against each other in an attempt to become **shogun**, the military ruler of Japan. Finally, in 1615, Tokugawa Ieyasu defeated a former ally to become shogun, forging peace through legislation and establishing his military capital in Edo (modern day Tokyo). With peace, the Tokugawa shogunate gave financial support to the imperial court in its capital, Kyoto. Mitsuoki's appointment thus came at a time of post-war reconstruction and was regarded as a symbol of the renaissance of the court and the unification of the nation.

The Tosa School specialized in literary and historical Japanese subject matters painted in the native **yamato-e** style, which was developed during Japan's period of seclusion in the 10th through 12th centuries. *Yamato-e* painters employed flat, vivid colors and sensitive brushwork called *tsukuri-e* (literally "manufactured painting"). This painting process is so precise that it hides the brushwork and imparts to the viewer a smooth surface. In *Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips*, however, Mitsuoki combined the traditional *yamato-e* with his **Kano**-trained contemporaries' technique of *kara-e*, the Chinese **calligraphic** ink practice. He layered rock formations in a frontal manner and attempted not to hide the contours shaping them. In addition, Mitsuoki used parallel, horizontal ink strokes to create the effect of volume and mass in the tree trunk. Bands of mist and clouds were achieved through successive ink washes, while **pointillist** dots added texture to the painting.

To complement the luxurious aesthetic of his court patrons and in accordance to the *yamato-e* tradition, Mitsuoki featured sumptuous mineral pigments. **Malachite**, **cinnabar**, gold and silver were used in his screen paintings. Malachite supplies the green of the bamboo and **lichen**. Cinnabar produces the red of the poem slips. Silver, now tarnished to a steel-gray, is visible on the unwritten side of a number of poem slips. Gold, in the form of leaf and powder, has been applied to catch and radiate light, causing the entire screen to glow. The atmospheric effects created by the sprinkled gold powder minimize suggestions of pictorial depth and impose a strong two-dimensionality on the screen. Mitsuoki's choice of materials not only declares the splendor of the court, but the boldness of his composition is so compelling that the elegance of the tree alone reminds the viewer of the imperial court's role as the authority on taste and national traditions. He believed that "artists must select details, leave things to the viewer's imagination...and if the essence of painting can be reduced to a single term, it would be 'lightness'—lightness in color, detail, and spirit."<sup>2</sup> No extraneous details, such as figures picnicking under the tree or courtiers attaching poem slips to the tree branches, were needed to convey his message. Even though he composed a design to embellish the poetry or narrative of the painting, the powerful rendering of the tree overshadows the literary content of the poem slips.

Although the modern cherry blossom viewing parties are not as refined as those in the past, the Japanese still enjoy this popular rite of springtime. People celebrate the flowering of cherry blossoms by holding *hanami* picnics with friends and families beneath the trees. Beloved for the shape and color of the petals, these blossoms reflect the traditional Japanese values of purity and simplicity. Since it flowers very briefly and then scatters, the cherry blossom has also become a symbol of their appreciation for fleeting or ephemeral beauty.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an identification of the poet, poem, poetry anthology, and 17th century calligrapher, see Carolyn Wheelwright, ed., *Word in Flower: The Visualization of Classical Literature in Seventeenth-Century Japan* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1989), p. 116.

<sup>2</sup> Rosenfeld, John M. "Japanese Studio Practice: The Tosa Family and the Imperial Painting Office in the Seventeenth Century," *Studies in the History of Art*, v. 38 (1993): p. 93.

# Glossary

**apprentice:** one who is learning a trade, art, or calling by practical experience under skilled workers

**atelier:** artist's workshop or studio where apprentices, students, or young family members receive instruction

**calligraphic:** a quality of line characterized by variations in ink tone and flowing, elegant brushwork; related to artistic or stylized lettering or handwriting

**cinnabar:** red mercuric sulfide used as a pigment; also called vermilion

**courtiers:** members of the imperial court

**Kano:** rival workshop of the Tosa family; worked primarily for the samurai class; specialized in ink painting derived from pictorial styles, materials, and subjects recently imported from China

**lichen:** a type of plant made up of alga and fungus usually found growing on a rock or a tree

**malachite:** green mineral carbonate of copper used as a pigment

**pointillist:** practice in art of applying small strokes or dots of color to a surface

**sake:** brewed alcoholic beverage made from fermented rice

**samurai:** the warrior aristocracy of Japan

**shogun:** a title given to the supreme military dictator of Japan during the Edo period (1615–1868)

**yamato-e:** literally “Japanese pictures”; paintings of native subject matter, often literary or historical tales, executed with great detail, bright colors, and precious materials. After the Civil War period in Japan, yamato-e was associated with the imperial court and traditional culture.

# Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

- In ancient Japan, objects from nature were taken to symbolize important ideals. The cherry blossom, for example, embodies the Japanese values of simplicity, purity, and an appreciation of fleeting beauty. A samurai's life was proverbially compared to the short-lived cherry blossoms because he was fully prepared to sacrifice his life at any time for his leader's cause. This beloved flower embodies the national character of the Japanese. Its five-notched petal motif has been used to decorate everyday objects such as kimonos, lacquer boxes, tables, pottery, etc. Pick an object and create your own design using the cherry blossom motif. Write step-by-step instructions on how you decorated your object and what materials you used.
- The Japanese consider cherry blossom viewing an annual rite of spring. In our country, what are some activities or rituals that we engage in to celebrate the beginning of spring? Consider other seasons as well. Create a comparative chart of the seasons, with one column for Japan and another for Illinois. Discuss the clothing that we wear, as well as the types of plants and animals that are found during each season. After listing all the items associated with each season, create a calendar representing spring, summer, winter, and fall. Include poetry, photographs, plants, drawings, etc., inspired by these seasons.
- Imagine that you are a writer for a travel magazine. The editor assigns you to go to Japan and write a report based on your experiences at the cherry blossom viewing festival. Step into the screen and write about what you see, feel, smell, and hear. Where would you want to go? What would you want to see? Further your imagination by adding to your story characters such as the empress, her courtiers, and her father, Shogun Tokugawa Hidetada. What food did they bring with them? What games did they play? How were they dressed?
- Design an advertisement for the travel section of the *Chicago Tribune*. What would you include in the ad and how would you design it to instantly catch someone's eye?

- Based on the plants illustrated by Tosa Mitsuoki, we can assume that the cherry tree is located in an area laden with moist air and heavy mists. What causes mists and at what temperature do they start to develop? Which regions in Japan are more conducive to fogs? Why? Have your students investigate Japan's topography. How is it different/similar to the U.S.?

- Investigate other artistic schools against whom the Tosa family was competing. Compare/contrast their styles, materials, and techniques. Create a chart that lists your findings and include pictures of objects as visual examples.

- Have students pretend that they are one of the empress's courtiers. Explain that Tosa Mitsuoki asked them to compose a poem about spring, which they will eventually write on the screen he created for the empress. Have them practice their haiku on a slip of paper like the ones depicted on the screen. Haiku is a Japanese lyric poem of a fixed, 17-syllable form that often points to an observation of nature. The first line has five syllables, the second has seven, and the third has five, for a total of seventeen syllables.

The wind blows softly  
as I gaze up at the tree  
sweet petals in sight

Once they've finished their poem, hang it on a tree drawn on a bulletin board. Have your own hanami celebration, with food, music, and poetry reading!

- Many 19th century artists such as Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), Edouard Vuillard (1868–1940), and James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) were influenced by Japanese screens. Investigate what inspired them and how they adapted screen painting into their artistic style and methods. What subject matter did they depict? What materials did they use? How were these screens used?

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