UNFOLDING TALES: AESTHETIC STRATEGIES IN JAPANESE HANDSCROLLS

Estelle Bauer

fig. 1
The Twelve Animals Gathering for a Poetry Contest from *The Poetry Contest of the Twelve Animals*, detail from Scroll I, Edo period, mid-17th century, handscroll, ink, color, gold, and silver on paper, 34.5 × 1036 cm, Chester Beatty, Dublin (J. 1154.1). © Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library

If a story is understood as a succession of actions involving particular characters, staged in particular locations, narrative art would be a visual record of these elements. The same story, depending on how it has been pictorialized, will present variations, sometimes tiny, sometimes significant. What is crucial is that the work is recognizable to the viewer, a point already noted centuries ago in Japanese literature. In the early eleventh-century *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*), for instance, the court dignitary Tō no Chūjō notes that "illustrations based on scenes and characters from tales (*monogatari-e*) are familiar to the viewer and can be understood at a glance. Their quality is thus more easily discernible."[1] These words are delivered at a moment in the novel when the preparations for a contest of narrative paintings (*monogatari-e awase*) throw the entire court into chaos. Fueled by power rivalries, the two teams select old examples or secretly assemble new ones.[2] During the competition, ladies-in-waiting debate the merits of the illustrated stories similar to a classical poetry contest (*uta awase*), and they designate a winner for each round. An important factor in the appreciation of the paintings is their luxurious mounting as a handscroll. But one can also extrapolate from Tō no Chūjō's description that the carefully considered content of the pieces likewise plays a significant role.

Two centuries later, in the mid-thirteenth century, the illumination of a story painted on square poem cards (*shikishi*) and pasted on folding screens resulted in a petition being brought before the shogun. Different from the above example in the fictional narrative of *The Tale of Genji*, this is a documented incident and the only such instance in the history of painting in premodern Japan.[3] Here, the complainant is a female poet, who accuses two painters of errors in the iconographic details in the illuminations of the *Genji* story, and she attributes this to the use of an inaccurate version of the novel. She maintains that the painters should have first undertaken research to establish the correct version of the text before beginning their work, and her argument is supported by excerpts in *The Tale of Genji*. For their part, the two defendant female painters adhere to another way of pictorialization that deliberately ignores the original reference text. In their defense, the two female painters assert that their paintings are above reproach because they are based on illustrations from a set of twenty handscrolls in the collection of the shogun. This mid-thirteenth century debate surrounding iconography represents two opposing views of narrative painting: on the one hand, the preeminence of the text, and on the other, the emphasis on pictorial tradition.

Although removed in time from the works in the current publication, these two documents—one grounded in fact, the other a fictionalized account—nonetheless convey notions that can assist us in navigating through the many later handscrolls. But looking at the paintings is equally important because they reveal different conceptual ideas about visual narrative according to the practices and styles of respective painting studios. This essay offers some basic principles and conventions employed by artists of narrative paintings, drawing primarily upon the handscrolls themselves—considered the most appropriated format for pictorial narration—as examples. Other types of formats will also be cited for the purposes of comparison.

The History and Viewing of Handscrolls

The handscroll originated in ancient China, and in its early form it was made of bamboo or wood slats fastened together that could be rolled up for storage. This common substrate, used for all types of documents, was replaced by silk, an expensive material reserved for more prestigious occasions. Paper was gradually adopted and mounted in the same way as silk in the handscroll format. Handscrolls were probably introduced in Japan soon after the arrival of Buddhism and Chinese writing in the sixth to seventh centuries. Buddhist narratives based on a Chinese model, which joined script and paintings, first appeared around the eighth century (see cat. 10). By the beginning of the eleventh century, the tradition of secular narrative handscroll paintings of tales written in Japanese was well established, as noted or recorded in the picture contests recounted in *The Tale of Genji*. Today, the oldest extant physical examples date to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They deal with both secular and religious themes, evidence that the main narrative genres were already in place. From this time on, the handscroll would become one of the major forms of artistic expression in Japan.

Handscrolls that combine script and paintings are called *emakimono*, referring to a "thing" (*mono*) composed of "scrolled" (*maki*) "images" (*e*). The similarly meaning term *emaki* is also employed in Japanese titles to provide information about the materiality of the painting, for example, *Genji monogatari emaki* is used to describe "the illuminated handscroll of *The Tale of Genji*." In its most common form, an *emaki* is composed of joined sheets of paper, measuring a little more than 30 cm in height and from 10 to 25 m in length. A single story can develop over one or more scrolls. The largest surviving set, the forty-eight handscrolls of the fourteenth-century *The Hagiography of Master Hōnen* (*Hōnen shōnin eden*), relates the life of the Buddhist monk Hōnen (1133–1212), posthumous events, and numbers forty-eight handscrolls.

fig. 2
Storage Box for the Set of Three Handscrolls for The Legends of Emperors Yao and Shun,
Linden-Museum, Stuttgart

The story recounted on a handscroll is read and viewed from right to left in keeping with East Asian convention. The text is generally divided into sections punctuated by paintings, each painting illuminating the content of the text that precedes it. Occasionally, dialogues or short descriptions are added within the image (*gachūshi*) (fig. 1). A comparison of *emaki* with the production of illuminated manuscripts that flourished in Europe during the medieval period reveals that, unlike in Europe, in Japan the spread of printed editions during the seventeenth century did not unseat manuscript culture. Their elevated status, the highest among all other formats, were key in their enduring history.

A handscroll is a precious object that is protected from light, dust, and humidity by storage in a wooden box (fig. 2). When enjoying a scroll, the viewer sets it on a tatami mat or on a low table, carefully unrolling the left section while keeping the right section in place, and stops when the unrolled segment measures between 50 and 70 cm (an average arm span). (In this way viewing differs from appreciating other art forms such as a screen, lacquer, or ceramic object.) The right section is then rolled up and the left section unrolled. The handscroll is similar to a book in that the reader holds it and enjoys it alone or in a very small group. Unlike a book that the reader can peruse at will and randomly select what parts to read, the physical form of the handscroll requires that one start at the beginning before considering the end. The viewing and handling of a handscroll is therefore akin to embarking on a journey into unknown territory, revealed gradually as it is unfurled, and always one of curiosity and expectation.

The handscroll is markedly different from a Renaissance European oil painting on canvas or wood in the understanding of space and time. A painting, in the Renaissance Western tradition, is a self-contained surface with fixed boundaries; the figures portrayed have a specific static position and are viewed from a particular standpoint. In the case of the handscroll, the visible section is constantly changing according to the framing set by the viewer. Compositional elements, be they a figure, landscape, interior object, or architecture, placed on the left edge (the place where it will appear first) can prompt the viewer to continue unfolding the scroll or can demarcate a visual boundary between two scenes. When the same element is placed in the center, it interacts with the figures or objects around it. When on the right, it will serve yet another function. This gives rise to two points. First, the placement of the figures (or other elements) on a handscroll is variable. It depends on the action of the viewer—in other words, the framing that he or she "imprints" on the section or the opening of the handscroll. Terms that commonly describe a Western painting such as "right," "left," or "center" are therefore not always relevant. This difficulty in situating a compositional element in an absolute manner is the main feature of handscrolls and distinguishes them from other fixed substrates (e.g., illustrations in books or photographs). Secondly, the meaning of each element and their role in the composition of the image may equally depend on their place within the viewable section.

Narrative Strategies

Architecture

The painter would inevitably need to consider the shifting quality of a handscroll in the creation of illuminations. The horizontal movement of the scroll logically presupposes that the same motif can be grasped from different viewpoints. The depiction of natural elements with organic shapes such as mountains or trees may not pose any particular difficulties; this contrasts the architectural forms whose rectilinear shapes can cause viewers to pause. This is why painters used "parallel projection," which is characterized by diagonals that accompany the viewer's gaze as he or she moves from right to left. This is particularly suited to the portrayal of buildings that stretch out in length and that the viewer discovers gradually (figs. 3 & 4).

In parallel projection, the vantage point is high and the lines defined by the beams and the tatami mats remain parallel such that there is no perspective reduction. In *The Debate on the Merits of Sake and Rice* (*Shuhanron*), for example, the parallel projection takes two forms. In the first (fig. 5), all parallel lines are diagonal, resulting in a composition that appears unstable and giving the impression that the human figures are about to slide off the surface. In the second (fig. 6), only the lines suggesting depth are oblique while the others are horizontal, creating what appears to be a more stable compositional type. Parallel projection is widely used in East Asian art but Japanese painters sometimes remove the roof in a compositional device known as *fukinuki yatai*, or "blown-off roof," to allow the viewer to see several interior rooms or inside-outside spaces simultaneously. Interestingly, architectural elements depicted on fans often accommodate the shape of the object (see cat. 78). This adaptation of the composition to the materiality of the substrate is particularly striking in the scene of Kiso no Yoshinaka (1154–1184) praying for victory (see cat. 78d), in which the *torii* gate seems to lean precariously to the left.

Architecture is not only the means of structuring the moving image surface. It also typifies where the story takes place and situates the protagonists socially. For instance, an aristocrat's residence would be furnished with blinds and a majestic entrance gate (see fig. 55, p. 239) while the house of a lower-ranking individual would have a more modest gate (see cat. 52). The contrast between China and Japan is another

fig. 3
Sumiyoshi Hiroyuki (1755–1811),
Education of the Young Shuten Dōji from *The Tale of Ibukiyama Shuten Dōji*, detail from Scroll II, Edo period, 1786, handscroll, GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde, Leipzig, see checklist, cat. 83

fig. 4
Gathering at the House of Kuribayashi Shibuzane from The Tale of the Monkeys, detail,
Muromachi–Momoyama periods, 1560s–1580s, handscroll,
The British Museum, London,
see checklist, cat. 101

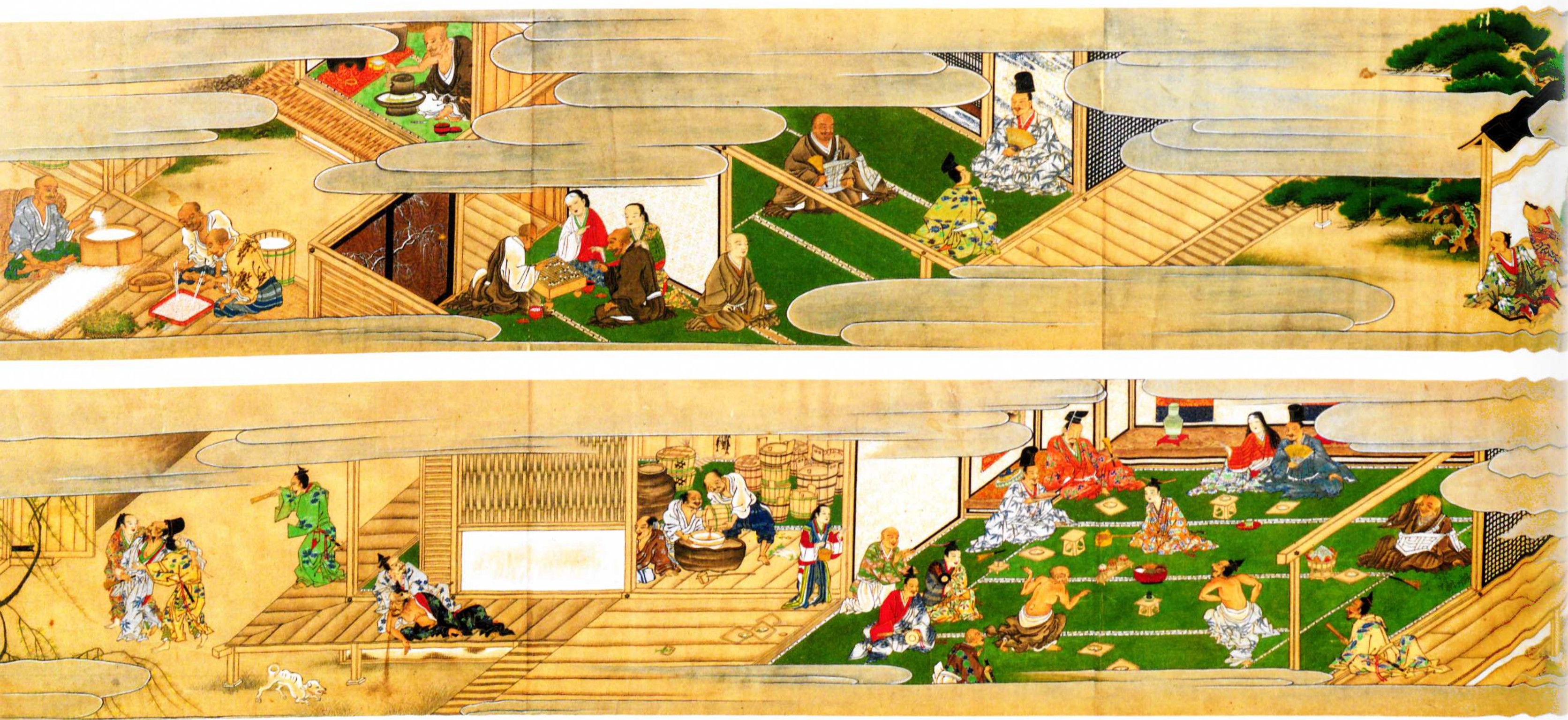


fig. 5
Compositional device of removing the roof to reveal room interiors (*fukinuki yatai* or "blown-off roof"), *The Debate on the Merits of Sake and Rice*, detail, Edo period, mid-late 17th century, handscroll, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, see checklist, cat. 103

fig. 6
Diagonal lines suggesting spatial depth, *The Debate on the Merits of Sake and Rice*, detail, Edo period, mid-late 17th century, handscroll, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, see checklist, cat. 103

structuring opposition of the narrative painting (see part VII). Chinese-style dwellings are built on masonry terraces delineated by red-lacquered railings, sometimes with elaborate, colorful decoration. The floors are paved with multicolored tiles, the roofs have glazed tiles, and curtains often frame the bays (see fig. 68). These codes of representation associated with otherness are also adapted for images of the Korean Peninsula (see fig. 17, p. 100) and the underwater palace of the Dragon Kings (*ryūō*) (see cat. 97f). In contrast to these opulent settings, Japanese architecture appears comparatively sober with its natural wood structures and shingle roofs. The colors are concentrated on the sliding walls and furniture. This interest in comparing China and Japan surfaced as early as the Heian period as seen in Chapter 17, "The Picture Contest" (*E-awase*), in *The Tale of Genji*, where the victorious side brought out a handscroll featuring both images from China and Japan. It can be assumed that the opposition of the two countries was not only based on the depiction of buildings but also on clothing and customs.

Human Figures

Whether the tale is set in Japan or abroad, the characters are rarely individualized. Their appearance is determined by their social background, which is rendered using uncomplicated iconographic conventions. Courtiers are generally portrayed in Heian-period robes while ladies-in-waiting wear layered garments fashioned from exquisite fabrics and long locks that cascade to the ground (fig. 7). Men wear *kanmuri* or *eboshi* hats (fig. 8). The most striking feature of both male and female characters is their impassivity. The outlines of their faces and their facial features are thin, regular, and unmodeled: the mouth is small, the nose is tiny and V-shaped, the pupils of the eyes are barely visible. The aristocrats are idealized and appear ageless unless they have entered the Buddhist order. And finally, they are seen in three-quarter frontal or back view, never facing the viewer or in profile. These principles serve as signposts in a hierarchical system in which the status of an individual is indicated by their proximity to the emperor—the closer to the emperor the higher the social standing even if their economic or political power is actually quite modest. This mode of representation is conventional and at times unrealistic. In two of *The Ise Stories* illustrations (see fig. 21, p. 115), in which the poet Ariwara no Narihira (825–880) passes before Mount Fuji, he wears a *kanmuri* cap, as if he were attending the court even though he is traveling in the country far from the capital. This headdress indicates his high rank, thus differentiating him from his companions.

Lower-ranking figures usually have more expressive faces, with wide-open eyes, prominent noses, a supple line defining the mouth and occasionally thick lips. They may be seen in three-quarter frontal or back views but they can also be depicted from the front or in profile. Above all, the outlines of their faces are modeled, and they often have colored complexions. The warriors are portrayed variously, depending on whether they are elites or just simple soldiers, and as such they can be shown in the same way as a courtier. But they can also be dressed in armor, caught in motion as they decapitate enemies, or involved in actions and bear fearful countenances. Young men, regardless of their social rank, are frequently illustrated the same way as noblemen but without hats.

All these features represent general conventions: each visual narrative constitutes a world within which the characters are defined in relation to each other, and these differences assist in their identification. They are sometimes tiny and can also depend on the style of the painter or the theme of the painting. In *The Song of Lasting Sorrow* handscroll (see detail p. 254), for example, the distinction between the emperor of China and commoners is barely perceptible.

In the tales that are staged indoors, architecture is depicted, as noted above, from a high vantage point but human figures are seen from a lower angle, as if the painter was next to them—that is, at the eye-level of a character within the image. The inclusion of two viewpoints, one to render architecture (a high one) and the other to render the human figure (a low one), does not hinder the legibility of the image. Most important in an indoor scene is the spatial positioning of the character. Indeed, in East Asia, the higher ranking an individual, the more he or she must be located inside a space, out of sight. Conversely, the lower the rank of a person, the more he or she will be located in areas exposed to view such as on the veranda or in the garden. Furniture also shows how a protagonist is pictured. Both high-ranking male and female figures are often seated in front of a screen that serves to magnify the space around them. The wives of the elite are seated next to a curtain of state (*kichō*) arranged to conceal them from the gaze of others (fig. 9). The painter of *The Tale of the Monkeys* handscroll has carefully followed these rules that assist in anthropomorphizing the characters. The first scene takes place in a building with blinds that hints at an aristocratic residence. The face of the master monkey is captured in three-quarter view, seated before a folding screen and holding a golden fan, all of which defines him as a refined personage invested with social standing and authority. The other two monkeys are depicted in profile. The one on the right, with a deferential attitude, sits on the edge between the tatami-covered space and the veranda (fig. 10).

fig. 7
Tosa School, *Chapter 22, "A Lovely Garland" (Tamakazura)* from *The Tale of Genji*, Edo period, early 17th century, album page, ink, color, and gold on paper, 21 × 17.6 cm, Museum Rietberg, Zurich (RJP 452y)

fig. 8
Tosa School, *Chapter 32, "A Branch of Plum" (Umegae)* from *The Tale of Genji*, Edo period, early 17th century, album page, ink, color, and gold on paper, 21 × 17.6 cm, Museum Rietberg, Zurich (RJP 452aa)
The courtier on the left wears an *eboshi*, the courtier on the right a *kanmuri*.

fig. 9
Noblewomen Sitting Next to a Curtain of State (kichō) from *The Tale of Ibukiyama Shuten Dōji*, detail, see fig. 3 above

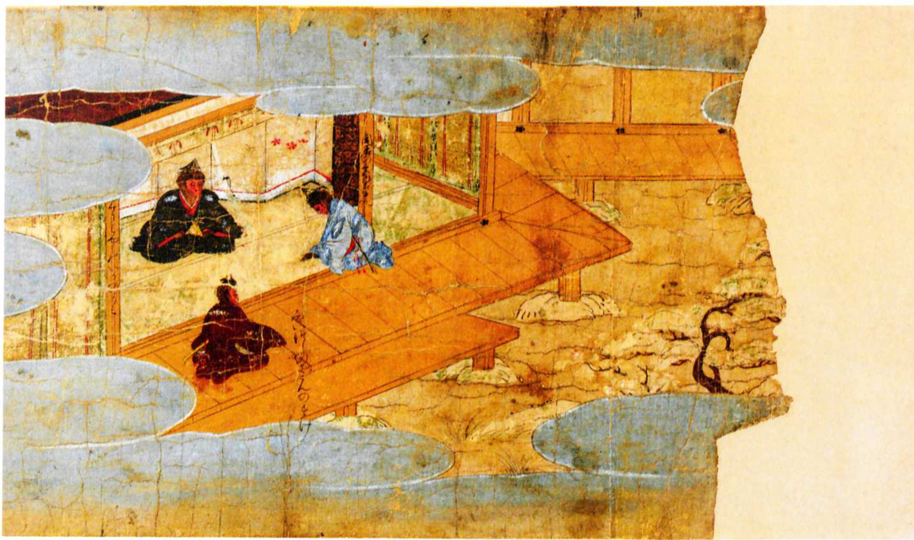


fig. 10
The placement of a master and servants in an interior setting, *The Tale of the Monkeys*, detail, Muromachi–Momoyama periods, 1560s–1580s, handscroll, The British Museum, London, see checklist, cat. 101

Time and Space

The lengthwise format of the handscroll is suited to a narration that respects a chronological sequence, with episodes that alternate between text and image. There are also examples in which the same painting section contains several sequential scenes. Kano Sansetsu's *The Song of Lasting Sorrow* (see cat. 91), for instance, consists of a single continuous painting divided into two handscrolls without any textual interruptions. In this way it exploits the various methods of articulating individual scenes. The first consists of embedding the scenes in the connected rooms of a large-scale architectural structure. This form of narration suits the section of the tale that takes place in the palace of the Chinese emperor. Another method is the insertion of clouds to separate scenes, which although unrelated to the story's content, serve as a site of spatial-temporal transition. Clouds are already employed in the visual narratives of twelfth-century handscrolls but the manner of representation changes over time. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, they resemble mist and are comparable to atmospheric phenomenon, creating a gradual and smooth transition between scenes, similar to a fade in film. Later, they become more visually prominent, covered with opaque pigments and contrasting the scenes on either side to yield a conspicuous boundary. A third method, arguably the oldest, is the use of landscape elements such as trees, mountains, and watercourses (see cat. 10). This device is still employed in the eighteenth century, albeit rarely, as seen in the Leipzig *Shuten Dōji* handscroll (fig. 11), where a rocky mountain, its summit hidden by clouds, bifurcates the image. At the same time, it is a signpost that the story is set on a mountain.

A single painting can also exhibit several actions that occur simultaneously in different places that the viewer discovers when unrolling the handscroll. The banquet scene in *The Tale of the Monkeys* (see fig. 4), for example, opens with the entrance gate that marks this as the residence of a relatively high-ranking person, and the trees indicate that the season is autumn. Two armed monkeys guard the doorway; one has dozed off due to boredom (fig. 12). This frequently employed motif points to a period of peace. The image then shows the banquet, the food preparation in the kitchen, and then the women's apartments, located in the most inaccessible area at the far back of the house. Here, divergent actions occur in parallel; they do not stem from each other. The narration in this section does not follow a chronological order. Rather, it is organized like a journey inside a residence from its point of entry (the door), the most open and public space, to the most private. This compositional device dates to the Heian period and variations of this are also seen in other works in this publication such as *The Shuten Dōji* or *The Debate on the Merits of Sake and Rice* handscrolls.[4]

Topography

The natural setting is not always a straightforward backdrop of an action in the tale but it can constitute an important element of the narrative. More than a chronological sequence, it is the location of the episodes in the landscape that convey the storytelling. An example is the six-panel folding screen illustrating the Battle of Ichinotani (see cat. 76 & 77). In it, the descent by the Minamoto troops down the slope of Hidoyori Pass is naturally (and logically) situated at the top of the screen, and it is intended to demonstrate the fearlessness of the Minamoto. The fight between Taira no Atsumori (1169–1184) and Minamoto retainer Kumagai Naozane (1141–1208) unfolds on the shore, a reminder that the Taira are linked with the country's Inland Sea and the west while the Minamoto are associated with the land and the east of Japan.

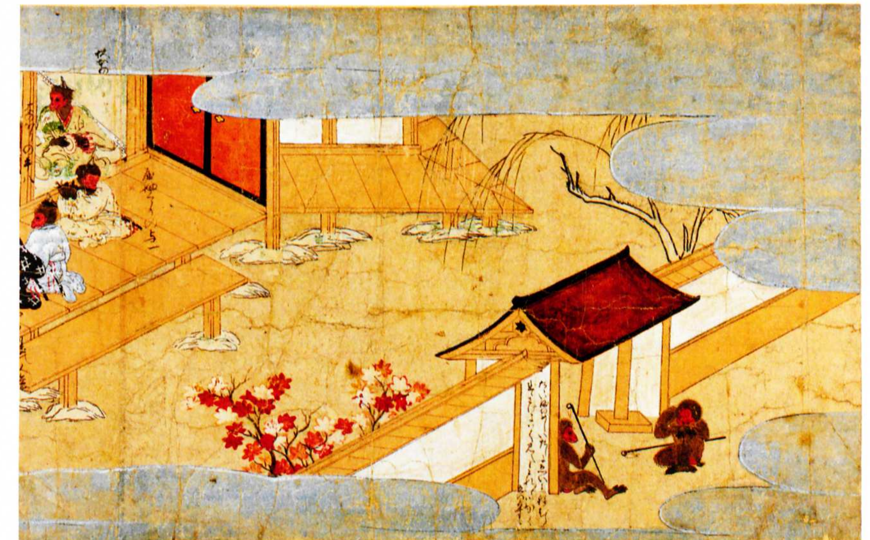
This tradition of topographical storytelling dates at least to the eleventh century with *The Illustrated Life of Prince Shōtoku* (*Shōtoku Taishi eden*, 1069). This celebrated painting, probably the oldest complete visual narrative in Japan, extends over a set of ten panels measuring around 1.85 m high and almost 14 m long.[5] It depicts an impressive panoramic landscape centered on the area of present-day Osaka and Nara. The sixty or so scenes chronicling the life of Prince Shōtoku (574–622) from birth to death, together with a few scenes before and after his life, are organized according to the place where they occurred, much to the detriment of any temporal continuity.[6] *The Battle of Ichinotani* folding screens belong to this tradition, which is well suited to large-scale paintings, thereby privileging spatial continuity and a cartographic approach in the telling of the stories.

As the passage in *The Tale of Genji* and the actual petition noted at the beginning of this essay suggest, it was expected that viewers from the eleventh to thirteenth century would immediately understand the visual history without prompting or without knowledge of the source tale as the image would be faithful to the original text. Later, a familiarity with history might have been a prerequisite before viewing, as in the case of *The Song of Lasting Sorrow* handscrolls or *The Battle of Ichinotani* screens, whose paintings are devoid of text but which recount famous episodes. In the majority of the handscrolls, however, the script precedes each painting section, allowing the reader-viewer to follow the story, even if they are unfamiliar with it, and to make a comparison between text and image. If we look once again at the petition submitted to the shogun in the mid-thirteenth century, is it the vision of the female poetess or that of the painters that has triumphed? If anything, the examples discussed here demonstrate that painters fashioned their own solutions in illuminating and telling stories—in the process they introduced (and imposed) their own visions of pictorial narration.
We might consider the significant role that painters played in the conception of narrative paintings if we look again at the illumination from the Leipzig *Shuten Dōji* handscroll (see fig. 11). The painter of this work—Sumiyoshi Hiroyuki—has borrowed the main lines of this section of this scene, as well as several details, from *The Hagiography of Master Hōnen* mentioned above, thus recycling an episode from one story to create another with a purely visual approach.[7] This eloquently expresses that narrative painting, regardless of the written narrative, can have a life of its own.

1 Murasaki, trans. Washburn, 2015, p. 364.
2 For a study of this chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, see Leggeri-Bauer, 2017.
3 For a presentation of this petition, see Akiyama, 1990, pp. 159–84; Meech-Pekarik, 1982, pp. 173–215. For a full translation in French, see Bauer, 2001, pp. 463–68.
4 Leggeri-Bauer, 2011, pp. 65–71.
5 This was originally on sliding doors at the temple Hōryūji in Nara, which were remounted as freestanding screens in the Edo period. In recent times they were remounted on ten panels. It is in the collection of the Tokyo National Museum.
6 For a comprehensive study of this work, see Carr, 2012. This set of paintings can be seen at https://emuseum.nich.go.jp, accessed March 4, 2021. Under the English "Painting" tab, search *Illustrated Biography of Prince Regent Shōtoku*.
7 Hiroyuki probably used as a model the complete copy of *The Hagiography of Master Hōnen* (15th–16th centuries) preserved at the Taimadera monastery in Nara and not the original work. Indeed, in 1792, he saw and probably copied parts of it; see Shimohara, 2001, pp. 11, 13, 19, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/144566151.pdf, accessed March 5, 2021.

fig. 11
Use of landscape elements to separate different scenes, Sumiyoshi Hiroyuki (1755–1811), *The Tale of Ibukiyama Shuten Dōji*, detail from Scroll II, Edo period, 1786, handscroll, GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde, Leipzig, see checklist, cat. 83

fig. 12
Guards Dozing Off from *The Tale of the Monkeys*, detail, Muromachi–Momoyama periods, 1560s–1580s, handscroll, The British Museum, London, see checklist, cat. 101



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