Kubo Shunman
Japan, 1757–1820

Under the Cherry Blossoms
c. late-18th–early-19th century
Ink, color, and gold on silk
Anonymous gift 1974.38

Yoi
nureba
onajigoto koso
iwarekere
hana wa yoshiwara
hana wa yoshiwara
Shokusanjin

Once drunk,
the same thing was said,
over and over
it’s the Yoshiwara for blossoms!
it’s the Yoshiwara for blossoms!
—Shokusanjin (Ōta Nanpo, 1749–1823)

It is cherry-blossom viewing (hanami) time, and two high-ranking courtesans of the Yoshiwara, the pleasure quarters of the city of Edo, are out for a stroll accompanied by young apprentices. They are chatting excitedly and walking with verve, judging from the raised, high-footed sandal of the courtesan in the lead. The artist used a pale, “boneless” touch to depict the tree trunk and its delicate blossoms. Yet it is the gorgeous textiles and flawless hairstyles of the beautiful women and girls that capture our eye.

In his verse, Shokusanjin, the witty poet-friend of the artist, equates the cherry blossoms and the courtesans, beheld while in a state of intoxication (hanami always includes drinking). The poem captures the courtesans’ excitement (about the blossoms), and his own (about them), while at the same time extolling the Yoshiwara for hosting such beauty.
This Lordly Plant, A Poem

Take

竹
このきみハ
medetaki fushi wo
めてたきふしを
kasanetsutsu
かせねつゝ
sue no yo nagaki
末のよ長き
tameshi narikeri
ためし也けり

Rengetsu

Bamboo

This lordly plant—
it grows knot
by auspicious knot,
happily portending
a lengthy life hereafter!


In this work, the nun Rengetsu brushed a short poem in classical Japanese (waka) that bears witness to the vigorous growth of a bamboo stalk. Sprinkled with flecks of gold leaf, Rengetsu’s calligraphy evokes the light and air surrounding a living plant. Refreshingly simple, her hand also mirrors the happy generosity of a young, budding spirit. Long used as a metaphor for strength of character—it bends in a storm but does not break—bamboo is a popular subject of painting and calligraphy.

By Rengetsu’s time, waka composition was no longer the exclusive practice of a courtly elite, and many more were educated in classical literature and calligraphy.
The Buddhist nun Rengetsu, living in the nineteenth century, echoed ancient Japanese poetry in combining the cry of wading birds along a river with the moon and a frosty night—a poetic image of the passing of time, touched with sadness. While the thin dancing lines of her calligraphy are a visual reflection of her poetic energies, there is also an auditory image: the soft sounds of her waka, Japan’s native short poem, which comprises five or seven syllables per line (5-7-5-7-7).