

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

酔

ぬれは

おなし事こそ

いはれけれ

花はよし原

花はよし原

蜀山人

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.

Ōtagaki Rengetsu

Japan, 1791–1875

This Lordly Plant, A Poem

Ink and gold on paper

Gift of Sean Thackrey 2018.83.4

Take

ko no kimi wa
medetaki fushi wo
kasanetsutsu
sue no yo nagaki
tameshi narikeri

Rengetsu

竹

このきみハ
めてたきふしを
かさねつゝ
末のよ長き
ためし也けり

蓮月

Bamboo

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

—*Rengetsu* (trans. H. Mack Horton)

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.

Ōtagaki Rengetsu

Japan, 1791–1875

The First Frost of the Year, A Poem

Ink on paper

Gift of John C. Copoulos. 2018.4.4

Shimo

chidori naku
kamogawazutsumi
tsuki fukete
sode ni oboyuru
yowa no hatsushimo

Rengetsu

霜

ちどり鳴
かもかはつゝみ
月更て
そてにおほゆる
よはの初しも

蓮月

Frost

Above the levee of Kamo River
where the plovers cry
the moon is sinking,
and I feel on my sleeves in the dead of night
the first frost of the year.

—*Rengetsu* (trans. H. Mack Horton)

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).