***Yamato-e* is a genre of painting that first flourished during Japan's** [**Heian period**](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/heia/hd_heia.htm) (794–1185).

Following several centuries of cultural exchange with China, in the late ninth century the imperial court of Japan ceased official trade missions with the mainland and turned its attention inward to focus upon national matters. **The Heian period, literally "the period of calm and tranquility," was a peaceful era during which the court was the center of rich cultural activity, including the spawning of new trends in painting and literature. The term *yamato-*e, literally meaning "Japanese painting,"** was coined during this period. **At the time, the term was meant to distinguish paintings concerned with Japanese subject matter from those featuring themes imported from China,** which were known as *kara-e*, literally "Tang painting," referring to the [Tang dynasty](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/tang/hd_tang.htm) (618–906) of China. **Japanese subjects included tales from Japanese literature and history, as well as activities and motifs associated with the four seasons in Japan. Such paintings depicted Japanese locales, typified by the soft, rolling hills of the Kyoto countryside.**

**Traditional yamato-e is characterized by native subject matter, often taken from literature.**

From the Heian period onward, however, the term *yamato-e* evolved in meaning to indicate not just the content or setting of the paintings, but also paintings that employ particular formal conventions. **Figures are generally highly stylized, with abbreviated facial features. Other stylistic features often associated with *yamato-e* include the use of bright, thick pigments, large bands of clouds that obscure and divide space, and a technique known as *fukinuki yatai*, literally, "blown off roof," in which the roofs of buildings are removed to provide a glimpse into the** [**interior**](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/fold/hd_fold.htm) **from above.**

Several of these techniques are demonstrated in a sliding-door painting fragment remounted as a [hanging scroll](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pfor/hd_pfor.htm) and showing a scene from "The Ivy" chapter of ***The Tale of Genji*** ([2006.570](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2006.570)). The most famous of Japanese novels, *The Tale of Genji* was written by a Heian court lady named Murasaki Shikibu around the year 1000 and details the many romantic liaisons of the fictional Prince Genji. Although this painting dates to the early seventeenth century during the [Edo period](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/edop/hd_edop.htm) (1615–1868), it preserves the *yamato-e* style, which continued to be preferred for illustrations of classical literature. Cloud bands, here richly embellished in gold, sprawl along the top and bottom borders, focusing attention on the narrative. Through the *fukinuki yatai* technique, we are able to look down on Genji's son Kaoru, the protagonist of the second half of the novel, and a maidservant inside the palace. By removing the roof, the artist allows the viewer a peek into a private scene, provoking a sense of voyeurism.

***Yamato-e* developed alongside other uniquely Japanese artistic advancements of the Heian period, such as *waka* poetry** ([1975.268.59](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1975.268.59)). These thirty-one-syllable poems were sometimes created in conjunction with *yamato-e* or inspired by them. The beautifully dyed and decorated papers upon which such poems were often written also convey the *yamato-e* aesthetic. Few *yamato-e* paintings remain from the Heian period because many of these early works were executed on folding screens and sliding door panels. These moveable walls were functional architectural elements, and were lost along with the buildings themselves. However, the existence of *yamato-e* screens and panels is documented in prose and in *waka* poetry.

Many *yamato-e* paintings took the format of [illustrated handscrolls](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jilh/hd_jilh.htm), known as *emaki*, depicting literary classics such as *The Tale of Genji*. Narrative handscrolls, as opposed to screens or sliding door panels, could be rolled up and stored away safely, so several early examples still exist. These intimate formats were read in small segments opened one at a time, like a book.

An early *yamato-e* handscroll in the Museum's collection is the *Illustrated Legends of the Kitano Shrine* ([25.224](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/25.224)), which dates to the [Kamakura period](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/kana/hd_kana.htm) (1185–1333). This set of scrolls provides a pictorial retelling of the founding of the Kitano Shrine of the native Japanese Shinto religion. The story tells of the Heian-period poet and statesman Sugawara-no-Michizane (845–903), who was falsely accused of treason and died in exile. When, after his death, a number of disasters befell the capital, it was believed that his spirit was exacting revenge on those who had wronged him. In the scroll, Michizane's spirit is depicted as a wrathful thunder god, wreaking havoc from atop billowing black clouds. So that his spirit would be appeased, Michizane was deified as the god Tenjin, and the Kitano Shrine was erected in his honor.

**The Kamakura period, during which power shifted from the courtly nobility to the military class, brought new subject matter into the *yamato-e* genre. This included narratives revolving around the leaders of newly formed Buddhist sects that appealed to the warrior elite**. The *Illustrated Life of Shinran* provides an example of a set of [Buddhist paintings](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/budd/hd_budd.htm) that make use of *yamato-e* techniques ([2010.366a-d](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2010.366a-d)). Each scroll is divided into levels, resembling a handscroll that has been cut up and rearranged, with cloud bands dividing each layer. The scrolls relate episodes from the life of the Japanese monk Shinran (1173–1263), who laid the framework for the True Pure Land School of Buddhism. Although they were painted in the Edo period, the compositions in these hanging scrolls derive from those in a set of handscrolls dating from the fourteenth century.

**Also during the Kamakura period, *yamato-e* painters first embraced portraiture**. The realistic *yamato-e* portrayals were known as *nise-e*, or "likeness paintings," and illustrated [military heroes](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/shga/hd_shga.htm), courtiers, and famous poets, among others. As opposed to the highly stylized faces seen in *yamato-e* narrative handscrolls, *nise-e* were meant to be faithful representations of particular personalities. A popular theme for *nise-e* was the Thirty-Six Immortal Poets, figures chosen during the Kamakura period as representative poets from Japan's past. One of these poets, Fujiwara Kiyotada, is illustrated in this segment from a handscroll, accompanied by a famous poem he wrote ([L.2011.54.1a-c](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/L.2011.54.1a-c)).

**During the** [**Muromachi period**](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/muro/hd_muro.htm) **(1392–1573), new ink painting styles from China gained in popularity, competing with the classic *yamato-e* for the attention of the** [**Japanese elite**](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/samu/hd_samu.htm). However, artists of the Tosa school, the official painters to the imperial court beginning in the fifteenth century, sought to keep the *yamato-e* tradition alive. In the Museum's collection, we can find an example of a pair of folding screens attributed to Tosa Mitsunobu (1434–1535), *Bamboo of the Four Seasons* ([1975.268.44,45](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1975.268.44,45)). The [four seasons](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/seim/hd_seim.htm) were one of the most common themes in *yamato-e*, and paintings on this theme are called *shiki-e*. These screens focus on the transformation of one natural element, bamboo, as it cycles through the seasons. Beginning on the right, we see springtime denoted with violets, then new bamboo shoots in summer. The stalks are entwined with reddish ivy in the autumn panel, and dusted with snow in the winter.

Similar to *shiki-e*, another type of *yamato-e* relating to yearly cycles was known as *tsukinami-e*, paintings showing the activities of the twelve months of the year. In *tsukinami-e*, nature and its cycles are not separated from the human realm, but intertwined. The Museum's collection contains an example of *tsukinami-e* in the form of an [Edo-period](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/edop/hd_edop.htm) album of twelve paintings (1999.161). Each album leaf depicts the activities of one month of the year in Kyoto. The album leaf for September illustrates two important events of that month, the doll festival, which was celebrated on the ninth day of the ninth month, and the blossoming of chrysanthemums. Inside the residence dolls are displayed on a low table, while outside ladies admire the colorful flowers. While the album harkens back to the elegant world of the Heian court, the activities depicted are contemporary. The ladies are attired in Heian court garb, but the doll festival celebration did not begin until the Edo period, when this album was made.

During the Edo period, *yamato-e* evolved in new ways. It reached an expanded audience as new social structures led to the development of a wealthy merchant class eager to take on the trappings of nobility. Previously the domain of court painters like the Tosa school, *yamato-e* was now taken up by town painters and other artists who took advantage of this new market.

***Yamato-e* painting also influenced other styles of Japanese painting that emerged during the Edo period, such as the decorative** [**Rinpa style**](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rinp/hd_rinp.htm) **and** [***ukiyo-e* woodblock prints**](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ukiy/hd_ukiy.htm). Rinpa artists, such as Tawaraya Sotatsu (died ca. 1640) and Hon'ami Koetsu (1558–1637), drew on many of the same themes as *yamato-e* artists, such as classical literature and poetry, while incorporating new stylistic elements and reworking classical motifs ([53.7.1-2](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/53.7.1-2)). *Ukiyo-e*, like *yamato-e*, focused on Japanese people, places, and customs, but in a distinct format and with a [new emphasis](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/plea/hd_plea.htm) on the contemporary world ([JP3341](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/JP3341)).

***Yamato-e* painting has endured as a distinctive style of Japanese art, as each generation is drawn in by the allure of a golden age of Japanese culture. With tales of courtly splendor and depictions of the natural world and heroes of the past, *yamato-e* artists have distilled Japan's history into resounding images of pleasure and beauty.**