

BYŌBU: THE ART OF JAPANESE SCREEN

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Japanese screens called Byōbu which means protection against (byo) the wind (bu) have been central to both the art production and architecture in Japan since at least the 12th century. This art form originated in China during the Han dynasty and was called 'Tsuitate' (206 B.C. - 220 A.D) and reached Japan only in the eighth century, during the Nara period. Like many quintessentially Japanese art forms, folding screens were borrowed from China and adapted over the centuries to suit Japanese sensibilities. Japanese schools like Shoga, Kano, Tosa, Maruyama and Rimpaproduced painted byōbu screens, fusuma (cupboard door panel painting) over many generations for the decoration of private homes and castles. The Kano school lasted for 300 years. The painted screen reached its artistic zenith between the Muromachi and the Edo Period i.e. late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. . 'From the late medieval period onward, they were sent in considerable numbers to China and to Korea. During the late fourteenth century, the knowledge of byōbu spread across Europe and America because of Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch traders. They became an essential component of interior art decoration of Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. As a second major attempt to increase trade between east and west, the American government sponsored visit by Commodore Perry in 1853, resulted in more long-lasting and significant influence of the Japanese screen on the west. . The importation of oriental screens, both Japanese and Chinese, to major European cities (they were displayed at the 1867 International Exhibition for Industry and Art in Paris) catalyzed the adaptation of the concept by Westerners.

The screens were essentially created to provide protection from wind and to create an intimate area by blocking unwanted gazes, but later they served as room dividers, enclosing and demarcating private spaces in the open interiors of Japanese palaces, temples, shrines, and elite homes. The screens varied according to their form and function. For instance, small two-fold screens were used for tea ceremonies, while large, gold-leaf screens with up to eight folds served as backdrops for dancing. An emphasis on mobility required a structure that would be lightweight and flexible. A lightweight but strong core was produced with a lattice of a stable wood covered with many layers of paper applied in a specific sequence, in the manner of a karibari. A Byōbu typically consists of paper stretched over wood-lattice panels. They are constructed with hinges made of strips of paper woven horizontally from the front of one panel to the back of the other. Each adjacent strip is applied in the reverse direction. The process is repeated at least three times to strengthen the hinges. The separations between panels are thus minimized and all sections of the screen are united visually within one large frame. The paper hinges allow each panel to fold 360 degrees, giving the screen a sculptural look depending on

how it is placed in a room. The painters traditionally used mineral paints over gold leaf to make the picture look as if it were lit from behind. Screens were used as diplomatic gifts. These screens gained popularity because of their portable size and easy storage. Numerous major European artists collected screens, and many others were so inspired by the form as to emulate it.

During the Momoyama period, there was a huge demand for these screens by the Japanese warlords, rich merchants and the aristocratic class to exalt their status. Screen ink paintings with Chinese figures and landscapes were chosen for the lord's private living quarters while other paintings on the screens included scenes from daily life. Reception halls were embellished with screen paintings of flowers, birds and animals in vibrant colours. Byōbu were displayed at religious temples and shrines, in public spaces like castles to impress visitors and coerce enemies, and in private residences to secure privacy.

Seventeenth century saw yet another change in the composition of the screen, instead of using silk border to surround the panel, 'Washi' paper was used to connect the panels making it easier to paint on the zigzag screen. The subject matter of paintings and calligraphy on Japanese folding screens has evolved greatly. They depicted images from the *Tale of Genji*, the classic Japanese work written in the 11th century. Traditionally the painting was done on a 6 panel designed facing each other, thus enabling them to create smaller spaces within a larger more open space. Today screens are usually displayed flat on a wall and make huge artistic statements. The most usual size is approximately 3.0m long by 1.5m - 1.8 m high, although smaller sized formats such as two panel screens are also available. Other proportions or sizes are less common but are available. Pairs of screens are still available, although they are frequently sold as individual works these days. Due to their mobility and flexibility, they are used almost everywhere to repurpose a room, as backdrops for tea ceremony and ikebana. Today, the screens are more likely to be hung on the wall rather than stood on the floor. The byōbu of present day is now made via machine, but traditional byōbu made by hand are still made, especially by those Japanese families dedicated to preserving Japanese customs and traditions.

The unique characteristic of the byōbu format is that it developed in relationship with architecture, incorporating not only functional space but also intangible space. They embodied the metaphysical concept of demarcating inside space from outside. Their zigzag placement format created a three-dimensional space using a two dimensional object.

Works Cited

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