

COLORS OF JAPAN *Literature Comes to the Table*

By Linda H. Chance

Figure 1 shows one of the most delicious treats you can imagine, a Japanese sweet to accompany a bowl of whipped green tea. It imitates the shape of a camella blossom and (not shown here due to the black and white print of the journal) is rendered in delicate colors. Would it surprise you to learn that the ultimate inspiration for this morsel was literature written largely by women a millennium ago? Readers of Japanese works from around the year 1000 in the Heian Period found appreciation there for many things, including a sense of color combinations that has attained special meaning in the culture. What follows is the story of how these colors came off the page, where they mostly described clothes, and into shops and restaurants everywhere. This process constructed a Japanese sensibility involving colors, clothing, and cuisine that now appears in products of both high culture, such as banquet food, and low, including Hello Kitty garb.

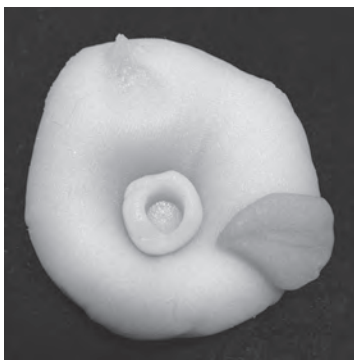


Figure 1. Source: Photo courtesy of the author.

The women who wrote about these colors were members of a tiny elite, perhaps 1 percent of the then-capital city of Kyoto's population, whose interests did not extend to such mundane subjects as daily meals, or even feasts. Murasaki Shikibu (ca. 973–ca.1014) recorded how food was served at celebrations when her employer became a grandfather (an important political event for Fujiwara no Michinaga [966–1027], a powerful aristocrat whose grandson would eventually become emperor). She did not mention the food itself, though, possibly because everyone who read her journal knew what would be offered on such an occasion. Instead, descriptions of what clothing the celebrants wore occupied a substantial proportion of her

words.¹ She took food for granted even while noting the tint of each hair ribbon.

These women did not publish their writings in our sense; they wrote with a brush and ink on paper, from which others copied by hand. Since writing was such a production, we can gather that the colors of the clothing men and women wore mattered immensely to members of this closed social circle. We also know that the dyes for fabric were extracted from vegetable matter with great effort and expense. What would later become a world-famous novel, *The Tale of Genji*, written by that same Murasaki Shikibu in fifty-four chapters and that her compatriots at court eagerly read, features repeated passages such as this:

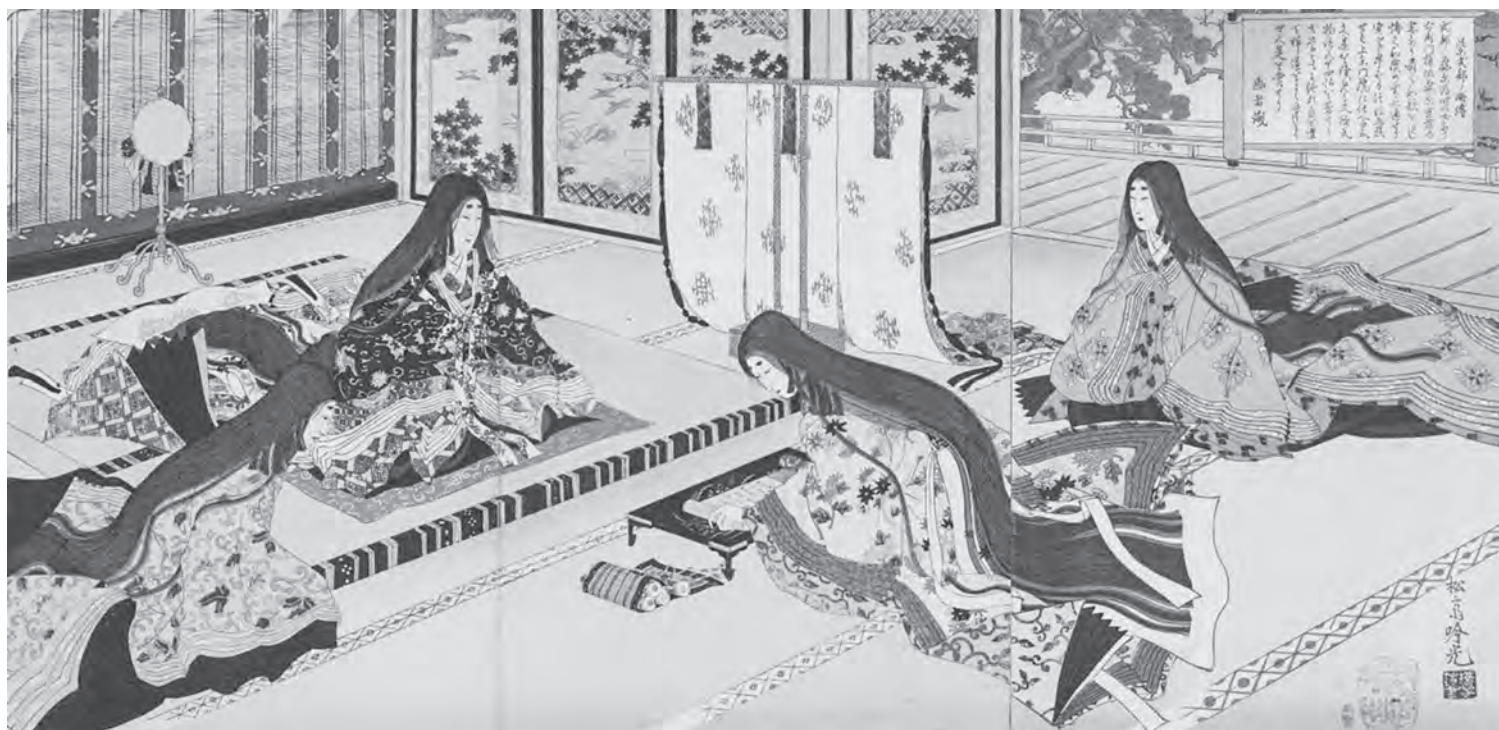
Genji dressed with great care . . . He wore a grape-colored train-robe under a cherry blossom dress cloak of sheer figured silk. Among the formal cloaks worn by everyone else, his costume displayed the extravagant elegance of a Prince, and his grand entry was a sensation. The very blossoms were abashed.²

The translator Royall Tyler's footnote to this passage intimates how much shared knowledge—not only aesthetic but political—was necessary to interpret the meaning of a courtier's dress:

His dress cloak (nōshi) is of a cherry blossom (sakura) layering, suitable for a young man in spring. Under that he has on an ebi dyed shita-gasane [grape purple train-robe], which normally went under the formal cloak (hō) for a solemn court occasion. A dress cloak is relatively informal, and its color does not convey rank. Genji is flaunting his exalted station.³

Genji is not a prince—he was born in the royal house, but his father removed Genji for his own protection. Still, he can tweak the rules to seem just as grand.

Aristocratic women wore silk robes in layers called *kasane*, and the combination of colors (*kasane no irome*) that showed at the sleeves was significant—in part because modesty meant that women of good families



From the concertina album *Short Biography of Murasaki Shikibu* by Adachi/Shōsai Ginkō, 1891. Source: Art Gallery NSW website at <http://tinyurl.com/zcu55lw>.

stayed behind screens, blinds, or fans to avoid the eyes of men. They could, and did, discreetly trail their sleeves and hems to attract attention. Later records show some ramping up to as many as twenty layers, causing a crackdown to a maximum of five robes. A demonstration of the dressing method today will typically use twelve as a set, but this was not the practice in Murasaki's day.

Kasane also referred to garments that used one color on the surface and a different color for the lining, sometimes with another layer between to enhance the effect. We have no contemporary documentation of exactly what all the combinations looked like, but we do know that silks might be dyed or woven, stiff, glossy, or even sheer to better allow the color underneath to show through. Some of these paired colors had seasonal names. Representing spring, *yanagi*, "willow," consisted of a white upper layer with green beneath, while *yamabuki*, or "kerria rose," was the dull yellow of just-turned leaves (*kuchiba*) on top and bright gold yellow below. We read in the "Picture Contest," chapter 17 of *The Tale of Genji*, "The page girls were in dress gowns of willow and of kerria rose over green."⁴ Every splendid event featured dazzling costumes, plus gorgeous furnishings, which authors lovingly described for a readership that cared.

Colors indicated the wearer's wealth and taste, naturally, but also in some cases social rank. Displaying status and rank in the Imperial order for male officials originated in China, where there was great concern for achieving the five correct colors—blue/green, red, yellow, white, and black—corresponding to the Five Phases (*wuxing*)—wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. Colors created by mixing two pigments, such as purple, were originally considered in poor taste, but purple later became associated with *yin-yang* theory and joined the hierarchy. Japan's use of visible colors and court costume, called the cap-rank system, began in 603 at the behest of Empress Suiko and her regent Shōtoku Taishi as part of the transformation to a centralized state apparatus. Over time, Japan's system came to focus on saturated shades of red and green.⁵ A

woman's access to rank colors was determined by her father's standing. As elsewhere around the world, the deepest purple, the most difficult color to produce, was only permitted to royalty. In *The Tale of Genji*, the main characters are all associated with various shades: the hero Genji is likened to the purple bush clover of autumn (*hagi*); his stepmother and lover Fujitsubo takes her name from the wisteria (*fuiji*) quarters (*tsubo*) in which she lives at the palace; Murasaki, the girl Genji abducts and primes to be his wife, resembles the purple gromwell flower and her aunt, Fujitsubo. Even an imitation purple is special.

Crucially, clothing and furnishings indexed the owner's social standing, which was itself thought to reflect a person's moral worth: a good person was rewarded with a comfortable life that brought to mind a Buddhist

The Heian Period Historical Background

In 794, the Imperial court moved from Nara to a site occupied now by the city of Kyoto. The new capital was called Heian "Peace," and indeed the Heian Period (794–1185) was characterized by relative peace and stability. Tax revenues flowed in from the agrarian provinces to support a small, urbanized aristocratic society, which prized civil virtues and aesthetic taste. Successive heads of one branch of the Fujiwara clan monopolized political power by forging close marital relations with the throne and ruling particularly from the mid-tenth century as regents for young and weak emperors. Accordingly, a steady supply of attractive, marriageable daughters to place as Imperial consorts was one of the most important political resources of the day. Although Chinese learning remained the foundation of government management and most of men's literary activity, writing in vernacular Japanese flourished from the tenth century, first in poetry, with the compilation in 905 of the *Kokinshū*, the first Imperial anthology of *waka* poetry, and then in the production of fiction and autobiographical texts. Most of the surviving prose texts from this immensely creative period are by women. In foreign relations, the Japanese court turned away from direct contact with China to adapt and naturalize the Chinese modes of thinking and forms of government that had been absorbed wholesale in the Nara Period (710–794). The aristocratic society of the court turned inward and ignored the countryside. Middle-ranking aristocratic women serving in the lively courts assembled around the Fujiwara consorts also turned inward and examined themselves, producing a body of "self-writing" that is unique in the world.

WRITTEN BY SONJA ARNTZEN, THIS SIDEBAR
ORIGINALLY APPEARED IN HER ARTICLE
"HISTORIES OF THE SELF: WOMEN'S DIARIES
FROM JAPAN'S HEIAN PERIOD (794–1185)"
EDUCATION ABOUT ASIA 20, NO. 2 (2015): 27–30.

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paradise. The well-born augmented their positions by skillful politics and marriage alliances, but they did not think of dress and decoration, or even the latest fashions, which they adored, as mere frippery. Facility with color, not to mention with instructing weavers and dyers, and having one's attendants properly sew the fabric into garments, was a mark of women's breeding.⁶ Sei Shōnagon (ca. 966–ca. 1017) served Teishi, an empress who was briefly a rival to Murasaki Shikibu's patron, Michinaga's daughter Shōshi. Sei expressed the refinement of the group of women around Teishi by critiquing people's appearance:

Witnessing such a scene, of course you sigh and wonder just what sort of people they must be, to manage to be so at ease in the "nine-fold palace." But when I actually saw them at such close quarters at the palace, the attendants' faces were all dark and blotchy where their white powder hadn't covered the skin properly, precisely like black patches of earth showing through where snow has half melted—a truly horrible sight.⁷

The stakes were clearly high, and no one wished to make an error that would result in ridicule.

Japanese readers came to admire the bygone Heian Period and have been studying the attire, color combinations, and seasonal references in these texts since at least the

thirteenth century, treating them as notable elements of connoisseurship and class. The court held on to its legacy of dressing for success, with the warrior class that came to be known as samurai not far behind in learning and applying this knowledge to their increasingly aspirational Kyoto-based lives. Even while the country disintegrated from the wars of the early fifteenth to sixteenth centuries, the material culture of the past was a vehicle for the elite to exhibit their prerogatives. Traditional combinations figured in paintings of scenes from the literature, of course, but also in games such as incense matching or flower arranging, as well as the higher arts these activities spawned. Color was both art and amusement.

All these methods of enjoying and engaging the literature became deeply embedded in popular culture over time. Artisans and city-dwelling

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commoners, and eventually prosperous farmers, gained access to literacy with the spread of printing from the early seventeenth century onward. They became part of a market for everything from the bestselling translations and transformations of *The Tale of Genji*, especially *A Fraudulent Murasaki's Bumpkin Genji* (Nise Murasaki Inaka Genji, 1829–1842, Ryūtei Tanehiko), to a backgammon-like board game, *sugoroku*, based on the tales.⁸ Numerous guides to the Heian literary classics came into print. At times, handbooks to clothes and colors were as popular as explanations of the narrative content.⁹ Shared rules spread—a vocabulary of color, the knowledge of which constituted a person's cultural capital, to use sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's term. Duplicating these codes in ornament reinforced their value and kept them in circulation, even as artists updated and invented combinations to meet the tastes of their times.

Some of that circulation was under the radar. The shogunate, concerned about maintaining class divisions during the Edo Period (1603–1867), discouraged wealthy commoners from displaying finery, including anything that referenced the high tradition. Sumptuary laws limiting consumption took aim at those who indulged in the longstanding habits of showy dress associated with high status. To avoid fines, dandies and clotheshorses moved forbidden patterns and colors to the inside of garments. Nothing is more subtle or luxurious, after all, than the spectacle that no one can see.

We do not understand much about the use of artful color in food that people actually consumed before the modern period, but from the mid-seventeenth century on, cookbooks, many of them literary in the sense that they were to be read, not cooked from, developed.¹⁰ Here too, sumptuary laws demanded that people eat according to their rank and status, with restrictions of what one could eat and when. Such controls no doubt fed the desire to imagine tastes and colors beyond the possible, far into the realm of fantasy.

Recommended Readings on Colors, Literature, and Food

Penguin Books publishes excellent, unabridged translations of Sei Shōnagon's *Pillow Book* (all short excerpts, fun to read), *The Diary of Murasaki Shikibu* (a great observer of women), and *The Tale of Genji* (especially "Beneath the Autumn Leaves" or "Under the Cherry Blossoms," chapters 7 and 8). On color combinations, see Haruo Shirane's *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature, and the Arts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), especially the beginning of chapter 2, and Liza Carihfield Dalby's *Kimono: Fashioning Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). Her chapter 7, "The Cultured Nature of Heian Colors," lays out the system of color combinations as used about 150 years after Murasaki Shikibu was writing. Dalby points out often that these combinations were not literal or natural, but wove together cultural allusions.

Almost any image of Japanese food will demonstrate sensitivity to color. To read about the history of Japanese cuisine and identity, see the works of Eric C. Rath, Theodore Bestor, or Katarzyna Cwiertka.

Wherever we observe the distinctive Japanese sensibility in colors we also uncover a fascinating, complex history of literary and cultural manipulations. Poets had long compiled thick handbooks of expressions for the seasons; what was visible outside mattered less than the ideal others had created. Starting in the late nineteenth century, when Japan encountered so much more of the outside world, commentators coined terms to indicate "native," or Japanese, as opposed to Western things. *Wafuku* (Japanese clothing) became the new word for kimono, which meant only "something to wear." *Washoku* indicated Japanese food, with subcategories such as *wagashi* (Japanese sweets). All these "native" items were heavily influenced by China, for so long the provider of high culture imports, and "Western" styles drew on local resources that made them appear and taste homegrown. Thus, the distinction between "native" and "Western" is difficult to draw. Still, people looked back to rediscover local sources, writing histories of a Japanese culture that they longed to understand as having a consistent essence.

Research into color was part of that effort. Dyers and other artists, scholars, and chemists have all invested energy into recreating the colors of the Heian, as well as those of the Nara Period (710–794) and earlier.¹¹ Colors and flowers, especially the plum, which poets mainly praised for white petals, were already important to the cosmopolitans who wrote the more than 4,500 poems in the *Manyōshū* (ca. 750). Archaeological finds tell us that they ate a red variety of rice in addition to other colors of grain. Elites were aware of Chinese and Korean attitudes toward food as medicine, including using color as one axis to make sure that meals induced health. Reconstructions of Nara food tend to demonstrate, or possibly assume, continuity with modern practices, such as serving variously colored foods in small portions on unmatched dishes. The records of the past are detailed in some areas, such as clothing, color, or poetic time, and reflect elite tastes; we fill in the blanks of food and everyday people's practices by analogy, thus constructing the image of a shared past. In reality, it has changed much over time.

In 2013, *washoku*, "traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese," was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Culture Heritage of Humanity curated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). "Japanese food" does not mean just any food that is eaten in Japan, however. The government and cultural agencies that prepared the application focused on the symbolism of dishes for the New Year celebration (*osechi ryōri*) as passed on in the community. A variety of symbol systems makes appearances in food design for special occasions. Gold beckons prosperity, while green stands for renewal. An auspicious pairing is red and white (also seen in contests, where red is typically associated with the female and white with the male).¹² Yin-yang thought drives a focus on the odd-numbered months and their complementary days; special foods were prepared during the first, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth lunar months. Some of these remain important holidays, such as the March 3rd Girls' Festival and the May 5th Boys' Festival, now the national holiday Children's Day. Each has its special associations of color and plant: pink, yellow, and green with the peach for the first; blue, red, black, and purple with the iris for the second.

Much high-end dining today models itself on meals served in the art of tea, developed since the sixteenth century. Tea practice and banquets now take close account of the minutest changes of season. Such hyperseasonality is relatively recent, since conforming to the seasons only matters when refrigeration and transportation mean we have the option to eat foods out of season, but it has become emblematic of Japanese cuisine.¹³ In the past, the seasons dictated what was available, and the wealthy enjoyed the occasional violation; now, people of means strive to capture the first and best of each season, and chefs lavish skill on timeliness. Summer foods stress the colors of coolness: streams, breezes, the crisp green of leaves, and refreshing white; winter dishes aim for a warm impression from bright red

ingredients, dark pottery, and deeply colored soups. Even convenience stores capitalize on seasonal trappings to promote items such as cherry blossom or pumpkin treats.

If you ask contemporary Japanese about their color choices, they may as likely allude to a palette favored at Ikea for the current season as to any “Japanese” favorites. In Kyoto especially, however, and at traditional shops throughout Japan, artisans and designers keep alive the best-loved seasonal combinations. Packaging for many of the sweets sold today invokes Heian Era motifs. Flower-shaped confectionery made from the most refined ingredients might start with a lump of *nerikiri*, a paste of white bean and a binding agent such as taro root, in one color, enwrapped in a layer tinted a different pale shade, through which the lump glows quietly, as in the picture of the camellia sweet. A detail such as a leaf or the stamens will be a contrasting color of the same value. The combination is what we see in a landscape, and yet the confectioner has transformed it into what Japanese literature scholar Haruo Shirane calls “secondary nature,” a created or represented nature, codified over the centuries, that may even invert the truth of the seasons.¹⁴ It can look natural, but this perfected, idealized, and abstracted nature behaves according to rules, encoding the preferences of poets who did not have a concept, let alone a desire, of traveling out to see what messy, actual nature looked like. In real nature, Japan has a rainy season; in the arts, there are spring and autumn, along with considerably less summer and winter.

Today, products often trumpet their regional connections in addition to set seasons. Consumers reliably buy Akafuku mochi (red luck rice cake) as a souvenir of the famous Ise Shrine. They show up with an appetite during the sweetfish (*ayu*) season along the rivers of Gifu Prefecture. If you happened to visit Kyoto in 2013, you would have seen Kitty-chan goods manufactured for limited release: a plastic Kitty doll or Kitty on a handkerchief, wrapped in multilayered court robes.¹⁵ The pink, green, and yellow are not as subtle as traditional vegetal dyes, but they nod to the tradition nonetheless.

It is impossible to draw direct lines from Heian color preferences or seasonal associations to contemporary palettes, but it is also hard to deny that the careful cultivation and regulation of these elegant choices have had tremendous impact in Japan. Color matching for kimono shows the influence of older styles. Green and red, a summer combination once called water iris, or yellow and red, a fall match known in the Heian as wax tree, are normal combinations. The strictest calendar of clothing calls for using colors only at or in advance of the season that they represent; once the cherry blossoms bloom and fall, which happens in a matter of days, or a week at most, pale pink showing through white is just depressing. The same is true of food, the best of which anticipates the coming season. It could be that the wild shades young people boldly mix in the trendy fashion centers of Harajuku or Shibuya are another instance of this sensibility that breaks the principles of color harmony as we learn them in Euro-American cultures. The aesthetics of color in Japan derive from a long material and literary history; a color’s political, as well as social uses amplify the meaning and resonance of every shade. ■

NOTES

1. See *The Diary of Murasaki Shikibu*, trans. Richard Bowring (London: Penguin Books: 1996).
2. Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Royall Tyler (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 160.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 328.
5. Some colors literally looked different than what we see in our chemical age. Yellow was the color of earth, but given the central place of earth in the Five Phases system and the reverence held toward the Yellow Emperor, the association was hardly what we would make with the color of mud. (Five Phases is a less misleading translation for the “five elements,” stressing transformation.) For the full story of color in Heian Japan, its ritual significance, and Chinese origins—which probably extend to the idea

of layering colors as well—see Mary McClintock Dusenbury, “Radiance and Darkness: Color at the Heian Court” (dissertation, University of Kansas, 1999).

6. See Sonja Artzen, *The Kagerō Diary: A Woman’s Autobiographical Text from Tenth Century Japan* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1997), 81. Also see Carole Cavanaugh, “Text and Textile: Unweaving the Female Subject in Heian Writing,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 4, no. 3 (1996): 595–636.
7. Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book*, trans. Meredith McKinney (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 4.
8. See Michael Emmerich, *The Tale of Genji: Translation, Canonization, and World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) on the popularization of the classic through illustrated replacements, beautifully produced with colored covers.
9. Examples include *Makura no sōshi shōzoku satsuyōshō* (Gleanings on Clothing in the Pillow Book) by Tsuboi Yoshichika (1657–1735) and *Genji nanryo shōzokushō* by Sōseki (1474–1533), brought into print by Tsuboi.
10. See Eric C. Rath, *Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
11. One dictionary, *Nihon no iro jiten*, authored by the dyer Yoshioka Sachio and published in 2000 by Shikōsha, covers 466 colors, 209 of which the dyer reproduced. See their website for samples of combinations, www.artbooks-shikōsha.com/.
12. Historians say this derived from late twelfth-century battles between the Heike (red) and Minamoto (white) families.
13. Rath, *Food and Fantasy*, 141.
14. See Haruo Shirane’s *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature, and the Arts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
15. See *The Gotochi Hello Kitty Collection Blog* at <http://tinyurl.com/jpubydo>, and the Surugu-ya website <http://tinyurl.com/z2efews>.

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