

“Onna Kasen”. Conserving a nineteenth-century Japanese concertina book

女歌仙

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Photographs: CDMT, QUICO ORTEGA

Introduction: Japonisme

The mid-nineteenth century saw the discovery of a country which, until that time, had lived in virtual isolation from the West. With the development of trade and the celebration of the Universal Exhibitions of London in 1862 and Paris in 1867, the doors of Japan were finally opened; artists with distinct personal styles became known beyond the confines of their country thanks to the beautiful *ukiyo-e* wood block prints which depicted nature and everyday life, with drawings, vibrant colours and clear lines. These descriptive, slightly asymmetrical prints transmitted a sense of tranquility and even spirituality, and their images reflected the success of a new urban social class who followed *kabuki* theatre and *sumo*. On reaching Europe, these prints had a profound influence on the Impressionists, the Post-Impressionists and the Modernists.

The first Eastern influences in the West had been felt in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Europeans were attracted by China and the idea of a paradise ruled by a rich, wise, mysterious emperor. This was the era of the *chinoiserie* – European adaptations of luxury goods from the East – which imitated Chinese styles to create fanciful depictions of plants, flowers, and animals.

In the nineteenth century the influence of Japan in Europe went beyond interior decoration for palaces and began to be reflected in the work of a group of artists, many of them based in Paris. The response to the art of Utamaro, Hokusai and Hiroshige was termed *japonisme* and its influence is particularly evident in the work of artists such as Manet, Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, Renoir, Cézanne, and Van Gogh. In Barcelona this trend found expression in the jewellery of the Masriera family and the illustrations by Alexandre de Riquer, Apel·les Mestres and Ramon Casas.

The interest in Japan is also reflected in the tastes of certain European collectors, who sought out all kinds of valuable items or curios from the East that were so different from the creations of the West. The collectors imported fans, stamped or embroidered silks, kimonos, handbags and books. Apparently it was the Jesuit Juan López Sopena who donated the book we describe here



¹ Data provided by Ricard Bru, Doctor in Art History and MA in Asian Studies. Postgraduate in Japanese language, culture and business (Senshū University, Tokyo).

Rupert Faulkner (senior curator, Japan, department of Asia of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London) and Anna Jackson (keeper of the department of Asia of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London), agree with the data provided by Ricard Bru.

² For a list of the 36 poetesses (June 2013), see: http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nyōbō_Sanjūrokkasen.

³ According to information provided by Anna Jackson (V&A) to Silvia Carbonell (CDMT), this is a highly unusual piece because it is created using *oshi-e* a technique that uses textiles in relief to form three-dimensional raised ornamentation. Jackson dates the book to the Meiji period (1868-1912), while Rupert Faulkner (V&A) thinks it may be from the first half of the nineteenth century or even slightly earlier.

⁴ Data provided by Katarzyna Zych, conservator of paper art works at CREPAC Belgium. Katarzyna has studied traditional Eastern art and techniques, such as the Conservation of Japanese folding screens (S. Grantham), Conservation of Wallpaper in Interior Decorations (G. Wisse) and the Tokyo workshops on the Conservation of Japanese folding screens (T Kimishima).

to the Textile Museum and Documentation Centre on 29 May, 1958. Inside the book was a handwritten note: “Japanese women’s clothing from the feudal period (fifteenth century)”.

This piece is an artist’s book, produced by a Japanese craftsman. The Kanji symbols on the cover are 女歌仙 – “Onna kasen” – which, literally translated, means “woman”, “poetry”, “immortal”. It is an anthology of the best “waka” poems written by the most famous **poetesses** of the Heian and Kamakura period (*Nyōbō Sanjūrokkasen*).¹ The selection was probably inspired by another very famous one, that of the 36 immortal poetesses by Fujiwara no Kinto, “Sanjūrokkasen”.²

During the Heian period (794 - 1185), the Japanese court was famous for its sensitivity to art, poetry, and literature. Among the poetesses of the era, two in particular stand out: Ono no Komachi and Shikibu Murasaki, who was author of the most famous novel in Japanese literature: the *Genji Monogatari*, The Tale of Genji, written in the eleventh century and illustrated repeatedly from the twelfth century onwards. The miniatures in the book present women of high social class, belonging to the imperial court: hence their unusual dress style. They wear the *jūnihitoe*, a very elegant kimono comprising twelve layers of silk in different shades, which can be seen only in the sleeves and neck. These layers were added over the white underclothes, and closed by a final layer on top; in all, the *jūnihitoe* might weigh as much as 20 kg.

The book

This unique piece,³ made in the relatively common **concertina format** known as *orihon*, has a protective cover in the form of a case on which the title (*gedai*) is written vertically in black ink on a claret-coloured background. The binding may be made from *borugami* (a type of rigid paper or cardboard) or *itamegami* (starched *kozō* paper which made a rough but flexible cover), lined with plant fibre woven into taffeta and dyed green. The interior of the binding is in orange brown silk. The book is closed by four dark brown loops made of fabric to which an elongated buckle made of bone or ivory was added, though it seems to be lost. On the cover is a trace of a possible circular seal, also lost.

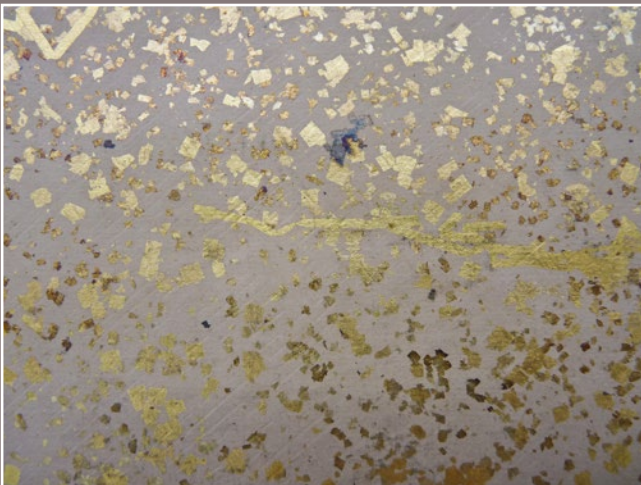
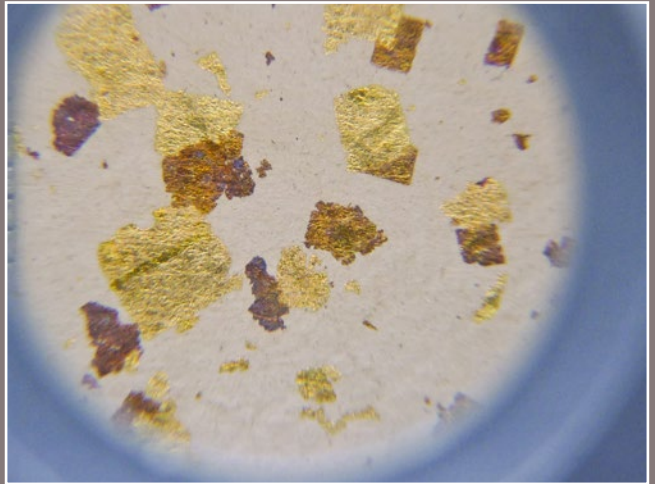
The body of the book is formed by rectangular pieces of cardboard glued together with strips that make them fold over each other, forming an accordion shape. The cardboard base has a pearly tone that makes the surface shiny (possibly mica spray applied with *funori*, a seaweed-based glue). The four corners of the block are decorated with gold paper. Japanese artists worked with this paper in a very personal way and applied different materials according to the effects they wanted to achieve, with the result that they are all different. *Dosa*, for example, is a preparation of alum which is mixed with *nikawa* (animal glue) to improve the support and gives the paper a more absorbent and consistent finish for the application of paint. The inner linings of the body of the book are decorated with gold mica applications in small squares. (On occasion – if the artist was sufficiently rich – gold, silver or copper might be added)⁴.

The left-hand side of the book contains text, 36 vertical poems written vertically in Japanese characters on different supports: paper or even on a very fine, thin tissue (resembling a plant fibre like bamboo or a palm leaf). The writing is in black ink and the decoration is made with gold or metallic inks (probably gold and silver mica powder).

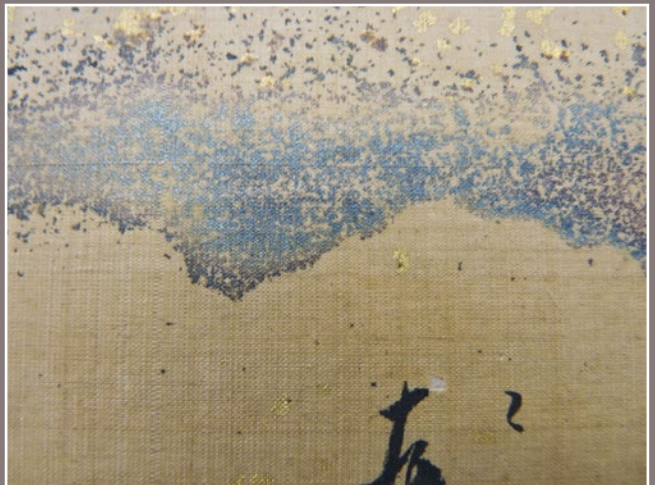
Pearly tone of the base of the paper.



Fragments of mica or gold applied to the lining.



Mineral fragments adorning covers: gold or mica%.



One of the metallic pigments decorating the poems.

One of the poetesses. [See details.](#)



5 According to Anna Jackson of the V&A, real hair was occasionally used.

On the right-hand side, 35 women are depicted wearing kimonos created with original fabrics. (The fact that there are only 35 women may be because one is lost: the book was in an advanced state of disrepair when it arrived at the workshop). All the women have different faces and features. These pieces are inserted inside the book and do not protrude excessively, so the book may be closed easily. Like the women's faces, some of the fabrics are hand painted, imitating flowers or plant motifs. The delicacy and realism of these models is impressive; the artist even tried to imitate natural hair using dark silk fibre.⁵

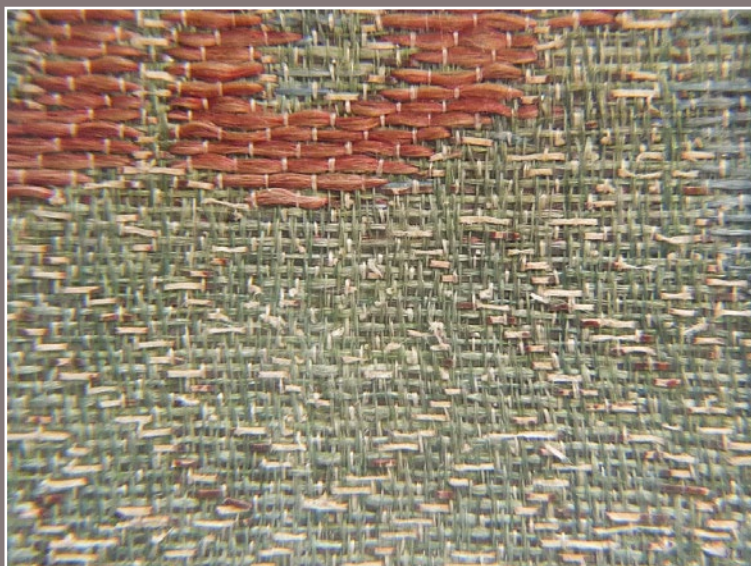
The book's condition

The piece was in a particularly delicate condition on arrival as the book was broken into several pieces or held in place by tape, making consultation impossible. There were also dark glue stains (possibly from a previous attempt sy repair) and some of the pieces were poorly glued or in the wrong place.

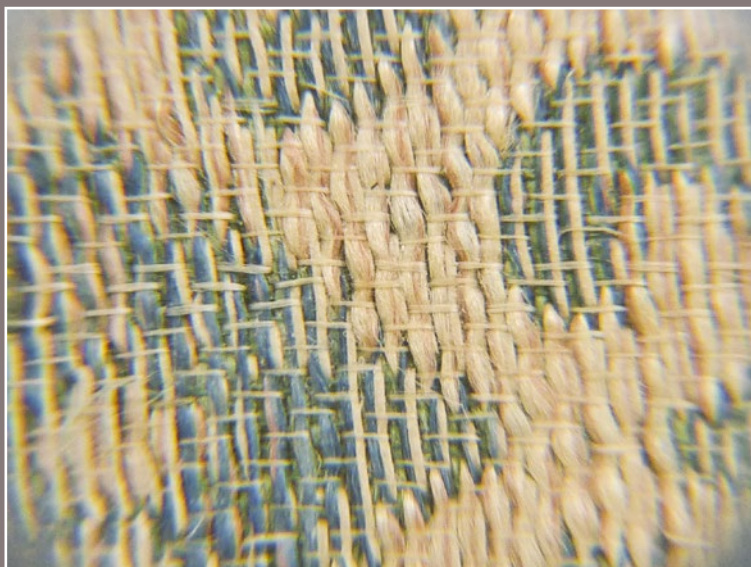
The covers of the book were made of a very delicate fabric and were broken and worn, especially around the perimeter. The fabric is a twill-based lampas which uses two warps with different silk wefts in green, red, rust, blue and white and one made with gold paper. The golden hue is almost entirely lost: only the red part that is the base for the gold is preserved.

The most damaged part was the binding. Exposed to friction and handling, it presented losses of the support, scratches, and general wear. The interior of the binding was partially detached, presenting some tears and holes.

Reverse of the cover with coloured stripes. The paper is in very poor condition.



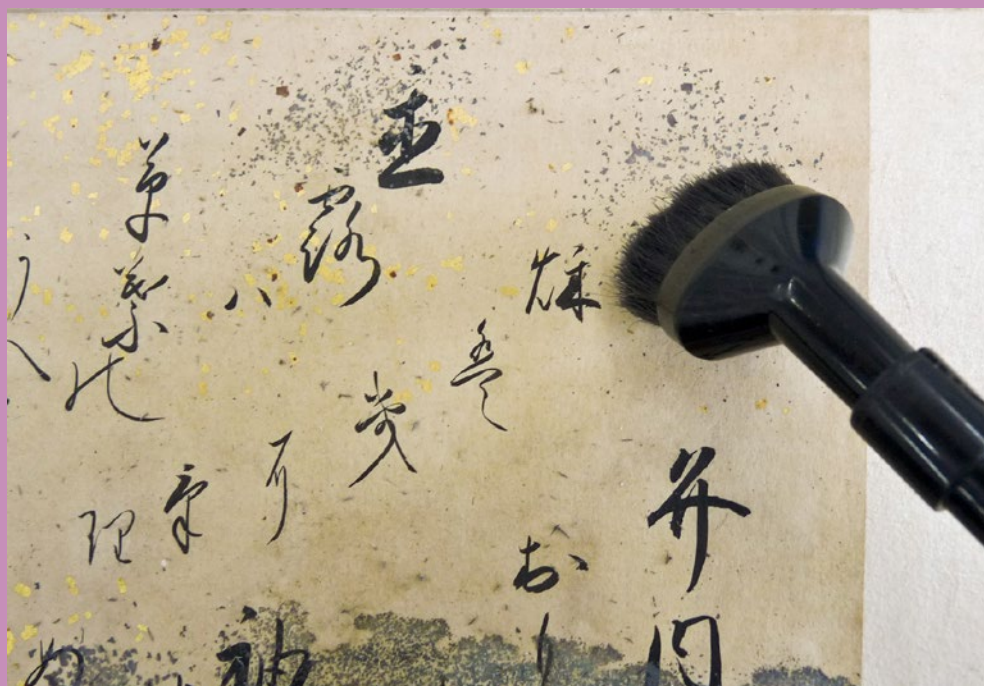
Reverse of the cover of the body.



View of the weft of the gold paper (X 20).



Cleaning of the supports.



Conserving the paper

We began by attempting to conserve the book by joining together the different parts. We cleaned the supports with the aid of stirrers, erasers, Wishab® sponges or aspiration, as required. Low suction aspiration was performed and delicate or broken parts were protected with a tulle screen. We removed the tape and the glue residue to be able to join the supports together.

Extraction of previous interventions using a bamboo spatula.



Consolidation of the body of the book with Japanese paper.



Separation of the cover from the binding using a bamboo spatula.



We tested several glues (wheat starch, rice starch, Tylose MH 300 ...) to see which was the most suitable and eventually chose wheat starch, due to its mordant and its flexibility. The grafts were made with Japanese paper similar to the original (Arakaji Natural 33 gr.). To provide consistency and to reinforce the hinge system, on occasion we had to glue two pieces of paper in the direction opposite to the fibre; this strengthened the accordion-like opening and closing action. The major challenge at this point was to maintain the tension to ensure the correct positioning and the opening of the cards.

We now treated the binding, reinforcing its support with Japanese paper. We removed the paper strip (*daisen*) of the cover and reinforced it with a sheet, gluing a thin piece of paper on the back with wheat starch. For the finish we added a small claret trompe l'oeil touch in watercolours. The cover was laminated with the Japanese paper, in pieces, to avoid tension. Excess moisture was removed with Reemays®, blotters and weights. We retouched the grafts with watercolours, applying colour to the reinstated part.

Cleaning blue stains with a scalpel and using a linen tester.



Conserving the fabric

In addition to the paper, the book's fabric was also in need of major repair. We used conservation techniques to clean up and consolidate the kimonos, the block covers, and the cover of the binding.

First we removed the dark glue stains that soiled certain points using a scalpel tip. The fabrics were cleaned mechanically with a low-suction vacuum, protecting sensitive areas with a tulle screen. The weaker or poorly glued parts were consolidated with wheat starch and, attaching the loose particles directly, a glass and a weight were applied to finish the process.

To ensure the conservation of the block covers, we removed the card to which they were attached with great care since the fabric was fragile and dry. The fabric was composed of two warps and wefts of different colours with a floral decoration and rust-coloured, green, and white stripes in a highly Oriental style. The removal was performed with a small bamboo spatula, exerting a little pressure. The glue applied originally (and in fact all the glues used in this book) were quite weak perhaps because the effect of the mordant is lost over time or because they were relatively light.

We cleaned the remains of the Japanese paper attached to the fabric, softening it with Tylose MH 300 gel, and then removed them using a spatula and applying moisture. We did not want to clean the piece too much, in case we damaged the fabric even more. We aspirated both the front and back of the two covers with low suction and protection. To avoid losing more gold paper weft, we decided not to immerse the fabric, but we did apply a slight humidification with cold steam to improve the rigidity and to even out the deformities before consolidating it on a support. To the new support, in green cotton, we added natural dye (coffee) to age the tone slightly. The tears and gaps were consolidated with conservation stitches (Bologna stitch or long and short, as required) with two-ply silk thread dyed with CIBA dye.

Correct placement of one of the dresses, using pegs.



Consolidation with wheat starch glue.



Fastening to a support with silk thread and conservation stitches.



The brown silk inside cover was aspirated and immersed in water several times to remove surface dirt. Once the warp and weft were aligned and the deformities removed, we applied a cotton support, dyed with natural dyes (coffee and tea) and added a crepeline to reproduce the colour more accurately. The consolidation was performed with conservation stitches as noted above.

Now that the parts were glued together, and perhaps due to addition of the cotton supports, the binding had a slight tendency to open (as in fact it did before the conservation work). To prevent this from happening we made two Melinex® strips of 75 microns about 3.5 cm wide, taped together to improve storage. For better conservation and safer storage in the future, we think that a case should be made to protect the entire book.

Conclusions

The conservation of this old Japanese book posed an interesting challenge because it is so different to the pieces we normally deal with, both in terms of the materials (the type of paper, delicate fabrics, and glues) and the technique used. We divided our intervention into two parts: conservation of the paper, and conservation of the fabric. The task has drawn our attention to new concepts of this complex and distinct culture, in which craftspeople worked with great patience without worrying excessively about the time taken, and had the skill to create such spectacular end results. As a result, we have been profoundly impressed by this philosophy and by the beauty and delicacy of this piece made by expert Japanese artists and bookbinders. ●

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