

Selections from NDL collections

Material recently designated as a rare book: *Bunsho*

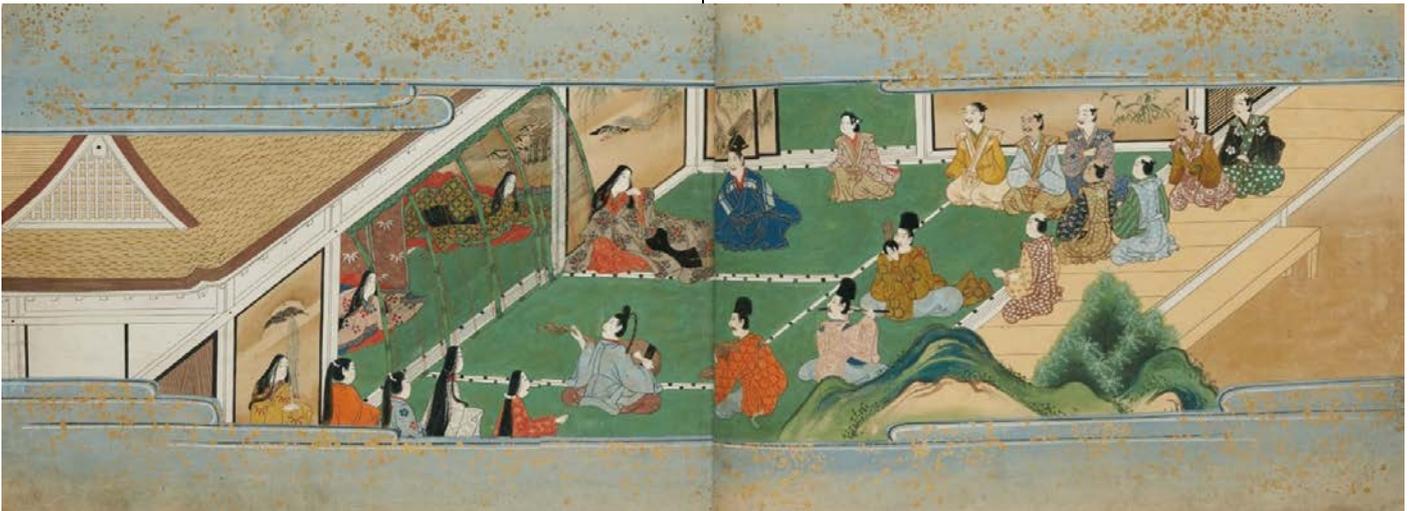
This article is a partial translation of the article in Japanese of the title "54th Committee on Designation of Rare Books: Materials recently designated as rare books" in NDL Monthly Bulletin No. 699/700 (July/August 2019).

The National Diet Library (NDL) holds a number of library materials that are considered historically significant. The NDL Committee on Designation of Rare Books determines which particular designation a material should receive according to the National Diet Library Rare Books Designation Criteria and National Diet Library Semi-Rare Books Designation Criteria. In February, 2019, three more Japanese books were designated as rare, and one more Japanese book was designated as semi-rare, bringing the total number of rare books to 1,305 and the total number of semi-rare books to 798.

bunsho

The term *Nara-e-hon* has been used since the Meiji period to refer to manuscripts illustrated with color drawings, produced from the end of the Muromachi period until the mid-Edo period with stories most commonly based on the narrative literature of the Heian period, *Otogi-zoshi*, *Kowakamai* (a Japanese recitative dance that was popular from the Muromachi to the Edo period), and other similar sources.

Although early examples of Nara-e-hon include simple works created by a single individual, by the late 17th century, *e-zoshi-ya* were accepting orders for quite luxurious volumes from daimyo or other wealthy individuals. Accordingly, Nara-e-hon come in several different formats and vary in height from 16 to 30 cm.



Bunsho NDL Call No. WA32-22. Copied in the early Edo period, three volumes, 24.0 × 34.7 cm. Nara e-hon (handwritten manuscript with color illustrations). The title is shown on the title strip.

Bunsho is a Nara e-hon of a fairytale known as *Bunsho-zoshi*. The protagonist is a man named Bunsho, who rises from humble beginnings as a salt maker to become a wealthy landowner. He is blessed by the god of the Kashima Shrine with two beautiful daughters who marry well, and the entire family enjoys a long, happy life. Because of their auspicious stories with happy endings, *Bunsho-zoshi* Nara e-hon were often produced for inclusion in a bride's dowry or to be the first book read at New Year's.

The latter half of *Bunsho-zoshi* tells the story of how Bunsho's daughter falls in love with *Chujo*, the son of the imperial regent. In the final volume, *Chujo* disguises himself as a merchant and participates in a *biwa* (Japanese lute) performance for the entire Bunsho family just to see Bunsho's daughter.

Cover of the last volume of *Bunsho*

There are many versions of this story, which is usually illustrated with 12 to 18 drawings. This particular version, however, has 23 vivid illustrations—including two two-page illustrations—and the explanatory notes are written on beautiful paper decorated with plants drawn in gold paint. The book is 24.0 by 34.7 cm, making it the largest known example of an oblong Nara-ehon. This format became more common during the early Edo period, and it is likely that this volume was created at that time.



A scene from the first volume, showing salt-making on the beach. The man in the upper right carrying two bundles of firewood on a pole is the main character, Bunsho. The pages all have a similar format of 12 columns containing 14 to 18 kanji or kana characters.

Oversized, oblong Nara-ehon such as this one are rarely discovered in perfect condition, because their drawings were often removed and reused elsewhere or converted into picture scrolls. This particular version of *Bunsho* is invaluable as a quintessential example of a complete set of volumes to an oversized Nara-ehon.

(Translated by YABE Moyu)

Related articles from the National Diet Library Newsletter:

- [Material recently designated as a semi-rare book: Yama no sachi](#) (No.202, October 2015)
- [Material recently designated as a rare book: Shika wakashu](#) (No.214, October 2017)