

Selections from NDL collections

## *The Tale of Genji* in the palm of your hand—edutainment from the Edo period

SAWASAKI Kyoko, Humanities, Maps, Rare Books and Old Materials Division, Reader Services and Collections Department

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*Genji Monogatari*. Published by Yoshida Zengoro, Koto (Kyoto), 1749. 28 volumes; 6.9×4.8cm in colored wood box. Available in the [NDL Digital Collection](#).



Shown in the photos above is a set of 28 palm-sized books containing explanatory notes about *The Tale of Genji*. The storage case is made of paulownia wood and decorated with pictures of flowers. Stored inside the case are one unnumbered volume titled "Outline/Table of Contents" and 27 numbered volumes. The box and its contents are small enough that you might think they are nothing more than accessories to a Hina doll set. But the books are actually filled with important information explaining the cultural background necessary to appreciate *The Tale of Genji*.

The unnumbered volume is titled "Outline/Table of Contents" and contains an overview as well as commentary on *The Tale of Genji* that describes the moral significance of the story. In fact, given the similarity of the language used in this commentary with that of the *Myojosho*<sup>1</sup>, a collection of commentaries on *The Tale of Genji* that dates from 1530, some scholars have suggested that the writer of this edition used the *Myojosho* as a reference.

The 27 numbered volumes contain commentary and explanatory notes for two of *The Tale of Genji's* 54 chapters. The label on each cover shows a volume number and the titles of the chapters. For example, the label on the cover of the third volume reads "Wakamurasaki Suetsumuhana 3," from which we know that the content of this third volume is about the chapters "Wakamurasaki" and "Suetsumuhana."



(Right) Frontispiece of Hanachirusato, Suma 6  
(Left) Waka from Chapter 31 Makibashira

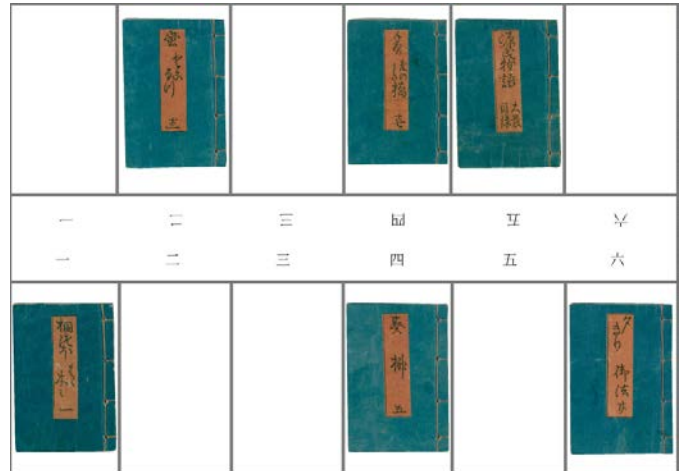
<sup>1</sup> The *Myojosho* was edited by the Sanjo-nishi family.

Each volume has a frontispiece with an illustration of a scene from the story as well as the chapter titles and a graphic symbol called a *kou-no-zu*, which depicts a sequence of fragrances. In fact, *The Tale of Genji* has a strong association with *koudou* or the Way of Fragrance. For Japanese aristocrats, fragrance was an integral part of their everyday life, and they would even play games, called *monkou*, that involved sampling and then guessing the ingredients to different combinations of fragrances. *Kou-no-zu* were devised as a means for recording these combinations. There is a well-known *monkou* called *Genji-kou* that is based on *The Tale of Genji*. Eventually, almost every chapter\* of *The Tale of Genji* became associated with a specific order of fragrances, including some which are the same.

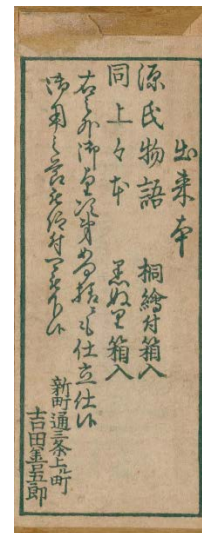
The text of each volume contains information intended to help the reader grasp the gist of the stories, such as the meaning of the titles, a synopsis of the plot, and information on each characters' age, official rank, and relationship with other characters. And there is also at least one quotation of *waka*, a Japanese style poem, included with commentary in each volume. This approach is reminiscent of the *Genji-kokagami*, a simplified version of *The Tale of Genji* written by Kazan' in Nagachika at the beginning of the Muromachi period. It was very popular because of its simplicity, and several editions were published during the Edo period. Japanese verse was often written in a calligraphic style called *chirashi-gaki*, which features large amounts of white space and flowing characters. And each numbered volume contains at least one example of *waka* presented in this style. In addition to providing commentary on *The Tale of Genji*, they also serve as examples of good handwriting.

This set of books was apparently produced with the aim of providing education for women. But it is clear from the copy held at the Tsurumi University Library that there were other uses for these books beyond just reading. In addition to the books and storage case, the Tsurumi University Library set also includes a sheet of paper on which a board game is printed.

This board game appears to be played by two players who throw dice to move their markers around the board that looks like this. In this case, the books are used as markers.



Whether used for reading or as a board game, this set seems to have been an educational toy which helped people acquire the knowledge about *The Tale of Genji* while playing a game. These small books are a symbol both of the popularity of the world of *Genji* and public enthusiasm for women's education in the Edo period.



An advertisement from the publisher is attached to the back of the box lid. It states that in addition to this popular edition in the illustration Paulownia wood box, there was also a deluxe edition that came in a black lacquered box. The Waseda University Library has some of these black lacquered boxes, and you can browse images in Waseda University's "Classic Registry General Database" ([http://www.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kotenseki/html/bunko30/bunko30\\_a0015/index.html](http://www.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kotenseki/html/bunko30/bunko30_a0015/index.html))

(Translated by HYUGA Tomoaki)

**References (in Japanese):**

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