



Yukio Lippit on Folding Screens and Gold Leaf

Folding screens, *byōbu*, perform a dual function. They are items of furniture that partition space, and they are paintings that animate the spaces they face and surround with new kinds of meaning or mood. When you unfold a folding screen within an interior space, you are making that space more official or decorative or playful or profound. You are enabling certain kinds of activity in front of it—poetic activity, merrymaking, perhaps even some kind of social or religious ritual—so these screens perform many different functions.

But they do so in a very powerful visceral way because of their scale. Japanese architecture is predicated upon this idea that you are distributing the weight of a roof to an outer perimeter of columns, and you have lots of freedom to partition the resulting large inner space in any way you want. Folding screens allow you to carve out spaces within this interior in a fairly free way. The Japanese folding screen relies upon special paper hinges which were innovated around the fourteenth century and distinguished them from the kinds of screens you saw elsewhere in Asia. So you could fold them in wonderfully quirky, irregular ways, unlike the ways you typically see in museums. So the same painting could look very different depending upon how you decided to present or display a screen in any given situation.

It's also important to remember that Japan was a floor-sitting culture. It's inconceivable that in Edo-era Japan people would stand around as we would in a museum, arms folded, gazing at a painting. You would be sitting on the floor, often on your knees, and that means your line of sight would converge with the mid to lower section of a screen. This means that the visual field of a screen was immersive. It encompassed the entirety of the viewer's visual

field in many cases. You weren't looking at the painting, you were surrounded by the painting, you were in the painting.

The classical pictorial theory of Renaissance Europe proposes that a painting is like a window onto which you see the world and presupposes a fixed viewing position. But there is no fixed viewing position that's presupposed by Japanese screens or Japanese pictures in general. You could take in a picture from any different vantage point. You could be to the left or to the right, you could be far away, you could be close up. You really experience the visual field of the screen in many different ways and as a result Japanese paintings had to accommodate a kind of all-over viewing perspective that ultimately makes them extremely dynamic as visual experiences.

Because there is no single privileged vantage point from which you are taking in the picture, from which if you step to the right or the left you somehow lose the focus. Instead you are taking in the landscape, or the nature scene, or the group of figures from different vantage points. That's why screens can be folded and unfolded in different ways. Ultimately you notice different things and you fix on different things when you are viewing a screen multiple times from different positions. It's very difficult to get tired by viewing the same screen because you are often viewing it under different conditions.



Maruyama Ōkyo, *Rooster*, 18th century, pair of six-panel folding screens. Courtesy of Shoeido Matsumoto Gallery.



A World of Edo Art Plants

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Gold leaf works well with Japanese pictorialism with compositions which use abundant unpainted space, or negative space in which the metallic qualities of the gold, its iridescence, its ever transforming refraction of light, is showcased to full effect. When a screen is placed in a Japanese interior according to lighting conditions before electricity was invented, it extends whatever natural light or candlelight is in the room and really transforms it. There is this fractal effect off of the surface of a gold screen because of its gold leaf which can often take on an organic and uneven effect across its surface. The topography of a gold screen is ever changing, and this is reflected in the light that it gives off. Thus, the gold leaf was both an empty background and a decorative surface that interacted in a scintillating way with the actual space of the room but also with the viewers' imagination.

"Interview with Yukio Lippit." Hoaglund, Linda, dir. *Edo Avant Garde*. 2019; United States; Japan.

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