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UNFOLDING NARRATIVES: VISUALISING THE TALES OF GENJI AND HEIKE ON THE FOLDING SCREEN

The celebrated Japanese narratives, *The tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*) (p. 83) and *The tales of Heike* (*Heike monogatari*) (pp. 76–7) are the subject of three folding screens (*byōbu*) in the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia. *The tale of Genji*, authored around the turn of the eleventh century by Lady Murasaki Shikibu (died c.1014), is a courtly epic of fifty-four chapters which chronicles the life, loves and heirs of the protagonist Genji, an ideal courtier nicknamed the ‘Shining Lord’.¹ *The tales of Heike*, with its best-known variant recorded in the mid-thirteenth century, is a warrior tale of twelve books, which centres around the tragic destruction of the Taira by the Minamoto during the Genpei War (1180–85).

The screens form part of a long-standing visual culture of *Genji* and *Heike*, which began shortly after the respective completion of each text, and which continues even today in Japanese film and comic books.² By the seventeenth century, when the screens were most likely to have been produced, a range of secondary texts – pictorial, textual and performative – had developed around the two narratives. This essay sketches the intersections between the original narratives, secondary texts, producers and audiences, and explores how each screen ‘tells’ its own version of *Genji* and *Heike* by interweaving select moments from a linear text and transforming them into dazzling spatial compositions.

The single Genji screen: A celebration of courtly splendor

Genji screens are often considered to focus on brilliant displays of court ritual and meetings between lovers.³ The single screen, featuring three chapters – ‘Under the cherry blossoms’ (*Hana no en*; Ch. 8), ‘Akashi’ (*Akashi*; Ch. 13) and ‘Butterflies’ (*Kochō*; Ch. 24) – follows this convention, and like many *Genji* screens, collages the chapters by demarcating them with gold clouds that act as discrete boundaries.⁴

‘Under the cherry blossoms’ (right) captures a key moment of that chapter, a chance meeting between Genji and a lady of the rival faction (Oborozukiyo), following a splendid cherry-blossom banquet at the imperial court, late in the second month. Although there is no description of this lady’s posture in the *Genji* text, the iconography of Genji gazing at the unwitting lady, who faces the moon with a fan by her face, became established over the course of the sixteenth century in small pictorial formats, such as folding fans and square sheets (*shikishi*, literally, ‘coloured papers’).⁵ An identical composition by Tosa Mitsuyoshi (1539–1613) appears in a *shikishi* album in the Kyoto National Museum⁶ and represents each of the *Genji* chapters by pairing one image with a textual and poetic excerpt⁷ from the *Genji* text:

... coming his [Genji’s] way and singing, ‘Peerless the night with a misty moon...’
He happily caught her sleeve.
‘Oh, don’t! Who are you?’⁸
‘You need not be afraid.

*That you know so well the beauty of the deep night leads me to assume you have with
the setting moon nothing like a casual bond!*⁹



details: Tosa Mitsuyoshi, 1539–1613
Hananoen from *Genji* album
Kyoto National Museum

details: Edo period, 1615–1868
Scenes from the three chapters of The tale of Genji
[*Genji monogatari*], 17th century
single six-panel screen, colour, gold on paper,
91.0 x 232.0 cm
Gift of the Friends of the Art Gallery of South
Australia 1999
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide



Genji coaxes the lady into an affair without knowing her identity and later uses her fan to find her. Thus the fan held by the lady Oborozukiyo functions as a key emblem of the chapter and a cue for the viewer to identify this moment from *Genji*.¹⁰

Another codified *Genji* iconography appears in panels two to four, dedicated to the chapter 'Butterflies' and the representation of a musical performance on two Chinese-style barges, the dragon-prow and the roc-prow (second panel), and a dance performance by young attendants in bird and butterfly costumes (third panel) at the sutra reading the following day, hosted by Empress Akikonomu (fourth panel). Flanking the dancers are renowned cherry and orange trees planted by the steps of the Shishinden, the main ceremonial hall in the inner palace compound.¹¹ By placing the cherry tree before a gold cloud, the screen turns it into a pivot motif that serves two chapters, 'Under the cherry blossoms' and 'Butterflies', and binds them spatially (imperial court) and seasonally (spring), even though they take place over a decade and a half apart in the narrative.

The group of travellers walking among autumn flowers in panels five to six captures Genji's triumphant return to the capital in the chapter 'Akashi', following a self-imposed exile in Suma (in the present-day city of Kobe) caused by the exposure of his affair with Oborozukiyo. This suggests an intentional dialogue between the two ends of the screen. (In fact, the painting-within-painting beside Genji at his encounter with Oborozukiyo shows travellers in an ink-monochrome landscape, hinting at his exile.) The progression of seasonal signifiers in the screen – cherry tree (spring), orange tree (summer) and chrysanthemum, bellflower and pink flowers (autumn) – also points to the possibility that it was originally paired with another screen featuring chapters from the autumn and winter months.



details: Edo period, 1615–1868
Scenes from the three chapters of The tale of Genji
[*Genji monogatari*]



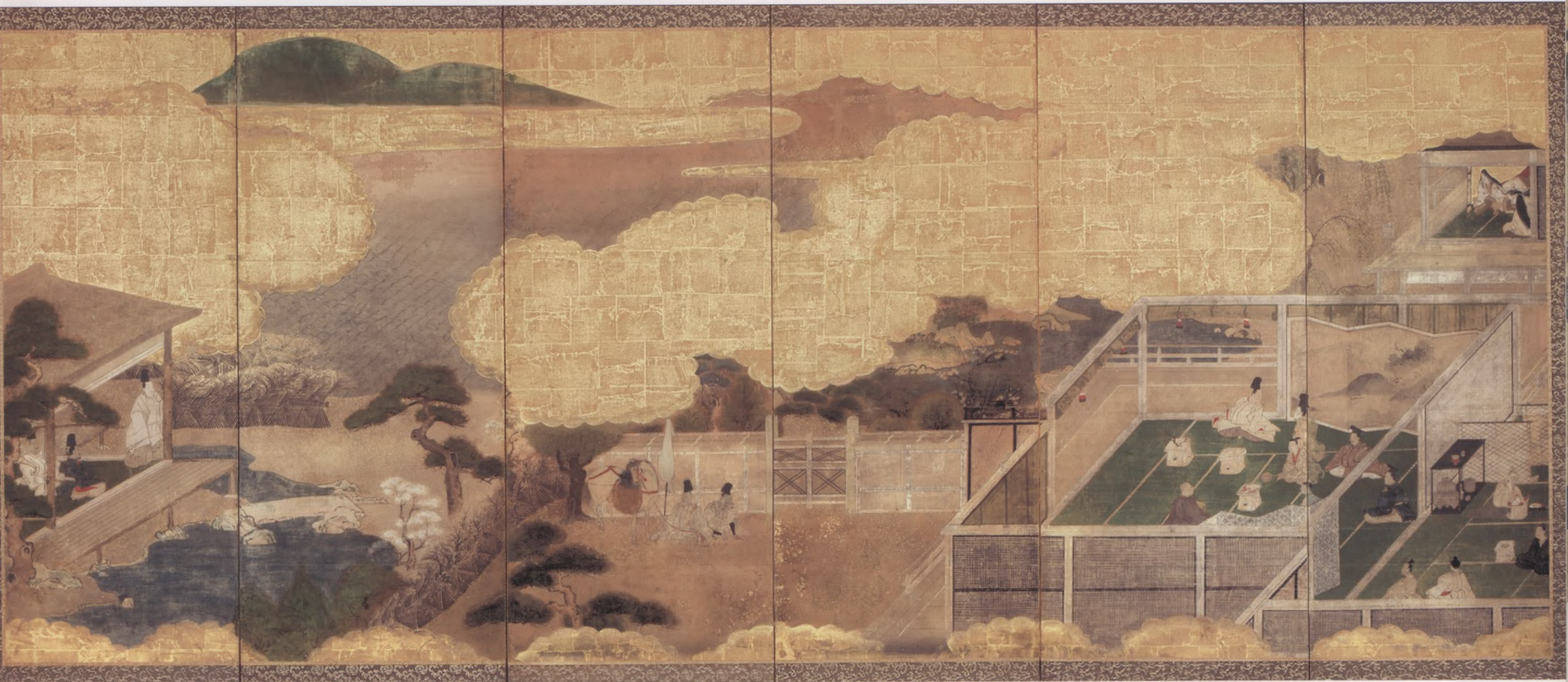


The pair of Genji screens: A meeting of the past and the present

In a departure from the court-centred composition of the single *Genji* screen, the pair of screens represents sites away from the capital and devotes one screen to a chapter: 'Akashi' (*Akashi*; Ch. 13) on the right and 'The pilgrimage to Sumiyoshi' (*Miotsukushi*; Ch. 14) on the left. Some background knowledge of the *Genji* text is essential for understanding this pair of screens, as the sequence of three chapters, beginning in Chapter 12 ('Suma'), follows Genji's fall, due to his involvement with Oborozukiyo during the previous year, and subsequent redemption, owing to the deity of Sumiyoshi.

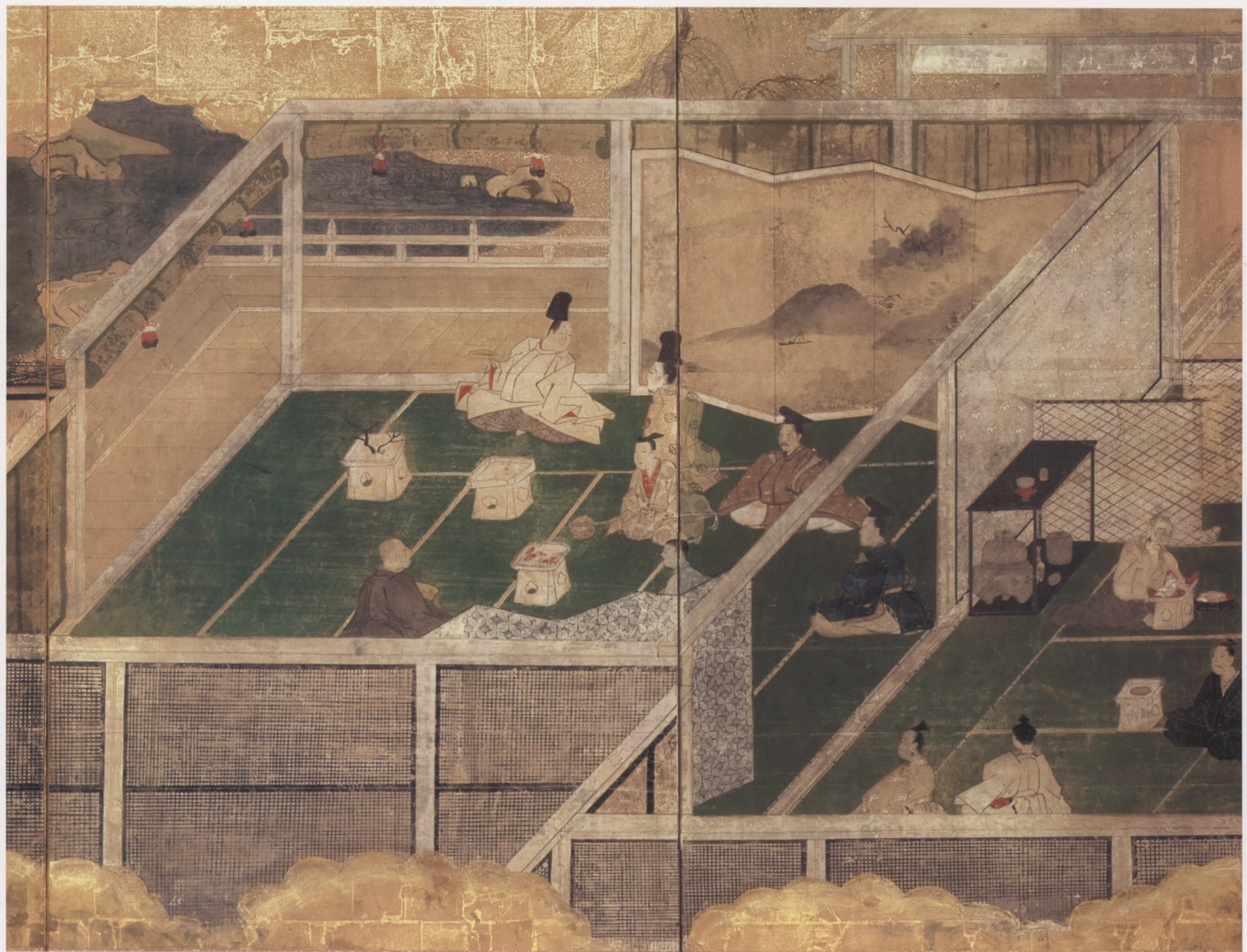
The 'Akashi' chapter marks the turnaround of Genji's fortunes in this sequence. The right screen illustrates two locations, both by the shore: Genji's residence during his exile in Suma (panels five to six) and Genji's temporary abode in Akashi under the

Edo period, 1615–1868
Scenes from The tale of Genji [*Genji monogatari*], early 17th century
 pair of six-panel screens, colour, gold, silver on paper, each 154.0 x 348.0 cm
 Gift of Dai-Ichi Mutual Life Insurance Company and the Government of South Australia through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation 1990
 Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide



care of the 'Akashi Novice', a former Governor of Akashi (panels one to four). Genji's future union with his daughter, the lady from Akashi, is hinted by her presence in the upper right corner of the screen. Panels five to six also allude to a passage in the 'Suma' chapter, where the first blossoming of young cherry trees in the garden triggers thought of the imperial court for Genji, particularly the cherry tree at the Shishinden and the fateful party held in its honour, where he met Oborozukiyo.¹² Furthermore, the lone cherry tree and stone bridge in the composition suggest that the producers of the screen referenced not the original text – only available to and read in its entirety by a privileged few – but *Genji* digests, which provided summaries of the plot, key scenes and poems. An especially popular digest since the fifteenth century, *A small mirror of Genji* (*Genji kokagami*), notes 'cherry sapling, garden stream, garden grass, pine pillars, stone bridge, bamboo fence; these are the elements of the Suma residence' (emphasis by author), corresponding to the distinct motifs in the composition.¹³

The band of gold cloud that cuts diagonally across the screen demarcates Genji's residences in Suma and Akashi. The right two panels are dedicated to a banquet held at the mansion in Akashi, represented by the pictorial device of the 'blown-off roof'





details: Edo period, 1615–1868
Scenes from The tale of Genji [Genji monogatari]

(*fukinuki yatai*), which allows unobstructed access to the interiors. Seated across from his host, the Akashi Novice, Genji holds up a ceramic wine cup. Departing from the compositional canon of the 'Akashi' chapter, this section incorporates objects not only post-dating the original world of *Genji*, but also imports originating in China, such as the ink-monochrome landscape screen and the tea shelf ornamented with a white Tenmoku teabowl on a red lacquer stand.¹⁴ This unusual composition suggests input from the patron who commissioned the screens, and makes the screen a particularly unique example among extant *Genji* screens.

By contrast, the left screen features a composition popular in the screen format: Genji's pilgrimage to the Sumiyoshi Shrine (symbolised by the *torii* gate and the round bridge) to offer thanks to the deity of Sumiyoshi for his recall to the capital.¹⁵ A year has elapsed since Genji's triumphant return to the court, and his enormous entourage befits his meteoric rise to Palace Minister. The lady from Akashi, who was also making her annual pilgrimage to the shrine by boat that day, appears again on the right. She sails away to nearby Naniwa without announcing herself to Genji, as the splendour of his entourage painfully reminds her of her inferior status. Genji only learns of this near-meeting after departing Sumiyoshi, and in the tale he composes a poem for her when he arrives at Naniwa himself. Although the screen represents Genji's entourage at Sumiyoshi, in the fourth panel Genji's servant Koremitsu is shown approaching the right ox cart with an inkstone case for Genji to write down the poem. This is probably because the episode and poem provide the background story for the Japanese title of the chapter, 'Miotsukushi'.



The Heike screens: Representation of an epic battle

The renderings of the *Heike* tale on the folding-screen format typically pair two monumental battles fought between the Taira and the Minamoto: the Battle of Ichinotani of 1184 (from Book 9) on the right screen and the Battle of Yashima of 1185 (Book 11) on the left.¹⁶ Most extant Ichinotani–Yashima pairings link the two battles by illustrating the Inland Sea in the middle. Perhaps based on the Ichinotani side of such pairings, the screens diverge from this convention with a focus on the Battle of Ichinotani and the attacks by the Minamoto on the Taira family's Fukuhara stronghold. As we shall see, this pair of screens centres on the first of the two battles that led to the final defeat of the Taira clan, while foreshadowing the ultimate outcome of the *Heike* narrative.

The two views of near and far made possible by the folding-screen format are exploited fully. Viewed from a distance, an overwhelming sense of movement sweeps across the two screens, representing a dynamic vision of 'battle'; viewed closely, the screen invites detailed inspection. Contorted bodies of warriors and horses moving in all directions vividly convey the confusion of battle, and carefully depicted armour – distinguishing high-ranking warriors from foot soldiers – replicates the great attention given to paraphernalia in the narrative. Red and white banners mark the Taira and the Minamoto clans, respectively.

The right screen illustrates attacks from the main and rear battle fronts, with the Taira clan's Fukuhara stronghold positioned in the middle. The composition mimics the episodic nature of the text, in dispersing key episodes across the screen. Two notable moments from Book 9, Section 10 of the tale, 'The double charge,' are portrayed in panels one to three. The brothers Kawara Tarō and Jirō (both died in 1184 at the Battle of Ichinotani) are pictured in the bottom right as they cross the Ikuta-no-mori branch barricade (top left). The first to storm the defences, they were also the first to perish. Kajiwara Kagesue (1162–1200) and two retainers, backed against a cliff, confront five enemies (p. 87 top), as Kagesue's father Kagetoki (?–1200) comes to his rescue (p. 87 bottom).

At the rear front of the stronghold, Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159–1189), the half-brother of the shogun Yoritomo (1147–1199) (left), leads a surprise attack 'some 700 feet' down the Hiyodori Pass, as vividly described in 'The attack from the cliff' (Book 9, Section 12):

Yoshitsune looked down over the Heike stronghold in the distance. 'Try sending some of the horses down,' he ordered. A few of the saddled horses were accordingly sent galloping down the slope ... 'If the riders are careful enough, the horses can get down without injury. Look lively, now – I'll show you how it's done!' Leading a force of thirty horsemen, he plummeted down the slope. The rest of the force followed, the incline so steep that the stirrups of the men in the rear clattered against the armor and helmets of those ahead of them.¹⁷

The screen strategically masks part of the Fukuhara mansion to provide a more intimate view of the interior, unlike most Ichinotani–Yashima screens, which provide a bird's-eye view of the overall structure. This draws attention to the central representation of the child emperor Antoku (1178–1185; r.1180–85) seated behind the bamboo blinds and attended to his right by his mother (Kenreimon'in; 1155–1213) and grandmother (Nun of the Second Rank; d.1185) (p. 89 top). The child emperor, emphasised by his diminutive size and his hairstyle, sharply contrasts with



details: Edo period, 1615–1868
Battle scenes from The tales of Heike
[*Heike monogatari*], early 17th century
pair of six-panel screens, colour and gold on paper,
each 155.0 x 357.0 cm
Gift of Andrew and Hiroko Gwinnett through the
Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation 2003
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide



the armour-clad intensity of the fighting warriors surrounding him.¹⁸ A sense of pathos is heightened for viewers who are aware of the emperor's ultimate fate in Book 11, when his grandmother jumps into the sea holding him in her arms.

The left screen features a particularly famous episode, 'The death of Atsumori' (Book 9, Section 16) (left, p. 89 bottom):

The Heike had lost the battle. 'Those Taira lords will be heading for the shore in hopes of making their getaway by boat!' thought Kumagae Naozane to himself. 'Fine! I'll go look for one of their generals to grapple with!' and he turned his horse in the direction of the beach.

As he did so, he spotted a lone warrior riding into the sea, making for the boats in the offing. He was wearing a battle robe of finely woven silk embroidered in a crane design, armor of light green lacing, and a horned helmet. He carried a sword with gilt fittings and a quiver whose arrows were fletched with black and white eagle feathers and held a rattan-wound bow in his hand. He was seated in a gold-rimmed saddle, astride a gray horse with white markings.

The lone warrior's horse had swum out about two hundred feet from the shore when Kumagae, waving with his fan, called out, 'Ho there, General! I see you. Don't shame yourself by showing your back to an enemy. Come back!'

The rider, acknowledging the call, turned toward the beach.¹⁹

Although not represented on the screen, contemporary viewers would have been familiar with the outcome, which results in Naozane's unwilling beheading of Atsumori (1169–1184), the youthful general, whose age is similar to his own son. This *Heike* episode was particularly famous by the seventeenth century, when the screens were produced, due to the popularity of the *Nō* plays and ballad dramas (*kōwaka-mai*) it inspired. Furthermore, extant works in handscrolls, hanging scrolls and folding screens reveal that this iconic confrontation between Atsumori and Naozane became an independent subject in its own right.

The *Genji* and *Heike* screens in the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia embody seventeenth-century receptions of these narratives. As *visual* narratives, these screens recall the *Genji* and *Heike* tales in complex ways, at the same time re-envisioning and reframing them. While the specific production contexts for each of the screens are not known, they demonstrate how previous compositions and established iconographies are digested and expanded to serve the individual needs of patrons and how they contribute to the ever-expanding visual culture of *Genji* and *Heike*.

details: Edo period, 1615–1868
Battle scenes from The tales of Heike
[*Heike monogatari*]



Tomoko Sakomura

