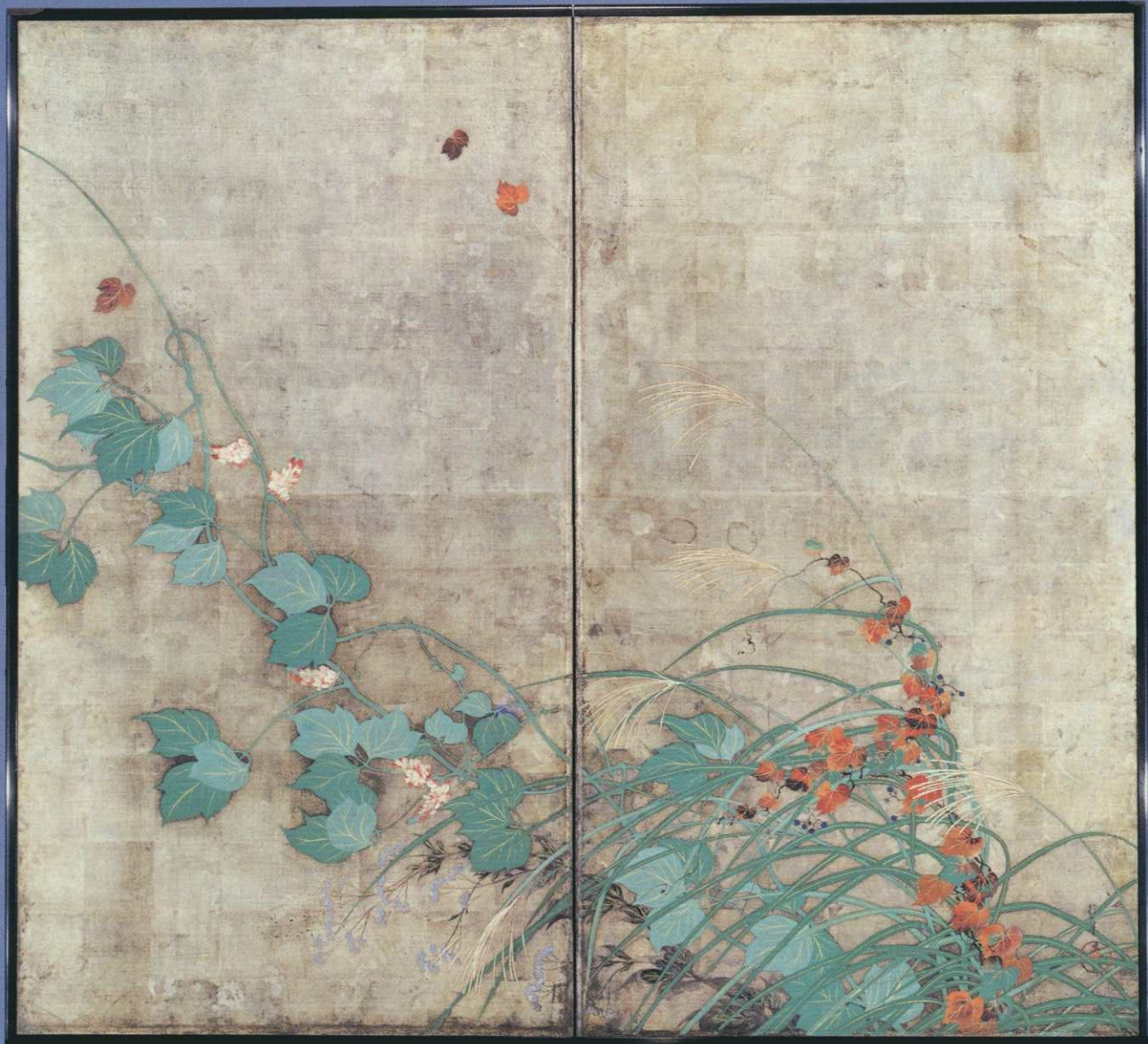


# Sensitivity to the Seasons

By Nobuo Tsuji



*Natsu-akikusa-zu (Flowering Plants of Summer and Autumn)*  
A pair of two-fold screens, colors on paper, each 165 × 182 cm

(Autumn screen)



The first work I would like to take up in this six-part series is a pair of folding screens by the Edo-period artist Sakai Hoitsu (1761-1828).

Although he was the younger brother of the Himeji *daimyo*, Hoitsu was born and raised in Edo (now Tokyo). He was interested in all of the arts, being an especially accomplished *haiku* poet. It was as a painter that he showed the greatest talent, however.

As seen in these screens, his style incorporated the coloration of the *yamato-e* (a lyrically elegant expression of seasonal sensitivities) developed by Kyoto artists since the 10th century. As such, his work owes much to Ogata Korin (1568-1716), a painter who preceded him by about a century and who he greatly respected. But Hoitsu did not just repeat the past. His works show a modern touch of realism that is not to be seen in Korin's works. Hoitsu excelled in the depiction of flowers and grasses, and his work is superbly represented in this pair of two-

panel folding screens in the collection of the Tokyo National Museum.

The summer screen depicts a river bank aglow in an evening shower. Reeds, bindweed, lilies and valerians bow under the weight of the droplets of rain as the river rushes by. The dark blue of the water and the subdued greens of the grasses contrast brilliantly with the silver-foil background to create the fresh, invigorating sense of summer.

You can almost feel the biting cold of the autumn wind that whips through the arrowroot, ivy, eulatia and agueweed of the autumn screen. Here, too, the background is covered in silver foil, dulled by a wash of black ink. The grasses and flowers are outlined in the same black ink, and leaves that have been ripped from the ivy vine dance in the wind to disappear into the background.

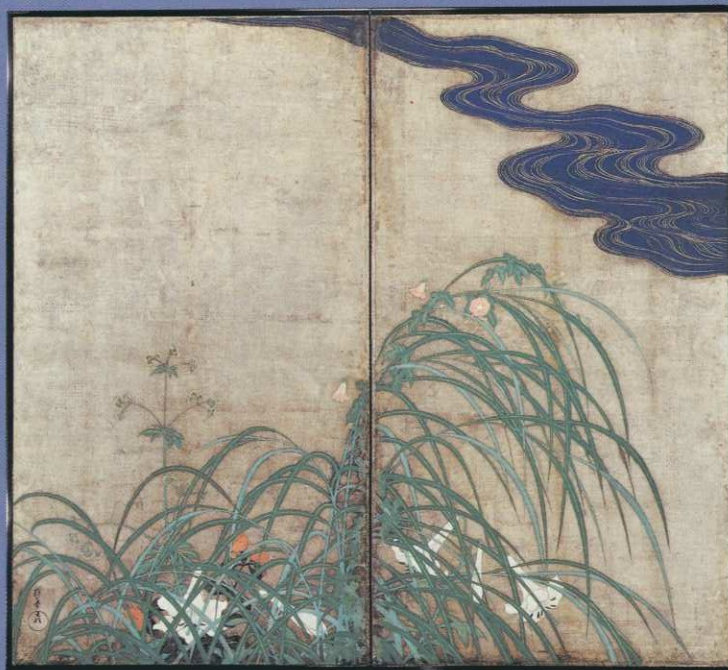
The motif is poetic, and Hoitsu may well have been inspired by several poems that describe just such autumn scenes as these in the *Shin-kokinshu* (New Collec-

tion of Ancient and Modern Times), an early 13th-century anthology of classical Japanese poetry.

As such, Hoitsu's pair of screens are firmly within the Japanese artistic tradition. Planters and cultivators, the ancient Japanese were acutely sensitive to the changing seasons. The *haiku*, the shortest poetic form in the world, still manages to include a word or phrase alluding to the season, and seasonal motifs have long been popular in all Japanese arts and crafts.

But Japanese society is no longer based in agriculture. Our crowded cities are dulling our sensitivity to the seasons; factories, housing complexes and roads so robbing us of our traditional lifestyle that we clog the expressways in a mass exodus to the countryside in search of what little of nature is left.

*Nobuo Tsuji is a professor of art history at the University of Tokyo. He specializes in Japanese art history.*



(Summer screen)