

Swirls of Beauty

By Nobuo Tsuji



Tsurayuki-shu from Sanjurōkunin-shu, national treasure, Nishi-Honganji Temple, Kyoto



Saruhiki, Suzuki Harunobu, woodprint, private collection

After the Japanese adopted the Chinese writing system in the 6th century, they created a separate syllabary of Chinese characters chosen for their readings rather than their meanings. At the same time, the cursive ideographs were abbreviated for simplicity's sake to create the *hiragana* syllabary that is still used today.

Hiragana was developed primarily by the women of the latter Heian court (794-1185). The elegant script was considered a special form for women, who rarely had the chance to learn to read or write the more complex Chinese calligraphy. The individual symbols flow one into the other to create a single thread.

Often *hiragana* was written on colorful handmade paper, the lines of the *hiragana* merging with the background pattern in a pleasing motif. One of the most famous examples of this is the *Sanjurokunin-shu* (Anthology of the Thirty-six Poets), a gorgeous early-12th-century collection of poetry now belonging to

the Nishi-Honganji Temple in Kyoto. The collection incorporates one or two books for each of 36 master poets since the 8th century. About 20 master calligraphers, both male and female, transcribed the individual poems for the anthology.

It was common practice during this period to celebrate the emperor's birthday by holding a competition in which individuals vied to present the emperor with gorgeous handmade books. The *Sanjurokunin-shu* is supposed to have been made for this purpose.

Its pages consist of an amazing variety of elegant and highly refined decorative handmade paper. The base paper imported from Sung China, *karakami*, was already decorated with woodblock printed plant patterns in white mica. On top of this are sprinkled colored pieces of paper, some cut, some torn, in a random collage overlaid with additional motifs of landscapes, flowers, birds and grasses. It is over this that the flowing lines of *hiragana* poetry have been written, in some places

so delicate as to almost disappear, in others bold and powerful. The combination of the paper's motifs and the superimposed pattern of the *hiragana* script has a lyrical effect well suited to the poetry it presents.

Shown here are two facing pages from the *Sanjurokunin-shu* on which are written six poems about the four seasons by the noted 10th-century *waka* poet Ki-no Tsurayuki. The paper is *suminagashi* paper, a kind of marbled paper made by adding drops of Chinese ink to water and gently swirling the drops to create a pattern which is then transferred to a piece of absorbent *washi* paper by briefly touching the paper to the liquid. In the example shown here, the overall effect is enhanced with the addition of brushstrokes in conscious imitation of the underlying *suminagashi* pattern.

Suminagashi paper was not frequently used after the *Sanjurokunin-shu*, and we do not see its like again until much later in the 18th century *ukiyo-e* art. Suzuki Harunobu (1725-70), an Edo period artist and the first to produce full-color woodblock prints, had a special fondness for *suminagashi* paper.

The example of his work shown here is of a monkey and its trainer, a common street entertainment during the New Year's holidays. Beautiful women were a favorite subject of *ukiyo-e*, and the monkey's trainer is thus depicted as a woman. However, this is not true *suminagashi* paper. Rather, the background is a finely detailed woodblock imitation of the *suminagashi* motif. Over the woman's head is written a New Year's *waka* poem by the 13th-century court poet Fujiwara-no Tameuji. The whole effect is reminiscent of the elegant refinement of the nobility so admired by Harunobu and just about all the samurai and townspeople of the day with any artistic sensibilities.

Suminagashi is a simple technique easily imitated. You might want to try it yourself with different colors to create your own personalized effect.

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