

Japan Courts and Culture

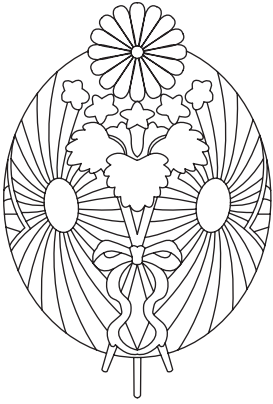
Large Text Labels



Treaty

Japan's seclusion came to an end in the 1850s, and the country returned to direct imperial rule in 1868. The new Emperor Meiji (1852–1912) encouraged rapid modernisation along western lines. Members of the British and Japanese royal and imperial families soon made their first diplomatic visits. Queen Victoria's son, Prince Alfred, was the first royal visitor to Japan. Imperial gifts of the highest quality – such as swords, textiles and screen paintings – entered the Royal Collection for the first time.

As artists began to travel between the two nations, Japanese craftspeople displayed metalwork and enamel at international exhibitions with considerable success. Works by them and by Imperial Household Artists were choice gifts for British jubilees and coronations.



Field Marshal's badge, c. 1918

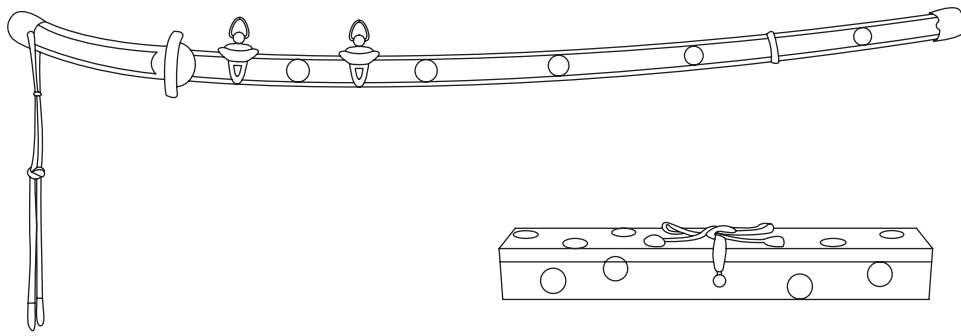
Osaka Mint

Close relations between the courts of Britain and Japan were demonstrated most clearly in 1918, when King George V was made an honorary Field Marshal of the Japanese Army. He was the first and only foreigner to receive this award, with its accompanying badge and sword.

Silver, gold, enamel

Given to King George V by the Emperor Taishō, 1918

RCIN 441124



Field Marshal's sword (**Gensuitō**), 1918

Gassan Sadakazu (1836–1918)

This Field Marshal's sword is the only example of its kind outside Japan. The elegant blade is in the style of the earliest known Japanese sword to have a forged curve. It was made by Imperial Household Artist, Gassan Sadakazu, at the age of 83.

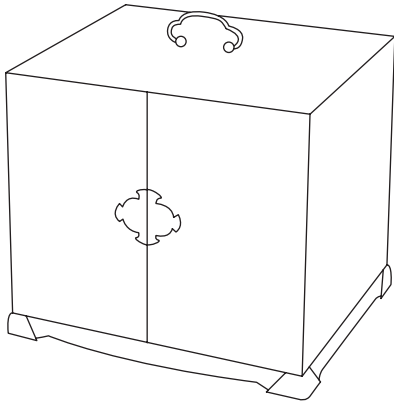
Steel, copper alloys (**shakudō** and **shibuichi**), gold, silver, leather

Given to King George V by the Emperor Taishō, 1918

RCIN 62630



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Miniature cabinet, c. 1905–07

Akatsuka Jitoku (1871–1936)

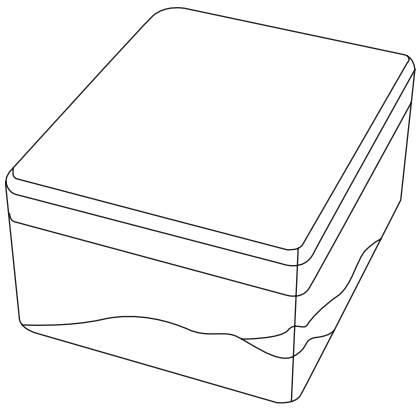
The close partnership of the treaty period was cemented by gift-giving at jubilees, weddings and other royal events. This Coronation gift to Queen Mary is the work of one of the most prestigious lacquerers of the early twentieth century.

Wood; black, gold and silver lacquer; mother-of-pearl, horn, shell

Given to Queen Mary by the Emperor Meiji and

Empress Shōken for her Coronation, 1911

RCIN 33967



Document box and cover (bunkō), 1900–07

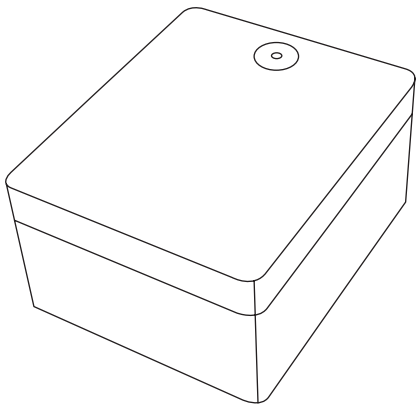
Ornate lacquer boxes such as this were often selected for official gifts since lacquer (**urushi**) represented a distinctly Japanese medium. This example combines elements of western realism with a smooth ground, created by polishing dense gold powder to a bright finish. It was presented in 1907 during negotiation of military agreements between the two nations.

Wood, gold and silver lacquer

Given to the Prince of Wales (later King George V)

by Admiral Yamamoto Gonnohyōe, 1907

RCIN 29450



Box and cover, c.1900–07

Attributed to Akatsuka Jitoku (1871–1936)

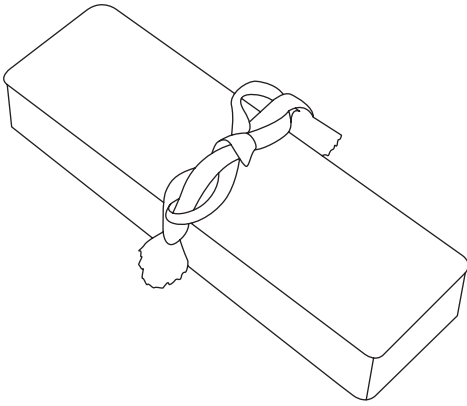
The large gold chrysanthemum crest (**kikumon**) on this box indicates that it was an imperial gift. Rounded corners and an exuberant design spilling over the sides are typical of high-quality pieces commissioned as gifts for important officials and foreign royalty.

Wood, black and gold lacquer, mother-of-pearl

Given to the Princess of Wales (later Queen Mary)

by Prince Fushimi Sadanaru, 1907

RCIN 29465



Box for letters (fubako) and address, 1922

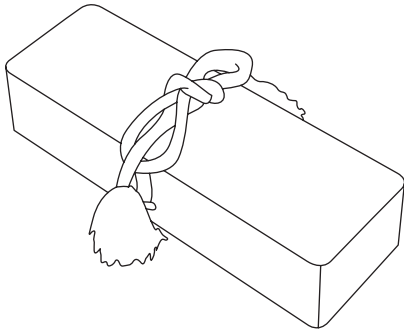
Scroll boxes were used in Japan from the sixteenth century to present important letters and addresses. The painstaking decoration reflects the significance of the documents inside. Here, the artist has departed from traditional Japanese motifs by adding Prince of Wales's feathers to mark a British royal visit. No other scroll box with this design is known to exist.

Paper, brocade, wood, gold lacquer, silk

Given to the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII)

by the Governor of Kagoshima, 1922

RCIN 69623



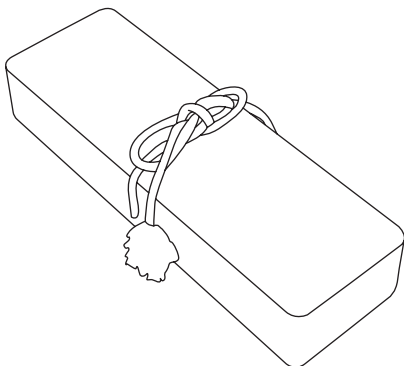
Box for letters (fubako), 1900–30

Cranes, depicted on this box with mother-of-pearl wings, are a symbol of good fortune, said to live for a thousand years.

Wood; gold, silver and black lacquer; mother-of-pearl, silk

Probably given to the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII), 1922

RCIN 79920

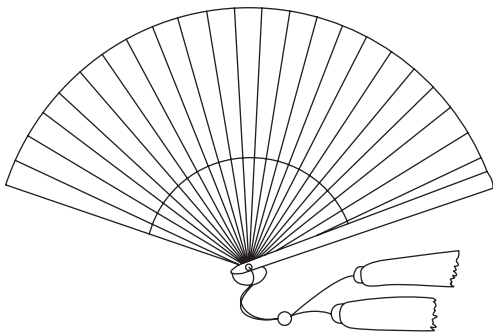


Box for letters (fubako), 1900–30

Wood, black, gold and silver lacquer; silk

Probably given to the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII), 1922

RCIN 79921



Fan (ōgi), c. 1870–90

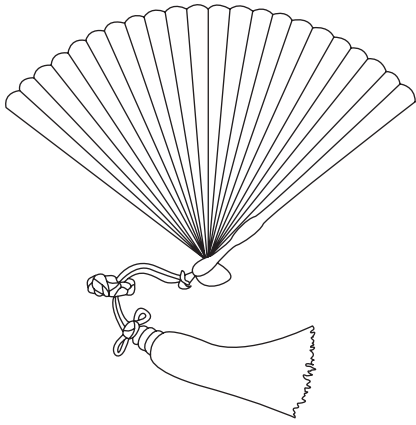
Utagawa Kunihisa II (1832–91)

Japanese fans were exported to Europe in large numbers in the early twentieth century. This example was possibly bought by Queen Mary, who frequently purchased netsuke, **inrō** and other East Asian wares from fashionable dealers such as Yamanaka & Co. on Bond Street.

Silk, watercolour, bodycolour, black ink, ivory, mother-of-pearl, shell, cellulose-based plastic, gold lacquer, bamboo, silver, red silk

Possibly acquired by Queen Mary

RCIN 25232



Fan (ōgi), c. 1880

Japanese folding fans date from the Heian period (794–1185) and were originally used in ceremonial processions, dances and tea gatherings. This example was a gift from Princess Chichibu, who attended the Coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in 1937. Rich gold chrysanthemums reinforce the association with the Imperial Family.

Ivory, silver, silk

Given by Princess Chichibu to Queen Mary or Queen Elizabeth, 1937

RCIN 25182

Daffodils in a vase, c.1928

Carnations in a ginger jar, c.1913

Peonies in a vase, c.1925

Sweet peas in a vase, c.1913

Dahlias in a vase, c.1928

Urushibara Yoshijirō (Mokuchū) (1889–1953)

Urushibara Yoshijirō came to Britain to demonstrate woodblock printing at the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition, an unprecedented effort to promote links between the two nations. He remained in London thereafter and departed from Japanese tradition by undertaking each stage of woodblock production himself: designing, carving and printing.

Colour woodcuts

Purchased by Queen Mary, 1928

RCINs 502217–21



16

**Shigeyama, actor in
'San-ba-so', Kyoto, 1936**

Elizabeth Keith (1881–1956)

The Scottish artist Elizabeth Keith first travelled to Japan in 1915, where she spent two years learning to carve and print woodblocks. This print shows an actor dressed for a comic interlude within a **Nō** play, the classical dance-drama of Japan. The composition reflects the long tradition of actor prints from the Edo period: the performer holds a pose in costume, as if captured mid-performance.

Colour woodcut

Purchased by Queen Elizabeth

(later Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother), 1937

RCIN 504348

Spring Beauty of Kyoto, c. 1925–9

Okamoto Tōyō (1891–1969)

Unfolding like the panels of a Japanese screen, this album contains images of the former imperial capital, Kyoto, at cherry blossom season. Each photograph was taken using a simple vest pocket camera. This straightforward approach was a reaction against a complex, painterly style of photography that spread from Europe to Japan in the 1890s. Deliberately devoid of contemporary buildings and crowds, the tranquil views offer an escape from the city's urban transformation.

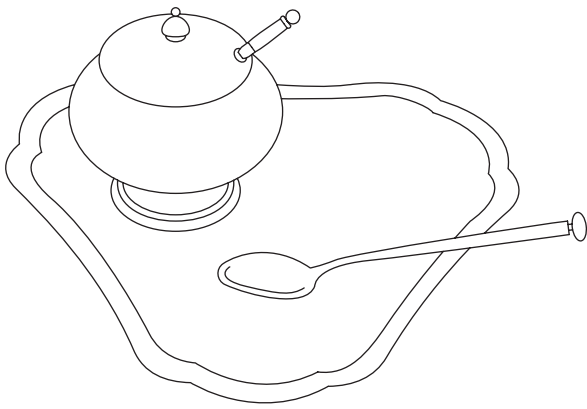
Concertina album with 24 gelatin silver prints

Given to Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester, 1929

RCINs 2862255 (album), 2862256–2862278.b (photographs)



17



Pot, tray, spoon and ladle, 1887

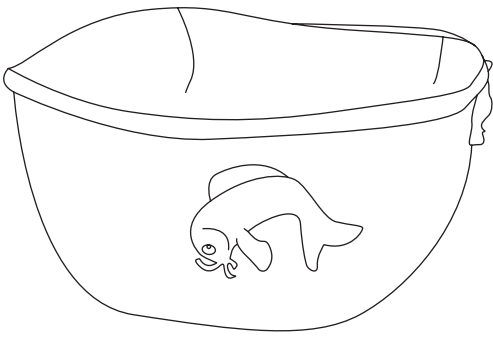
Schürmann & Co., Frankfurt

This German set mimics the colour and texture of Japanese metalwork, displaying a subtle range of hues rather than a shiny surface. Rose gold alloys and careful patination have created a colourful appearance on a matt ground. Bird and insect motifs resemble the decorative devices on Japanese sword guards.

Silver, rose gold

Given to Queen Victoria for her Golden Jubilee, 1887

RCIN 13153



Bowl, 1894

Michelsen, Copenhagen

In the late nineteenth century, increased travel and artistic exchange gave rise to a new fashion in Europe called **japonisme**, inspired by Japanese forms and styles. This bowl presents a carp – a common Japanese motif – with the restrained air of a woodblock print. The relief decoration mimics inlay on Japanese metalwork.

Silver, parcel gilt

Probably acquired by Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother

RCIN 106051



Procession of the Emperor Go-Mizunoo to Nijō Castle in 1626, 1855

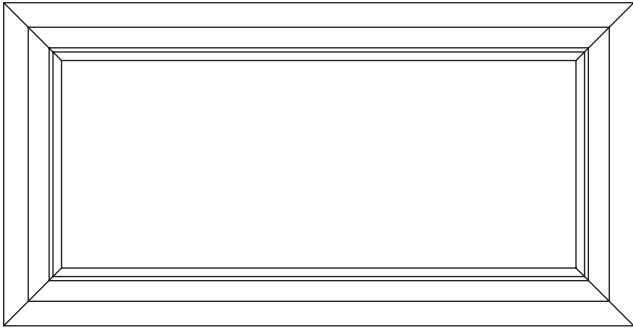
Bunkei

This hand-painted scroll depicts an imperial procession to the home of the Tokugawa shōguns. At that time, the Tokugawa created their own court culture in imitation of palace rituals. Colourful illustrations like these emphasised their influence and status.

Ink and colour on paper

Probably acquired by Queen Victoria

RCIN 1145973.a



Yamato-mai Performance, 4 May 1922

Ōmura Chōfu (active 1902–22)

At Kasuga Grand Shrine, a Shintō ritual dance called **yamato-mai** is performed. The 1,000-year-old ceremony is among traditional arts preserved at the Imperial Court. The artist combined this ancient subject matter with a modern, naturalistic style, using European oils on canvas instead of Japanese paper and water-based pigments.

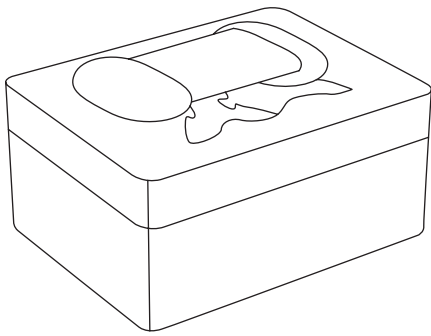
Oil on canvas

Given to the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII), 1922

RCIN 403847



18



Box and cover, 1850–1920

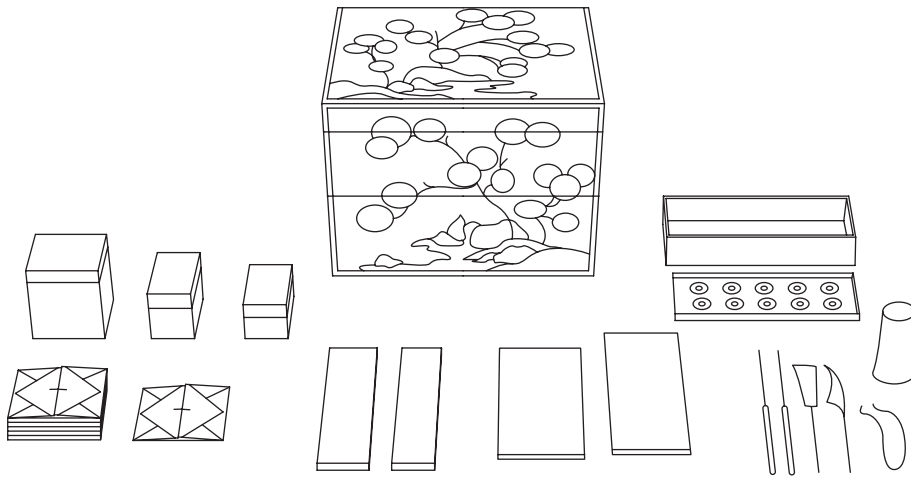
This box is carefully decorated with instruments for **gagaku** (‘elegant music’), the traditional court music of Japan. The genre was codified during the Heian period (794–1185), when courtiers and officials performed stylised dances as part of their duties. The design evokes the refined atmosphere of the Imperial Court.

Wood; black, gold, silver, red and green lacquer; shell

Given to Queen Mary by the Prince of Wales

(later King Edward VIII), 1921

RCIN 29463



Box for an incense game (kōbako)

1700–1800

Incense appreciation was an ancient mark of aristocratic refinement, governed by strict rules of etiquette. This set contains equipment for a game in which participants identify different woods based on their fragrance. Matching sets like these might be included in a wealthy bride's trousseau.

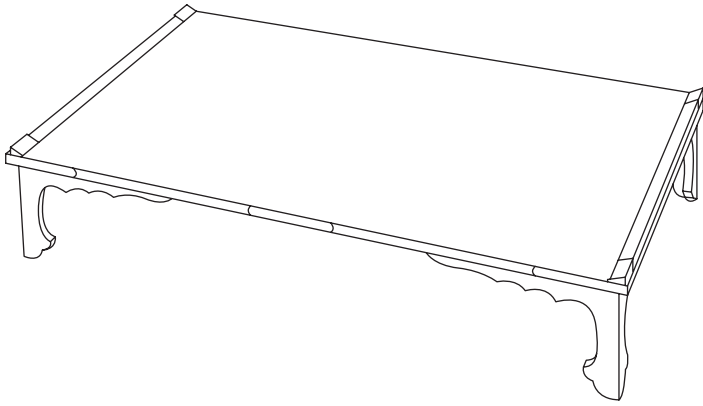
Wood; black, gold and silver lacquer;

paper, bamboo, metal, feather, ivory

Given to Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh

by the Emperor Meiji, 1869

RCIN 3484 (box)



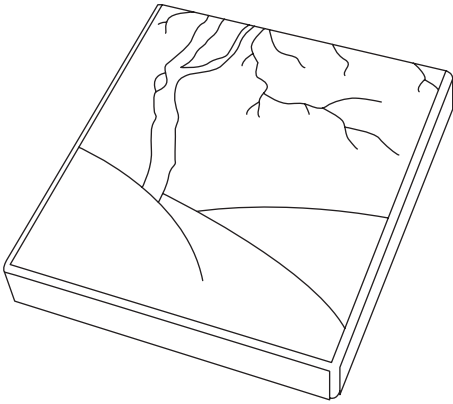
Writing table (bundai), 1900–30

Poetry and religious texts played an important role in courtly life, necessitating high-quality equipment for calligraphy. The swooping plovers on this writing table symbolise long life, because their cry sounds like **chiyo**, which means ‘1,000 generations’.

Wood, gold lacquer, silvered metal

Given to King George V by the Emperor Shōwa, 1930

RCIN 7121



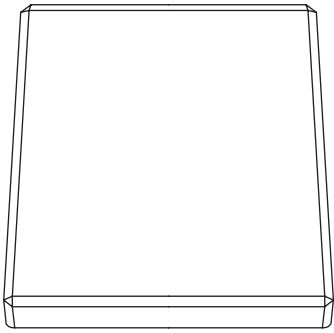
Box and cover, 1860–69

Far more than mere nature studies, pairings of birds and flowers in Japanese art have specific seasonal and poetic connotations. This combination of pheasants and a flowering peach tree, representing spring, is taken from Chinese painting.

Wood, gold lacquer, pewter, glass, stone

Given to Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh by the Emperor Meiji, 1869

RCIN 29453



Writing box and cover (suzuribako)

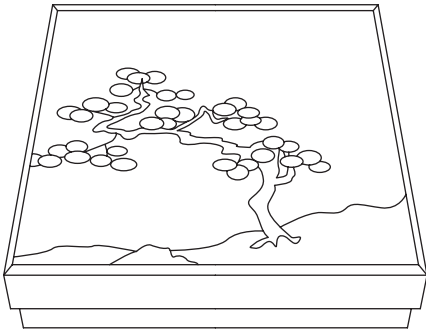
1775–1825

Writing boxes were choice gifts from the Japanese Court, which had been home to a scriptorium since the eighth century. This dramatic scene of a dragon among storm clouds has its roots in Chinese philosophy, where dragons are associated with water and believed to control rain.

Wood; black, gold and silver lacquer; coral, horn, gilt bronze

Given to Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh by the Emperor Meiji, 1869

RCIN 33949



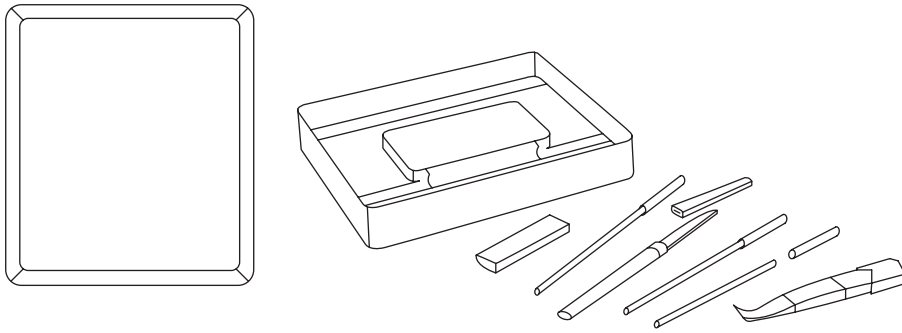
Writing box and cover (suzuribako)

1900–10

Wood, gold and silver lacquer

Possibly given to King Edward VII for his Coronation, 1902

RCIN 3294



Writing box (suzuribako) and implements 1850–1900

This writing box contains all the equipment necessary for calligraphy. The solid inkstick would be ground with water to produce liquid ink for writing or painting. The consistency is varied by adding water from the shell-shaped silver water-dropper.

Wood, black and gold lacquer

Given to King George V by the Emperor Shōwa, 1930

RCIN 64476

Embroidered panel, c. 1935

Firm of Takashimaya (est. 1831)

Peacocks have long been a popular subject with Japanese embroiderers. This design is based on an eighteenth-century painting, and a variety of stitches have been used to achieve a painterly effect, including long sections of couched twisted thread.

Silk, thread, coromandel wood

Given to King George V for his Silver Jubilee, 1935

RCIN 69597

Mount Fuji from Miho, 1935

Yoshida Hiroshi (1876–1950)

Japan's highest and most sacred mountain has been depicted in art since the eleventh century. Yoshida Hiroshi had already created a series of ten images of the mountain when he produced this woodcut in 1935, inspired by Katsushika Hokusai's celebrated 36 views of the peak. Subtle gradations of colour show Fuji's distinctive conical peak in the soft light of dawn.

Colour woodcut

Possibly acquired by Queen Mary

RCIN 507122

Buckingham Palace, seen from Green Park, c.1911

Yoshio Markino (1869–1956)

This woodcut shows Buckingham Palace in faint outline at dusk. The artist, Yoshio Markino, arrived in London in 1897 and quickly grew to love the city, writing that ‘Age and the fogs have made the buildings so beautiful’. The scene is presented with the simplicity of a Japanese print, but the colours are muted and the winding path through Green Park introduces a strong sense of perspective.

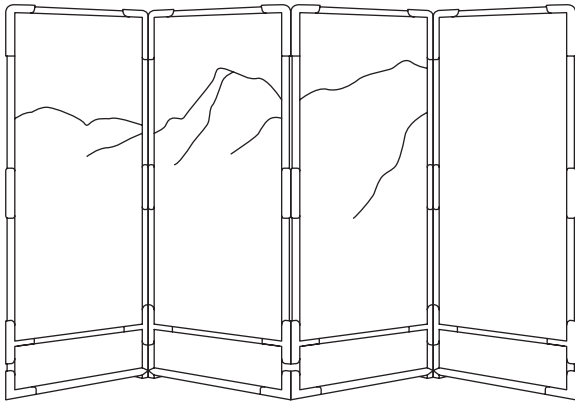
Colour woodcut

Given to Queen Mary by the artist, 1928

RCIN 702798



19



Embroidered folding screen, 1880–97

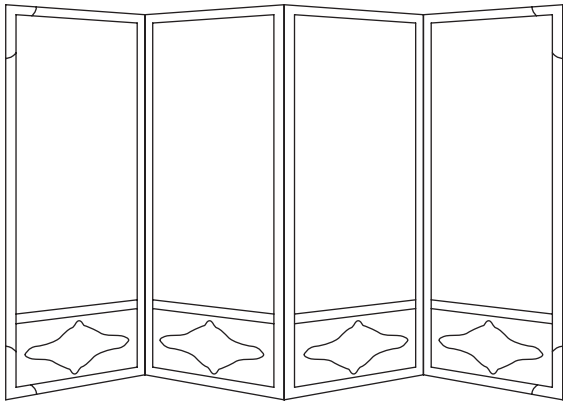
Kyoto

From the 1880s, the Japanese Imperial Family used embroidered textiles to furnish the Imperial Palace in Tokyo and as diplomatic gifts. This screen depicts the majestic landscape of Arashiyama near Kyoto. A relief effect is created by cotton wadding on the rocks and trees, and bright silk means the foaming water seems to tumble out of the frame.

Silk and silk thread, calamander wood

Given to Queen Victoria by the Emperor Meiji
for her Diamond Jubilee, 1897

RCIN 79563



Embroidered folding screen, 1880–1900

Iida & Co., Kyoto

Natural beauty is a central theme of Japanese courtly art, reflecting a keen appreciation of the changing seasons and the worship of local deities (**kami**) residing in plants and animals. These panels render the four seasons in vibrant colour, from the springtime peacock on the right, to the wintry crane on the left.

Wood, lacquer, silk and silk thread, leather, gilt brass, watercolour, paper, mother-of-pearl, copper alloy

Given to King Edward VII by the Emperor Meiji for his Coronation, 1902

RCIN 42037



Cosmetic box (tebako), c. 1890–1905

Shirayama Shōsai (1853–1923)

This box was the first diplomatic gift between Japan and Britain after the Second World War, indicating a new era of friendship. Imperial Household Artist Shirayama Shōsai has depicted a heron with remarkable boldness and delicacy, using miniscule streaks of gold to accent the soft silver feathers.

Wood; black, gold and silver lacquer

Given to HM The Queen by the Emperor Shōwa
for her Coronation, 1953

RCIN 39503



20

Coda: The Current Reign

In 1975, HM The Queen became the first reigning monarch of the United Kingdom to make a State Visit to Japan.

Japanese works of art today adorn the walls of more than a dozen current and former royal residences, as they have done for centuries. Together they demonstrate the vibrant artistic exchange that has long united our two courts and cultures.