Folding Screen Depicting Bamboo in Four Seasons

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The existence of the "Folding Screen with Pictures of Bamboo in Four Seasons" (Shiki Chiku Zu Byobu) held in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a screen of the Yamato-e style from the Middle Ages has been known for a long time. However, as yet there has not been a study on the subject of the structure of its expression. This paper looks at the tradition of painting bamboo, the four seasons and bamboo forests while focusing on the structure of its expression, studies the themes they contain and uncovers the background to their creation by also taking into consideration the cultural background of that time.

The tradition of painting bamboo dates back to the Asuka Period (552-646). By gathering together samples and studying bamboo depicted in picture scrolls that pre-date the 14th century, we find that they gradually became a familiar motif while preserving their image as a symbol of Chinese-style literati. Taking into account the two factors of the introduction to Japan of bamboo paintings that had been cultivated in China and advances in the establishment of bamboo forests in Japan, it is possible that by the middle of the 14th century the production of large bamboo paintings existed. Next, from the relation between this folding screen and "Shiki Boku Chiku Zu" (Ink Painting of Bamboo in the Four Seasons) and its relation with the depiction of bamboo shoots in LiKan's (李衎) "Chikufu Shourouku", I point to specific aspects of the acceptance of Chinese paintings in the screen. Also, due to its similarity with the "Shiki Kaboku Zu Byobu" (Folding Screen with Pictures of Flora in the Four Seasons) I draw attention to the inheritance of the tradition of Yamato-e. I note that the repeated use in this work of seven bamboos implies the seven sages of the Chinese tradition and explain that this existed in elements of Japanese culture of the day such as Renga (linked verse) and tate-hana at the same time. Next, following a structural comparison between the folding screen and the "Shiki Chiku Zu" ("Picture of Bamboo in the Four Seasons") contained in the "Ashiyakama Shitae Zukan" (Picture Scroll of Ashiyakama Shitae) I suggest that there is a high possibility that Tosa Mitsunobu is the creator of the screen. Taking the above points into account, I show that the folding screen was produced on the basis of an active interpretation and acceptance of expression found in Chinese and Japanese paintings and suggest that Tosa Mitsunobu, who was a court painter and also worked in the service of warriors for many years, fits well as the screen's creator. I show that Sogi's Renga circle was the setting for the genesis of the reference to the seven sages and that Mitsunobu did belong to that circle, thus providing further support for the above contention. Lastly, I suggest that the gentle style of painting, multiple themes and the necessity of expressing the four seasons in the folding screen can be interpreted as having been brought about by the cultural environment in which the use of screens, Chinese objects, fabricated objects, tate-hana and screens coexisted and competed with each other.