



# “Art and diplomacy. The Japanese Collection of the Château de Fontainebleau (1862–1864)”

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It is not widely known that the Château de Fontainebleau in France has a collection of Japanese art. The existence of the collection was largely unknown to all but a few prior to the “Art History Festival” held in June 2021 and centered on the Château.

The “Art History Festival” is a collaborative event organized by the National Institute for Art History and the Château de Fontainebleau under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture of France. Offering a diverse program that includes lectures, round tables, movie screenings, and exhibitions, the event has wide-ranging appeal, attracting not only experts and researchers but also artists and the general public. Each year, a theme and a guest country are chosen. The theme of the festival this year, held from June 4 through 6, was “Plaisir” (Pleasure), and the guest country was Japan.



Prof. Miura Atsushi

**Fig. 1:** Solemn reception of the Japanese ambassadors to the Tuileries Palace on Sunday, April 13, 1862, *Le Monde illustré*, April 19, 1862, National Library of France



The festival is always accompanied by an exhibition associated with the guest country held at the Château de Fontainebleau. This year, the exhibition “Art and diplomacy: The Japanese Collection of the Château de Fontainebleau” is being held, from June 4 through September 20, displaying the collection of Japanese art from the mid-nineteenth century inside the palace. The artistic works in the collection were examined by a joint team of Japanese and French researchers and found to be gifts from the Tokugawa shogunate to Napoleon the Third, Emperor of France in the closing days of the Tokugawa regime (Fig. 1). This was the time of Tokugawa Iemochi, the fourteenth Shogun, and in particular the gifts brought by the first Keno Shisetsu (Mission to Europe) in 1862, and the gifts presented by the Mission in 1864 after its return to Japan as a token of gratitude for the hospitality extended to them, were exhibited for the first time. While it was known that the Tokugawa shogunate presented artworks as diplomatic gifts to major Western countries (the United States, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Prussia, Russia and Portugal) in the closing days of the Tokugawa regime, the specific identification of the folding screens, hanging scrolls, and lacquerware presented to the French court, and the finding that these items are high-quality artistic works, is an important historical rediscovery.

On display at the exhibition are twenty-seven artworks, including one folding screen, ten hanging scrolls, and sixteen artistic craft works including lacquerware. *Sano no watari-zu byobu* (Crossing at Sano painted folding screen) painted by Kano Shuntei Yasunobu is presumed to be one of a pair among three folding screens presented by the Tokugawa shogunate to the Emperor in 1860 as a gift in return for the items presented by Napoleon the Third to Tokugawa Iemochi in 1859 (Fig. 2). The design of this elegant folding screen is

**Fig. 2:** Kano Shuntei Yasunobu, *Sano no watari-zu byobu* (Crossing at Sano painted folding screen), one of a pair of six-panel screens, with color on gold paper, presented in 1860, The National Museum of the Château de Fontainebleau



**Fig. 3:** A set of four hanging scrolls from the ten presented by the Keno Shisetsu (Mission to Europe) in 1862, The National Museum of the Château de Fontainebleau



**Fig. 4:** *Yokyoku-zukushi makie ryoshi-bako* (gold-lacquered document box with series of noh songs), a gift of gratitude presented after the Mission's return from France in 1864, The National Museum of the Château de Fontainebleau (photos for Fig. 2, 3 and 4 by Hiroyuki Suzuki)





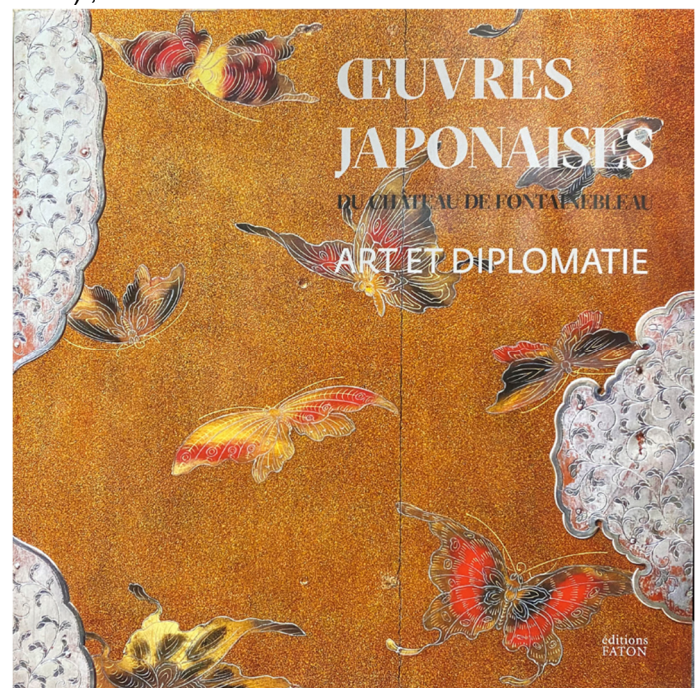
based on the *waka* poetry tradition, linking it to the distinguished waka poet Fujiwara no Teika (or Sadaie, 1162–1241) from the eighth-century anthology of Japanese poetry the *Man'yōshū*, and both front and back are covered entirely in gold-leaf fabric, indicating that it was a high-status official gift. The ten hanging scrolls were presented to Napoleon the Third by the first mission to Europe in 1862. The subjects depicted are Mt. Fuji and the Tatsutagawa river, which is known for the beauty of its autumn foliage described in the waka poems, as well as quintessential Japanese places of scenic beauty and natural motifs such as cherry blossoms and maple leaves, accentuated by luxurious mountings (Fig. 3). Other fine examples of sophisticated techniques and gorgeous ornamentation are many of the artistic craft works presented as return gifts from the Mission in 1864, including figurines, bookshelves and ivory works as well as lacquerware (Fig. 4).

The Japanese artistic works that still remain at the Château de Fontainebleau, then, were sent to France as gifts to smooth diplomatic relations between Japan and France in the closing days of the Tokugawa regime. These differ in nature from the large volume of artistic works such as ukiyo-e prints that were brought to France by travelers and merchants, or through international expositions. Whether folding screens, hanging screens or lacquerware, these are high-quality official works of art produced by artists and craftsmen employed by the Tokugawa shogun family. They may be said to constitute the official art of the closing days of the Tokugawa regime, the academic arts of Japan (Kano school, Sumiyoshi school), if you will.

These works of art were introduced to France during the dawn of the new age of Japonisme following the opening up of Japan to the outside world. Yet they had no direct impact on the development of Japonisme in France since they were barely seen in public, having been presented as diplomatic gifts and placed in the rooms of Empress Eugénie, wife of Napoleon the Third. This could be said to have resulted in a blind spot in Japanese artworks introduced to Europe and the United States during the closing days of the Tokugawa regime. In fact, however, it has meant that the official art of the Tokugawa shogunate has in effect been frozen and preserved in its original form until now. The collection may even offer an opportunity to re-examine the history of Japanese art to date. It would also be interesting to know what choices were made when gifting works of art to foreign countries, given that they were judged to be suitable gifts from the shogunate, which set a high value on social standing and quality, to the Emperor.

The exhibition catalog (Fig. 5), produced in conjunction with the exhibition, contains detailed research reports on this collection. Pieces written by three French and four Japanese authors help us gain a deeper understanding of the historical

**Fig. 5:** Catalog of the exhibition “Art et diplomatie. Les œuvres japonaises du Château de Fontainebleau (1862–1864)”, 2021



background to the arrival of Japanese artworks at the Château de Fontainebleau in the period of the French Second Empire, the artworks in the collection and their characteristics, and the context of Franco-Japanese diplomacy and Japonisme in the closing days of the Tokugawa regime. Research on gifts to major Western countries other than France during the same period has already begun, and the task of synthesizing the results of these studies awaits.

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Born in 1957. Graduated from the University of Tokyo in 1981 and earned his doctorate in Art History from the University of Paris IV (Sorbonne) in 1997. His research areas include French painting of the nineteenth century and the artistic relations between France and Japan. Served as Lecturer at the Japan Women's University (1990–93) and as Assistant Professor (1993–2006) and Professor (2006–) at the University of Tokyo. His publications include *Kindai geijutsuka no hyosho – Manet, Fantin-Latour to jukyuseiki no furansu kaiga* (The representation of modern artists — Manet, Fantin-Latour and Western Modern Art) (2006), *Histoire de peinture entre France et Japon* (2009).

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