

Kai-awase

The History and Art of the
'Shell-Matching' Game of the Japanese
Heian Imperial Court



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Kai-awase, The History and Art of the ‘Shell-Matching’ Game of the Japanese Heian Imperial Court, Researched and Written by Baron Aurddeilen-ap-Robet (Mka. Raymond Becker)
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Introduction

Prior to the Heian period, Japan's Imperial line of succession was controlled by the corrupt Sogo Clan Buddhists located in Nara. To lessen their influence, the 50th Emperor of Japan, Kanmu (Figure 1), moved the capital from Nara to Nagaoka-kyo, but a series of natural disasters forced him to relocate a second time to the newly constructed city of Heian-kyō (modern Kyoto).



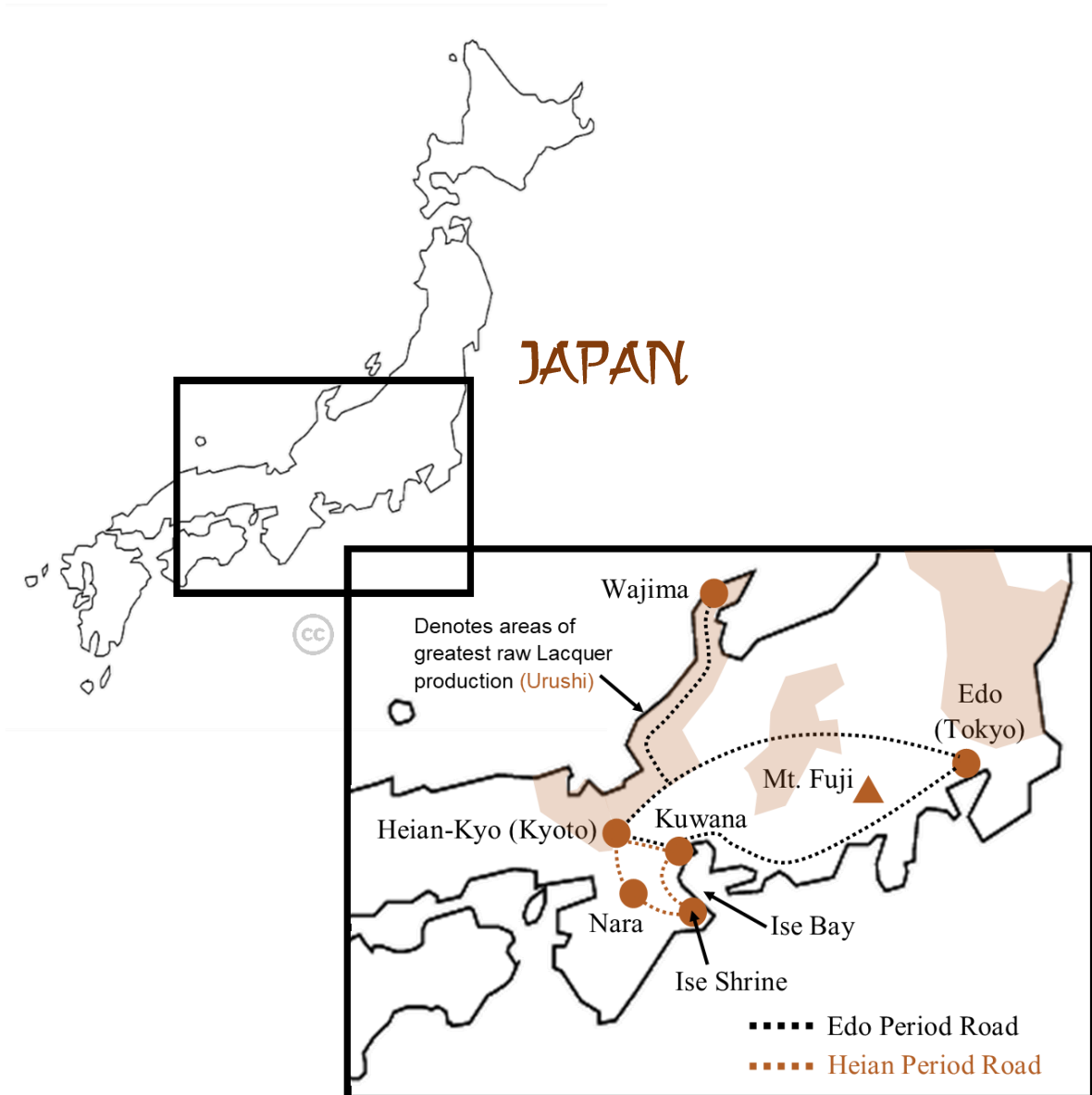
Figure 1: Emperor Kanmu, 16th Century Painting
(Public Domain Image)

A century later, a rebellion in China suspended all cultural exchanges, and halted the influx of Chinese goods. Cut off from China, and its capital now situated at some distance from the Buddhist religious center, Japan developed a new cultural identity as well as a new type of script known as katakana, a phonetic script with a distinctive writing method. This new script gave rise to Japan's famous vernacular literature, many of which were written by court women, and would later become one of the primary themes for decoration found on many aristocratic textiles & lacquerware. In addition to this new script and literature, the Heian imperial courts developed their own concepts of what was aesthetically pleasing and created a series of unique court games to showcase them. One of the games in this series, Kai-awase, would become the

very symbol of early Japanese aristocracy and would later be adopted by samurai houses to signify their power and influence.

To fully understand how Kai-awase became such a powerful cultural symbol, we will first examine the literature and court documents of the early Heian period and later Japanese dynasties to find evidence of when the game began, and how it was played. Second, we will look for visual clues in the textiles, lacquerware, and paintings of Japanese artisans to determine the extent of the game's prominence and popularity in Japanese culture.

The following map contains the primary locations which are central to the history of the game of Kai-awase.



Kai-awase, a Mono-awase game of the Heian Period

Kai-awase, a game of ‘matching shells’, is included among a number of aristocratic medieval Japanese pastimes belonging to the category Mono-awase. These games were unique to Japan, though they did incorporate Chinese attitudes towards art and poetry which were essential for all officials and scholars to become proficient if they wished to gain advancement.

Mono-awase games (‘**mono**’ meaning ‘*thing*’ and ‘**awase**’ meaning ‘*match*’ or ‘*join together*’ depending on the context) became popular in the Heian period (794-1185), and continued to flourish into the late Edo Period (1603–1867). Mono-awase games were played by splitting participants into two teams and having each team present items on a chosen subject to be matched against each other in several rounds. *For example, if the match involved poetry, and the chosen subject for the current round was love, then each team would present a written poem related to love.* Another Mono-awase format involved the presentation of several objects on an exquisitely decorated, miniature artificial garden or island called a *suhama* (Figure 2). Such elaborate *suhama* presentations were a means for aristocrats to display their refined sensibilities by using objects that were considered by the Heian imperial courts to be aesthetic in nature (e)

At the end of each round of Mono-awase, an independent judge (*hanja*) would then determine which team had presented the superior item. The team which presented the greatest quantity of superior items by the end of the game would be declared the winner. The game of Kai-awase originally involved each team presenting similar shells, and the judge would compare their beauty, size, and rarity in the same manner as seasonal Mono-awase games involving natural items. By the Late Heian period, Kai-awase evolved into a game of matching the two halves of a clam shell rather than a direct comparison competition. The total number of game rounds was generally dependent on the number of items submitted, but a predetermined number of rounds could be established by the host.

Among the most well-known games of Mono-awase were Uta-awase (poetry), E-awase (pictures), and Kai-awase (shells), Ko-awase (Incense), as well as tori-awase (birds, also known as tokei [cockfight]), hana-awase (flowers, also known as hanaikusa [flower battle]), kotori-awase (bird bench show), mushi-awase (insect), senzai-awase (Bonsai and other potted plants), ogi-awase (fans), and biwa-awase (lutes), and seasonal events such as shobu-no-ne-

awase (iris roots), kiku-awase (chrysanthemum), and kobai-awase (red-blossom plum) were also played. (a)

The Iris root comparison contest (*shobu-no-ne-awase*) was one of the oldest and most formalized of the Mono-Awase games. Iris roots were submitted in pairs by members of each team, together with appropriate poems, and carefully compared for beauty, length, and rarity. In the small birds contest (*kotori-awase*) members of each team produced little songbirds that they had raised at home; they were compared two by two, in terms of plumage, color, and voice. The side that had entered the greatest number of rare and beautiful birds received a prize of silk or other valuables, as well as the prestige afforded from winning.

Mono-awase games typically began with court participants being assigned to right and left teams. Major nobles sponsored each team and selected those skilled in a specific field from their relatives, vassals, and related parties. Since even minor nobles could have the honor of being selected if they were skilled at *waka* (a traditional Japanese poem of thirty-one syllables). It is said that some of these lesser nobles of low birth were desperate to come up with good poems, literally for their lives. The left team was dressed in warm colors (purple and orange), and the right team was dressed in cool colors (lavender-blue and yellow). During major events the designs and colors of costumes worn by '*Menowarawa*' (assistants), and even the paper for wrapping items matched their respective teams. The Left team always began the game, and usually had higher-ranking members. In Japan, the left-hand side was traditionally considered the dominant or "masculine" side, the opposite of European tradition. In the Heian period, the Minister of the Left outranked the Minister of the Right. (i, j)

The selection of judges was a delicate process during which Mono-awase veterans who not only had an eye for beauty but also had skills in writing, *waka*, and calligraphy would be chosen by the highest-ranking noble present. Also selected was a '*Kazusashi*' (score keeper) who used '*kushi*' (skewers) and scoring boards (Figure 23) to record the number of wins and losses by each team. In addition, there were occasions to select someone to oversee commentary and direction for their team, and a '*Nennin*', whose job was to support their team. (i)

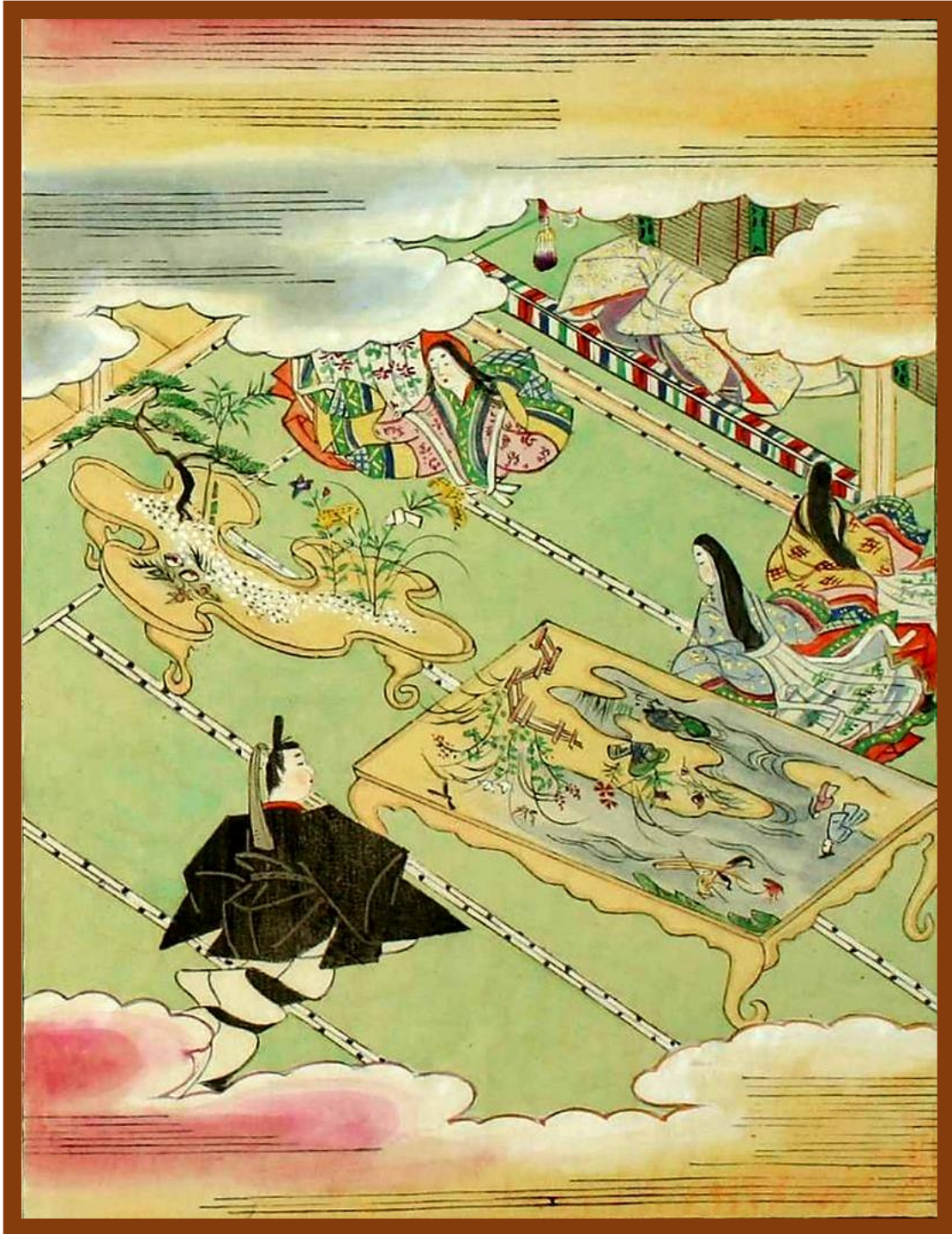


Figure 2:

From the Wasenda University Collection. A depiction of a Mono-awase game including two **suhuma tables** from an inked woodblock print of unknown date.

(Public Domain Image)

Kai-awase in Classical Japanese Literature

Evidence for the existence of Mono-awase games can be found in Medieval Japanese Literature such as the 11th Century '*Genji Monogatari*' (*Tale of Genji*) by Murasaki Shikibu, the 12th century '*Tales of Tsutsumi Chunagan Monogatari*' (Tales of the Riverside Middle Counselor), a collection of short stories by author(s) unknown, and the 14th Century '*Tsurezuregusa*' (*Essays in Idleness*) by the monk Yoshida Kendo

In Chapter 17 of the *Tale of Genji*, Murasaki relates the story of a Mon-awase game known as E-Awase (Picture Matching) taking place between two ladies of the Imperial court, Akikonomu and To-no Chojo's daughter (Figure 3). The following is a summary.

*Akikonomu, the Rokujo lady's daughter, had been under Genji's Guardianship since her mother's death. Having carefully managed her affairs, Genji succeeds in having her presented at court as the emperor's consort. The young emperor is initially uncomfortable with his new wife but soon begins to favor her over his other lady, To-no-Chujo's daughter, when he discovers they share a love of painting. Still, Akikononmu's position is not entirely secure. Competition grows between Akikonomu and her supporters on the one hand and To-no Vhujo's daughter and her supporters on the other, and both sides use the emperors love of painting to try to gain advantage. After a time of each side's trying to outdo the other, **Genji suggests a solution: why not hold a picture contest in which the final judgement is made in the emperor's presence?***

"It was now the middle of the Third Month, a time of soft, delicious air, when everyone somehow seemed happy and at peace. It was also a quiet time at court when people had leisure for these avocations."

"The day for the contest arrives. The right group (To-no Chujo's daughter) and the left group (Akikonmomu's faction) each presents a selection of paintings; Prince Hotaru is to act as umpire and decide which selection is superior. As the paintings are brought out, it is not at all clear which side will be victorious, they all seem impressive. Then Akikonomu's side presents its final offering: a scroll by Genji depicting life at Suma. ... "The assembly, prince Hotaru and the rest, fell silent ... there was no point now in turning to the painting offered by the right ... the triumph of the left was complete" (b)



Figure 3: From the Harvard Art Museums' collections;
The Picture Contest from the Tale of Genji

In Chapter 6 of the *'Tales of Tsutsumi Chunagan Monogatari'*, the shell matching game known as Kai-Awase is mentioned. In this story, Kurodo-no Shoshu, a chamberlain-major general, encounters a young woman collecting shells for her mistress. The following is an excerpt.

*"At this moment the girl stopped, changing her attitude entirely, and said "Our young mistress and the daughter of her father's principal wife are planning to hold a **shell matching game**, and have been busily searching for them eagerly with Lady Taifu and Lady Jiju. But just now I am on my way to call someone who is to be sent to her elder sister's place." (c)*

Another similar encounter and one of the earliest references to the game of matching shells appears in a poem written by the late-Heian period poet and priest Saigyō (1118-90) in which he notes his encounter with a group of maidens at the famous site of Futami-no Ura (Futami Shore) gathering clamshells on the request of a resident in the capital. The fact that the

poem was included a collection entitled *'The Mountain Hut'* (*Sankashu ca. 1178*), suggests that the game already existed by the late Heian period. There is also a mention of the game in Entry 171 of *'Essay of Idleness'*, in which Yoshida Kendo describes someone playing a later form of Kai-awase, the shell matching game. The following is an excerpt.

"It happened once that a man playing at matching shells took no notice of the shells before him but was so busy looking to the side and darting glances behind people's sleeves and even into their laps that in the meantime the shells before him were covered by another player. The good players do not seem to strain themselves to capture shells from a distance, but though they appear to match only those nearby, they cover a great many" (d, e)

While Kendo's intentions in this Essay is to use the kai-oi game as a metaphor for a political moral, his description of the game gives us a glimpse into how it was played. Moreover, the fact that kai-oi can be used as a metaphor for a moral suggests the pervasiveness of the game among Kendo's readers. (e)

Kai-awase in Imperial Documents

Further evidence for the existence of Mono-Awase games and a very important source for the popularity of such games can be of the can be found in Imperial Court documents. Here are some Examples.

In 966, Imperial documents describe Emperor Murakami hosting a *mono-awase* competition on the 15th day of the 8th month (the most important full moon of the year). The construction of each team's *suhama* is recorded in the *'Eiga Monogatari'* (Story of Spondor).

"Both sides worked furiously, determined not to be outdone. The contestants from the Office of Painting submitted a painted landscape tray depicting flowering plants of heavenly beauty, a garden stream, and massive rocks. Various kinds of insects were lodged in a rustic fence made of silver foil. The artists had also painted a view of the Ōi River, showing figures strolling nearby and cormorant boats with basket fires. Near the insects there was a poem. The Office of Palace Works presented an interesting tray, carved with great ingenuity to resemble a

high tide, which they had planted with artificial flowers and carved bamboo and pines. Their poem was attached to a spray of fresh ominaeshi (yellow perennial flower)” (f)

These elaborate competitions could run all day, and in fact another famous competition held by Emperor Murakami six years earlier (on the 30th day of the 3rd month of 960), ran from 4 p.m. until dawn, when the drunken winning team exited while singing and dancing. A courtier’s diary recorded the elaborate preparations made at the palace. (g)

“Special care was taken on this occasion as many eminent people of refined taste would be attending the event, and so new plants and flowers were carefully chosen and added to the garden. The Chamberlain Minor Captain Sukenobu oversaw the garden, and he had oak logs arranged like a fence and entwined with ivy so that it looked like a cedar forest. He also placed steppingstones here and there so that one could walk along on them. The garden gave the impression of a pastoral landscape and looked more delightful than usual.”

“The blinds were replaced by new ones. The emperor’s seat was arranged in the anteroom at the southern end of the gallery. The atmosphere was so pleasant that it defied description”

*“The poems [of the Left] were engraved on the silver leaves of golden-yellow mountain roses placed in the suhama—truly a beautiful work of art of exquisite workmanship. The tables were made of rosewood and other wood. The design of the **suhama** was quite interesting and charming. The cover was of varied shades of dark red and wisteria were embroidered on it; the mat was of violet brocade. Then two court girls brought in another suhama for scoring, the design of which was wisteria tendrils made of gold and silver. A twig was to be removed each time a point was scored.”*

As previously mentioned, a special *suhama* (Figure 2) could be used for scoring. During a contest in 1035 one side planted miniature pine trees to track their score; at another in 1078, “the Left inserted arrows with silver shafts and glass feathers into a target to mark their wins, and the Right placed tiny replicas of musical instruments in a silver box inlaid with crystal. (h)

Another 10th Century court scroll details an Uta-awase game held at Teiji Palace which took place under the sponsorship of retired Emperor Uda at his residence on the 13th day of the Third Month 913. There is some doubt about the exact composition of the contest and its topics, but it appears to have had at least 30 official rounds and 60 poems considered. The principal poets involved were Ise, Sakanoue no Korenori, Fujiwara no Okikaze, Ōshikōchi no Mitsune, and Ki no Tsurayuki.

Here is a poem presented during this game written by the Waka poet Mitsune, an early Heian administrator of the Japanese court (859–925), and a member of the Thirty-six Poetry Immortals.

*“Every three thousand years,
'Tis said, the peach bears fruit;
And in this year
It blossomed with the spring:
That’s what we have chanced across.”*

An 11th Century court scroll displayed in the Tokyo National Museum (**Figure 4**) details a game of Uta-awase which took place at the end of the 9th century held by the Empress in the Kamyō era (889-898), which became the source of over fifty poems found in the Kokinshū; a collection 1,111 poems divided into 20 books arranged by topic. These include six books of seasonal poems, five books of love poems, and single books devoted to such subjects as travel, mourning, and congratulations.



Figure 4

A 14th Century Emaki (Horizontally Illustrated Scroll; **Figure 5**) also found in the Tokyo National Museum depicts imaginary of Tōhoku'in or '*Poetry Mono-awase among Persons of Various Occupations*'.

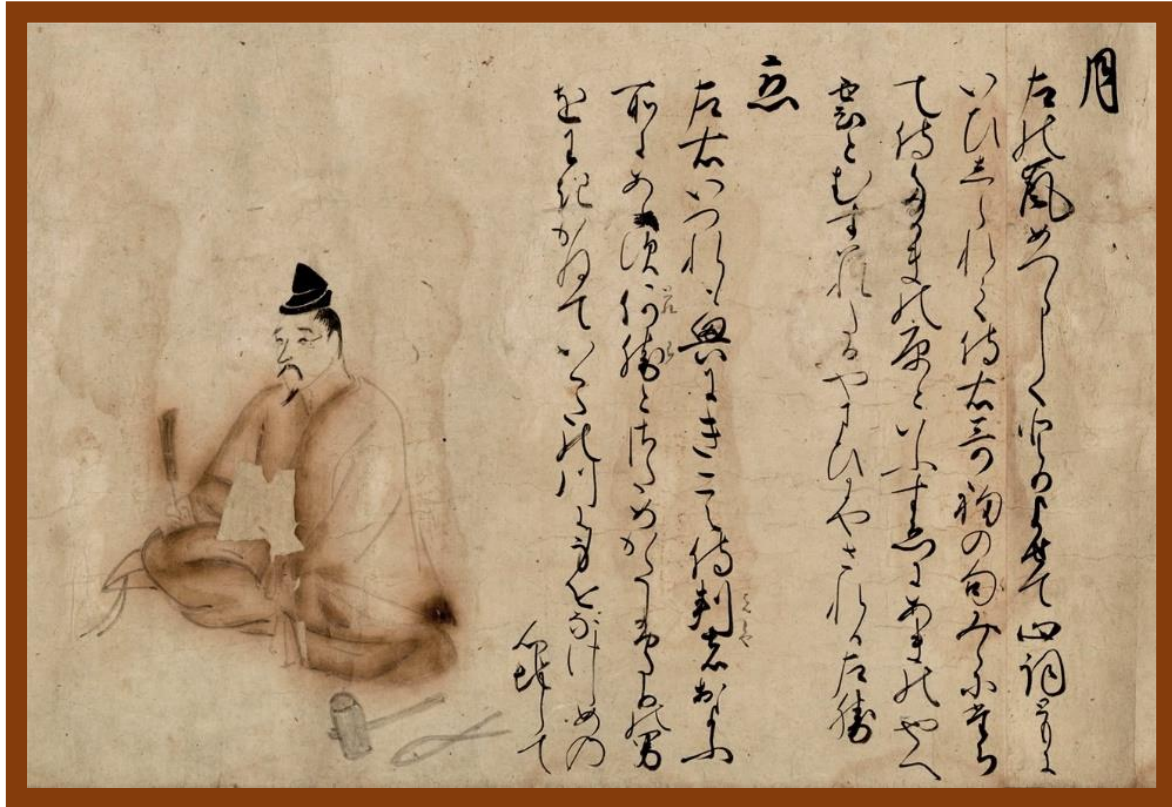


Figure 5

The '*Daily Records of the Oyudono no ue*' (1477-1826), a day-to-day account of imperial housekeeping kept in turn by the ladies-in-waiting of the Oyudono-no ue (office for heating water in the Seiryoden, the regular residence of the emperor). Among the daily records listing various deliveries and visitors to the residence, there are numerous statements that '**a game of shells was played**'. According to this journal, this shell game was played close to 500 times in the span of roughly a century (1481-1589), and it appears that the game was played at least once per year, and during some reigns, as often as 9 times per month, revealing the popularity of this shell game as one of the primary entertainments of the emperor's residence. (e)

Transition From Kai-awase to Kai-ōi

The earliest recorded *Kai-awase* (shell matching) contest dates from 1040, and was held at the **Ise Shrine** by Emperor Go-Suzaku's first daughter, Princess Nagako (Figure 6). This was a competition very much in the spirit of the other *mono-awase* games, and consisted of twenty rounds, each shell being presented with an accompanying poem. However, near the end of the Heian period, *Kai-awase* transitioned from this comparison-competition form into a completely different game called *Kai-ōi* ('shell covering') which was based upon collecting matching pairs of shells. *Kai-awase* itself died out and there is no record of any competitions taking place after the Heian period. This demise and transition appear to coincide with the change in the ruling structure from religious to military control. By the Edo Period, the two terms would be conflated, with *kai-awase* being used for the matching game as well, and today *kai-awase* is the term most used when referring to the shell game. (e)



Figure 6: Interior of Ise Shrine dedicated to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu

Location of first recorded Kai-awase game. Woodblock print by Utagawa Toyoharu (1735–1814)

Daidai Kagura Ceremony at the Ise Shrine, 1770 - Boston Museum of Fine Arts

Unlike Heian period *Kai-awase*, the new game was exclusively played with clam shells, and it offered definitive terms for deciding the winner. In one method of play, the left-hand sides of the shells, also termed the “male” shells, were arranged face-down on the floor. The right-hand sides, the “female” or ‘coming out’ shells, were then drawn from their *Kai-oke* (‘shell storage box’) one-by-one and the players would attempt to match them with those on the floor. Whoever was the first to point out a successful match would capture both halves of the shell, and the winner was the player who collected the most shells. Early instructional books from the Muromachi period (1392–1573) include rules that state that the game is played with twelve shells which should be arranged in a circle on the ground, and that the drawn shell should be placed in the center, with the pointed end (“head”) directed towards the highest-ranking person in the room. Evidently the game could get physical, as those same books warn that “to quarrel and remove shells by force is something that only men and courtesans do.” (e)

While later depictions (Figures 10) usually represent the game as only played by women, diary entries and paintings from the time show that the game was originally played by everyone, often in mixed teams (Figure 11). To note one example, the Diary of Lord Tokitsugu notes that the aristocrat Yamashina Tokitsugu played a game of Kai-oi at the Oyudono-no ue on the seventeenth day of the second month of 1567 with the emperor, high-ranking court nobles, and ladies-in-waiting; a revenge match was requested by the losing side two days earlier.

When played with many shells, the game must have been difficult, since the clues that point to a match are solely the subtle shades and contours of the shell, and the only way to test if shells truly match is to pick them up and attempt to join them together. Traditional Kai-oi sets could contain up to 360 shell pairs, modern replicas usually only have around 54. (e)

In the late Heian period, Kai-oi sets turned into a luxury item: the interior of the shells was at first decorated with matching fabrics, and then elaborately painted or even gilded. After the Kamakura period (1333), it became common to decorate the shells with matching scenes from the Tale of Genji (Figure 12). Other designs included shells with half of a poem in each, so that the matching pair could be read as a complete poem (Figure 15); these types of the poem shells would eventually evolve into *uta-garuta* poetry cards (also known as *karuta*) (Figure 33). (e)

A personal *kai-ōi* set became a standard part of a noble bride's wedding gifts, as the joining of the matching shells was symbolic of the joining of husband and wife in marriage. However, the elaborate sets with their hand-painted and gilded interiors must have been expensive to create and only owned by the richest of families. Indeed, at times restrictions were put in place so that *only* noble families of the upper ranks were permitted to include the game in their bridal trousseaux (the clothes, household linen, and other belongings collected by a bride for her marriage). When time came to hand over the wedding gifts, it was customary for the *kai-oke* to be the first item presented (Figures 7, 20 & 21). In this role, miniature *kai-oke* can be found in *hina-matsuri* collections, and these are still produced for this purpose today. (Figure 9) (e)

By the Muromachi period (1338-1573), even as the courtly world of nobility was overshadowed by the military world of the shoguns, the fashions of the aristocrats often seeped into the culture of the samurai class. For example, the custom of endowing a bride-to-be with a set of shells was taken on by the samurai class, but the decorative lacquered boxes might instead feature simple yet elegant family crests (Figure 7). The sets of shells had a prominent place in the ceremonial procession from the bride's family home to that of her husband. The chief retainer of the bride's father oversaw the transportation of the boxes and presented them to the groom's family in a ceremony known as *Kai-oke Watashi* (presenting of the shell boxes). (i)



Figure 7:
18th Century style Kai-oke shell
storage box decorated with crests
of the Tokugawa family

In Private Collection

(Copyrights apply)

Kai-oi Shell Selection and Symbolism

The clam shells used for Kai-oi are the highly prized Hamaguri (*Meretrix Lusoria*) primarily harvested from Ise Bay near the town of Kuwana. Once a port city, Kuwana was an important stop for travelers, particularly pilgrims heading to the Ise Grand Shrine near Futami, for it served as the Western entrance to the Ise Province. The calm waters and mild climate of Ise Bay favor the growth of oysters and clams which produce shells suitable in size for women to hold in their hands; approximately 2 to 3 inches at the widest part. (u)

Shells with the most uniform outer color (usually white) and with the least number of natural markings were chosen to make them difficult to match while playing the game. The shells halves were then separated into left (Jigai) and right (Dashigai) (Figure 8) and placed into two Kai-oke (shell storage boxes, Figures 7, 21 & 22). Kai-oke were tied with a braided cord, each with a unique knot to distinguish which box contained the left and right shells.

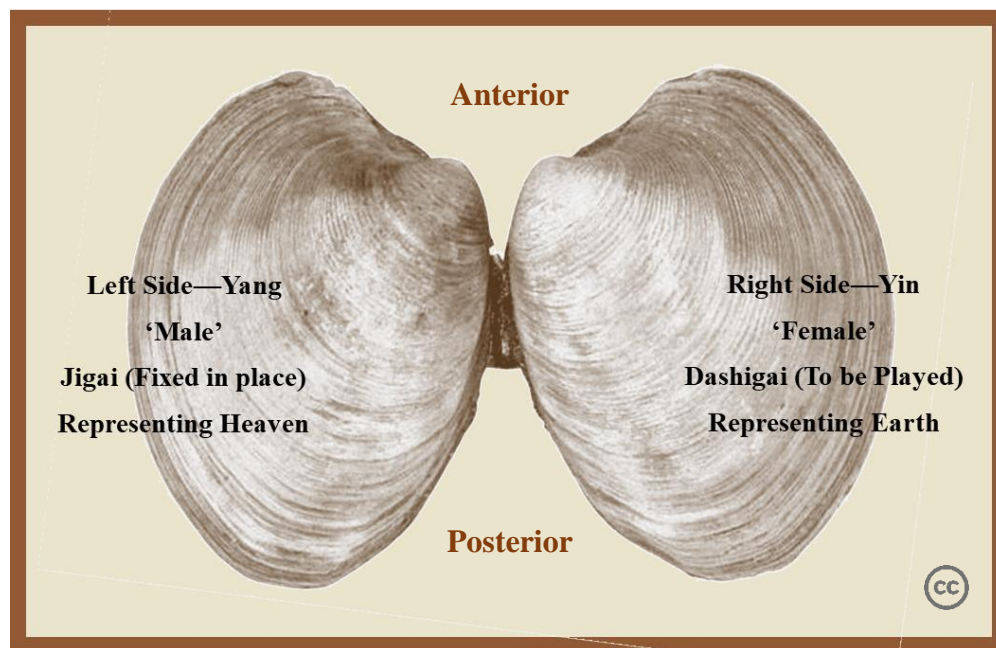


Figure 8: Left and Right sides of a Clam

Living clams naturally rest on their right side or ‘bottom valve’, and the left side or ‘top valve’ opens upward. Therefore, the right side represents the ‘earth’ below, and the left side represents ‘heaven’ above. (Image created by author and may be used with sited credit under Creative Commons)

Even today, Hamaguri clams are commonly regarded as symbols of marital harmony because the shells symbolize a joined pair. Due to this auspicious meaning of finding one's destined match, *Hamaguri ushiojiru* (clear clam soup) is often served at weddings. And because a shell of a hamaguri clam will never fit another hamaguri clam, it serves as a symbol of a woman's fidelity to her husband. This same soup is also often served on *Hinamatsuri* (Girl's Day, also known as Doll Day), which is celebrated annually on March 3rd. The primary aspect of *Hinamatsuri* is the display of seated male and female dolls, the *obina* ("male doll") and *mebina* ("female doll"), which represent a Heian period wedding. The dolls are seated on red cloth and may be as simple as pictures or folded paper dolls, or as intricate as carved three-dimensional dolls. More elaborate displays will include a multi-tiered doll stand of dolls that represent ladies of the court, musicians, and other attendants, with all sorts of accoutrements which always include a **miniature Kai-oke shell storage box** at the center front of the display. The entire set of dolls and accessories is called the *hinakazari* (Figure 9)



Figure 9: Hinakazari (Seven-tiered *hina* doll set) with miniature Kai-oke shell storage box

Courtesy of the Japanese Cultural Institute, Rome, Italy (Copyrights apply)

Setting Up and Playing Kai-oi (Shell Covering Game)

It was well known to the Japanese that clams opened and closed their shells with the cycle of the moon, and thus they chose to honor that natural relationship in the game by arranging the Jigai face down in the following manner. Twelve of the half shells, symbolizing the twelve months, were set in a circle, along with seven more representing the days of the week. The resulting number, nineteen, represented the Metonic Cycle in which the moon returns in the same phase to the same longitude in the sky. The remaining shells were arranged in nine more or less equal lines, representing the nine layers of heaven. Smaller games were typically played with a total of 24 to 38 shell halves, while larger games could involve as many as 720 shell halves. (i) When all Jigai were set, a ‘*Nyobo*’ (court lady) serving as ‘*Dashiyaku*’ (person who picks out dashigai) took one of Dashigai out of Dashigaioke (Kai-oke, or storage box for the dashigai) and placed it face down in the center of the Jigai circle. (Figure 10)

As few as 2 and as many as 20 or more himegimi (daughters of a person of high rank) surrounded the shells and attempted to find the one Jigai with the same natural markings and shape as the Dashigai. Taking turns each player examined all the shells to determine which Jigai they believed matched the Dashigai. Once they had made this determination, they picked up the Dashigai from the center of the Jigai circle and placed it in their hand face down, covering it with their kimono sleeve. Then the player picked up the Jigai and carefully slid it into their Kimono sleeve to join it with the Dashigai. If the halves did not click perfectly together, they simply returned the Jigai and Dashigai to their places. If the shell halves did match, then the player would hold up the matched shells together or show the interior of the shells if they contained matching painted images. The player then placed the matched pair of shells face down near their knees. (i). Two things must be noted; First, the reason for covering both shell halves with the Kimono sleeve was to prevent the accidental reveal of the often highly decorated interior of the shell which could potentially be a clue for the next player. Second, Kimono sleeves were much longer for both men and women during in the medieval period, making the ‘covering’ easier.

Next the *Dashiyaku* placed another Dashigai at the center of the Jigai circle and the matching process repeated, alternating between left and right teams, until all the shells had been claimed; the player who claimed the most shells was the winner.

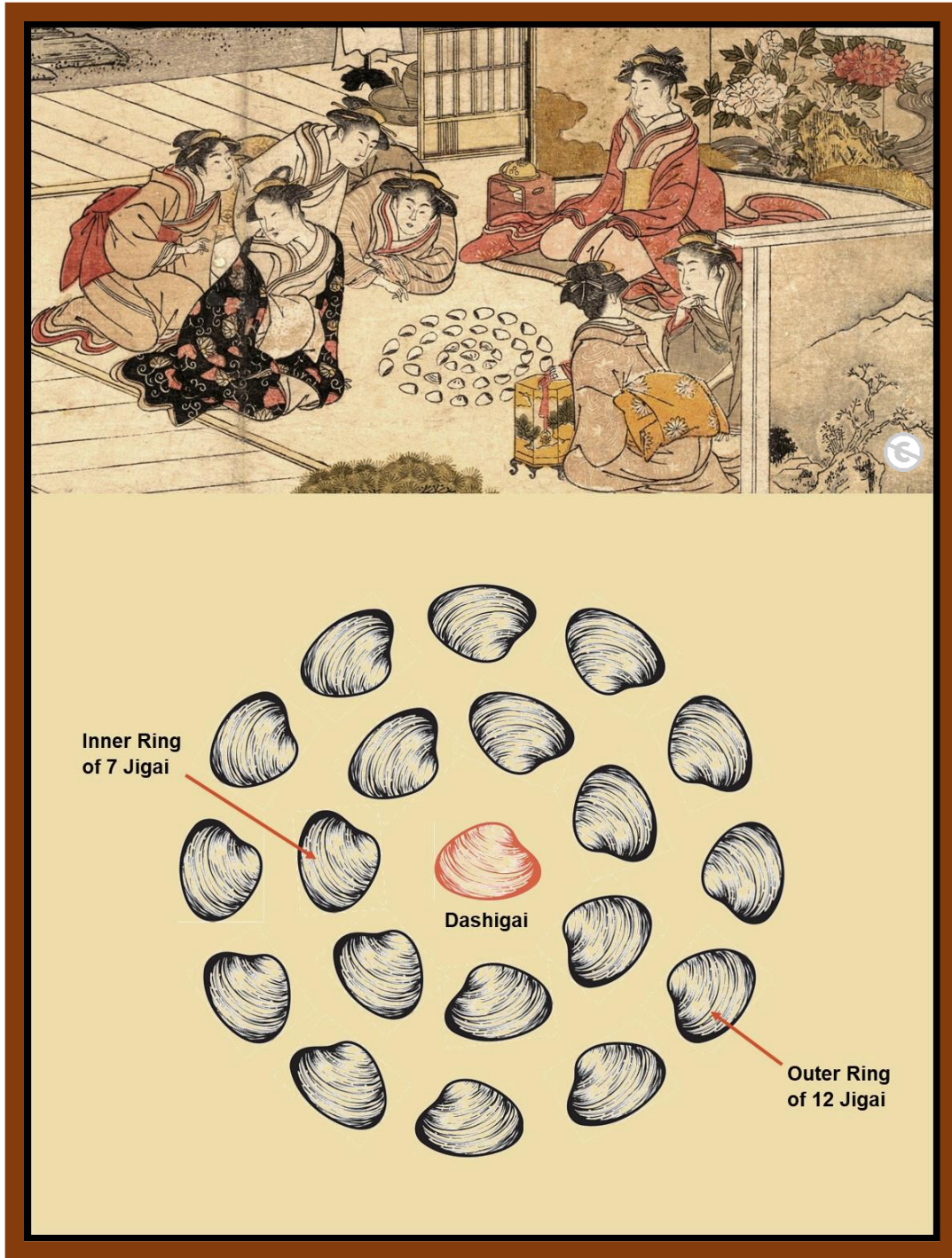


Figure 10:

The top portion of figure 10 is a 1790 Wood Block Print of Girls Playing a Game with Shells by Kitagawa Utamaro (Japanese, ca. 1754–1806)

The bottom portion of Figure 10 illustrates the traditional starting shell set-up



Figure 11: Kai-awase, 18th Century Hanging scroll; ink & gold on silk



Figure 12.

A 16th century scroll 'Tale of Brief Slumber' depicting Kai-oi being played

Boston Museum of Fine Arts (Public Domain Image)

Kai-oi Shell Decoration

One of the earliest known records of Kai-oi shell decoration appears in the *'Daily Records of the Oyudono-no ue'*, which mentions the arrival of cloths that were made to be used for adorning the shells' interiors. Dated to 1496, this entry suggests the aestheticization of shells already began during the late Muromachi period as a natural extension of the decoration of shell containers and of a growing devotion to the Kai-oi game. A diary entry from 1562 mentions the delivery of shells with painted interiors. From these entries it seems that the painting of shells developed later than the use of brocades, and in the last decades of the Muraomachi period to the early Momyyama period, both modes of decoration coexisted. (e)

It appears painting eventually became the dominant form of shell decoration, for all the extant examples of shells used for Kai-oi are painted rather than decorated with textiles. Decoration found on these surviving examples of Kai-oi shells can be broken down into three groups: Classical, Natural, and Domestic.

Classical shell decoration is those that feature traditional Japanese stories such as the Tale of Genji, or the Tales of Ise. Human figures are typically present. (Figure 13). Among the more extravagant classical decoration are those in which gold-leaf clouds with embossed geometric motifs (*kiko-mon*) surround the painting



Figure 13: Edo Period Kai-oi Shell with Tale of Genji Painting, Honolulu Museum of Art

It should be noted that Classical decorations need not match exactly, often a matching shell was one that depicted a different part of the same literary scene.

Natural Shell decoration features a combination of flora and fauna. (Figure 14)



Figure 14: Edo Period Kai-oi Shells with Bird & Tree Painting, Honolulu Museum of Art

Domestic Shell decoration features everyday household items such as clothing, hanging scrolls, tea utensils, bowls, and similar containers. (Figure 15)



Figure 15: Edo Period Kai-oi Shells with Obi Painting, Honolulu Museum of Art

Apart from the pictures on the shells, there are some which contain Tanka (31 syllable poems), though the surviving quantity of these shells does not compare with that of picture shells. These types of shells harken back to the original mono-awase version of Kai-awase when a poem was included with each shell presented for comparison.



Figure 16: 17th Century Kai-oi
Lacquered Shell with Tanka

Courtesy of the Kozu Kobunka
Kaikan Museum, Kyoto, Japan

(Copyrights apply)

According to a passage dated August 9th, 1489, in a record entitled ‘*Nobutane-Kyo-ki*’, tanka contained in the love section of the ‘*Kokin-wakashu*’ (a famous collection of modern poems, drawn up in the 15th century) are written on shells; one tanka to challenge with on the right shell or dashigai, and one to answer with on the left shell or Jigai. (Figure 16) (j). Here is the first Tanka entry from the section of love in the ‘*Kokin-wakashu*’ by an anonymous author:

*“A cuckoo
Singing! Summer
Sweet flags,
Have opened my eyes,
To this love”*

Another popular source for tanka painted on shells and later uta-garuta cards was the ‘*Ogura hyakunin isshu*’ (One hundred poets, one hundred poems) a collection of poems, each by a different poet, and compiled by the calligrapher Fujiwara no Teika (1162–1241). The collection is organized chronologically from Emperor Tenji (626-671) to Emperor Juntoku

(1197-1242). Each of the poets is depicted by a woodblock print created by Ukiyo-e artist Hishikawa Moronobu (1618-circa 1694). In one of Teika's diaries, the *Meigetsuki*, he says that his son Tameie asked him to arrange one hundred poems for Tameie's father-in-law, Utsunomiya Yoritsuna, who was furnishing a residence with decorated screens near Mount Ogura (hence the full name of *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu*). (Figure 17) (t)



Figure 17: Image 34 of 56 from the '*Ogura hyakunin isshu*', *Library of Congress*

Most of the painted Kai-oi shells that have survived were produced during the Edo period. According to a chapter describing Kai-oi (shell covering) in a record of the 18th century, known as the '*Youshufushi*', artists who made picture books and painted fans tended to be the ones who decorated shells as well. The pictures on shells and fans share many patterns in common because the two have small surfaces and similar curved shapes, though the direction of the pictures is opposite. Painted fans were in great demand since the Muromachi period (late

16th century) for both export and daily use. Though cheaper fans were painted by apprentices, the more expensive fans were painted only by masters. Given the importance that Kai-awase had gained in the Samurai era, the same standard most likely applied to the painting of Kai-awase shells. Based on this reasoning, we can narrow down the number of possible shell painters to a handful of masters living in Kyoto. Fan artists such as **Tawaraya Sōtatsu** (1570 – 1640), co-founder of the Rinpa school of Japanese painting, maintained commercial workshops in Kyoto specifically to produce fans and screens for wealthy aristocrats (Figure 18). **Kano Motohide**, and **Kano Shoshu** (1551-1601), were brothers and both masters from the Kano School who also painted fans such as the ones shown in Figures 19 & 20. Shoshu is also responsible for creating several screens which incorporated images from the Tale of Genji, a common theme found on painted Kai-awase shells. (j, r, s)



Figure 18: Early 17th Century Japanese Fan 'Rural Cottage in Early Spring' by Tawaraya Sōtatsu
Courtesy of Daigo-ji Temple, Kyoto Japan, <https://www.daigoji.or.jp/> (Copyrights apply)



Figure 19: *View of Kyoto*, fan painting by Kanō Motohide, Momoyama period, early 1580s, one of a set of 10, ink and color on gold paper, Honolulu Museum of Art



Figure 20: Late 16th Century, '*Plantain and Bird in Snow*' by Kano Shoshu, In the collection of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art

It must be noted that though the outer part of the Kai-oi shells are typically not decorated, they are normally polished and lacquered with a tree resin taken from *Toxicodendron Vernicifluum*, a tree native to east Asia (Refer to the map on page 4 for areas where raw lacquer is produced). To harvest the resin, a scratch is made in the tree's trunk and the resin is scraped out. As the resin dries it exhibits strong adhesive properties and can be used to make a glossy coating. The port town of Wajima on the northern coast of the Noto Peninsula was and remains one of the major centers to produce lacquer (Urushi) and lacquerware. Kai-oke (shell storage boxes) and Mona-awase Scoring Boards like the ones shown in Figures 7, 21, 22 & 23 have been crafted in Wajima since the 15th Century (i)



Figure 21: Kaioke and Awasegai

Pair of Lacquered Storage Containers for Painted Shell Matching Game.
Chrysanthemum-stem design with crest and peony-between-two-stems crest,

Edo period, 19th c (crafted sometime between 1819-1839)

Originally owned by Shunkyo-in Sachi-gimi, wife of the 11th Owari Tokugawa Nariharu.
Courtesy of the Tokugawa Art Museum, Nagoya, Japan (Copyrights apply)



Figure 22.
Example of Japanese Kai-oke
shell storage boxes
Late Edo Period



Figure 23.
Example of Japanese Incense
game set with scoring board
Edo Period (1600–15) – 1868

Courtesy of the Tokugawa Art Museum, Nagoya, Japan (Copyrights apply)

Kai-awase in Japanese Art

Beginning in the 17th Century and continuing through the 19th Century, the shell game of Kai-awase repeatedly shows up in various Japanese art forms from Lacquerware to textiles and wood-block prints. Formal marriages arranged by the shogunate and provincial leaders during the Edo Period caused an explosion in the production of Kai-awase related items. Wealthy and powerful daimyo ordered magnificent wedding trousseaus for their daughters, and these trousseaus became symbolic of the social rank and the political alliances upon which the marriages were founded. A large variety of wedding-set items are described and illustrated in the '*Konrei-dōgu shokikei sunpō-sho*' (Wedding Trousseau Items Size Manual), a woodblock-printed handbook produced in the Edo period lists nearly 400 pieces recommended for the dowry. These articles were elaborately executed, representing the social status of the families and at the same time expressing the notion that marriage was the most important event in a woman's life. Lacquered Kai-oke shell storage boxes were one of the most important items of the bride's wedding gifts and were prominently displayed in the wedding procession. (Figures 7, 21, 22). The handing over of the shell-matching box was a formal part of the wedding ceremony. Many wedding kimonos were often embroidered with Kai-awase images (Figures 25, 26). (1)

The Edo period also saw the emergence of many renowned *Ukiyo-e* wood-block artists. Five of these artists, *Suzuki Harunobu*, *Chōbunsai Eishi*, *Totoya Hokkei*, *Toyohara Chikanobu*, and *Utagawa Yoshiiku*. were known for their depiction of everyday life and included prints illustrating the preparations and playing of Kai-awase in their collections. It is interesting to note that many early *Ukiyo-e* artists were either from samurai families or served as samurai at some point in their lives, and as such would be very familiar with the marital aspects of Kai-awase.

Suzuki Harunobu (1725–1770) created at least three known wood-block prints illustrating the shell game of Kai-awase (Figure 28, 29) and was the first to produce full-color prints (*nishiki-e*) in 1765, rendering obsolete the former modes of two and three-color prints. In both Figures 28 & 29, Women are seen looking at Kai-awase shells, and Kai-oke storage boxes are visible behind them.

Harunobu was from a samurai family and had an ancestor who was a retainer of the high-ranking Tokugawa Ieyasu in Mikawa Province. In 1764, he was chosen to aid his samurai family in their amateur efforts to create e-goyomi calendars prints. These calendar prints would be the first nishiki-e (brocade prints). The most important innovation in the creation of nishiki-e was the ability of Harunobu to use several separate blocks in a single image. The new technique depended on using notches and wedges to hold the paper in place and keep the successive color printings in the register. Harunobu was the first ukiyo-e artist to consistently use more than three colors in each print. (m)

Chōbunsai Eishi (1756–1829) was a Japanese ukiyo-e artist, and pupil of Kano Eisen'in Michinobu. Born as the first son of direct vassal of the Shogunate, a well-off samurai family that was part of the Fujiwara clan. Eishi was a vassal of the Shogunate, but left his service with the Shōgun Ieharu to pursue art. (n)

From 1785 to 1801, Eishi was a very active print designer and created illustrations for several books, some of which included erotica. In his series *'Parodies of Six Immortal Poets in Modern Dress'* (Figure 27), Eishi included a portrait of a courtesan holding a pair of painted Kai-awase shells. (n). In accordance with the series title, this portrait employs the parodic device by which figures of the past are depicted in contemporary guise, sometimes as a person of lower status or a different gender. In this portrait the Heian-period monk-poet Kisen Hōshi is represented by a courtesan holding a shell decorated with a painting that recalls Chapter 45 of The Tale of Genji, *'The Divine Princess at Uji Bridge.'* In that episode, Kaoru, Genji's supposed son, visits Princess Ōigimi in Uji.

Totoya Hokkei (1780–1850) was a Japanese artist best known for his prints in the ukiyo-e style. Hokkei was one of Hokusai's first and best-known students and worked in a variety of styles and genres and produced a large body of work in prints, book illustrations, and paintings. Born Iwakubo Tatsuyuki in 1780 in Edo (modern Tokyo), Hokkei was at first a fishmonger before studying with Kanō Yōsen'in Korenobu the head of the Kobikichō branch of the Kanō school of painting. Hokkei's earliest known works appear around the year 1800 as illustrations

for books of *kyōka* comic waka poetry, licentious *sharebon* novels, and *hanashibon* storybooks. Two of his Kai-awase illustrations from the waka poetry series are shown in [Figures 30 & 31](#). The combination of Waka poetry and shells harkens back to the early Heian period when poems were presented with shells to be compared in mono-awase games. (n, o, p)

Toyohara Chikanobu (1838–1912), better known to his contemporaries as Yōshū Chikanobu, was a prolific woodblock artist of Japan's Meiji (era). Like many *ukiyo-e* artists, Chikanobu turned his attention towards a great variety of subjects. His work ranged from Japanese mythology to depictions of the battlefields of his lifetime to women's fashions. As well as several the other artists of this period, he too portrayed *kabuki* actors in character.

Chikanobu was known as a master of *bijinga*. images of beautiful women, and for illustrating changes in women's fashion, including both traditional and Western clothing. His work illustrated the changes in hairstyles and make-up across time and captured the transition from the age of the samurai to Meiji modernity. In one of his woodblock series illustrating women's activities of the Tokugawa era, Chikanobu depicts a woman with a unique hairstyle removing Kai-awase shells from a Kai-oke shell storage box ([Figure 32](#)). The details on the Kai-oke appear quite similar to those found in [Figure 22](#). (q)

Utagawa Yoshiiku (1833 – 1904), also known as or Ochiai Yoshiiku, was a Japanese artist of the Utagawa school. Born the son of teahouse proprietor Asakusa Tamichi in 1833, Yoshiiku became a student of ukiyo-e artist Utagawa Kuniyoshi toward the end of the 1840s. His earliest known work dates to 1852 when he provided the backgrounds for some actor prints created by his master.

Yoshiiku's earliest works were portraits of actors, beauties, and warriors. He later followed Kuniyoshi into making satirical and humorous pieces and became the leading name in the field after Kuniyoshi's death in 1861. He illustrated the [Tokyo Nichi Nichi Shimbun](#) ('Tokyo Daily News') from 1874 to 1876, and then co-founded the Tokyo E-iri Shinbun ('Tokyo Illustrated News'). The latter folded in 1889, and Yoshiiku returned to making prints. He struggled during his later years, and his last known print appeared in 1903. (n)

In an 1860 print, Yoshiiku depicts multiple Kai-awase shells containing both poems and painted images. Notice the bases of two Kai-oke boxes in the upper right corner. (Figure 24).



Figure 24: Surimono print with Painted Clam Shells and Poems by Utagawa Yoshiiku 1860. Wood Block Print in the Mary A. Ainsworth Asian Collection of the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio

Utagawa Kunisada (1786 – 1865), also known as **Utagawa Toyokuni III**, was trained at the Utagawa School, and the most popular, prolific, and commercially successful designer of ukiyo-e woodblock prints in 19th-century Japan. In his own time, his reputation far exceeded that of his contemporaries, Hokusai, Hiroshige and Kuniyoshi. At the end of the Edo period (1603–1867), Hiroshige, Kuniyoshi and Kunisada were the three best representatives of the Japanese color woodcut in Edo (capital city of Japan, now Tokyo). Kai-awase shells are shown in one of his prints from 1854, again with both poems and painted images. (Figure 25) (n)



Figure 25: Waka Murasaki Genji E-awase

1854 (late Edo)

The Genji-"mon" (crest), title, illustration, and poem for the chapter appear in the upper right-hand corner of the print, enclosed by two overlapping clam shells.

Utagawa Toyokuni III (Japanese, 1786-1865) (Artist)

Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Md.





Figure 26: Kai-oi Textile Designs

(Left) The long-sleeved, light blue uchigake shown on the left is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It was probably worn by a young woman of the wealthy merchant class. The design of lacquered shell-matching game boxes (kai-oke) and shells, both decorated with scenes from and references to the Tale of Genji, is embroidered in colored silk and couched gold-wrapped thread. As only the two properly matching halves of a shell can be paired in the popular shell-matching game, it symbolizes a married couple and often appears on wedding garments. As it is the most vulnerable part of the garment, the hem is very rarely decorated, but on this luxurious uchigake, there is fine embroidery of shell patterns. (19th Century). **Photography © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. All Rights Reserved**

(Right) The 19th century Kimono fragment shown on the right is in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It is also decorated with Kai-oke and shells. (Creative Commons)

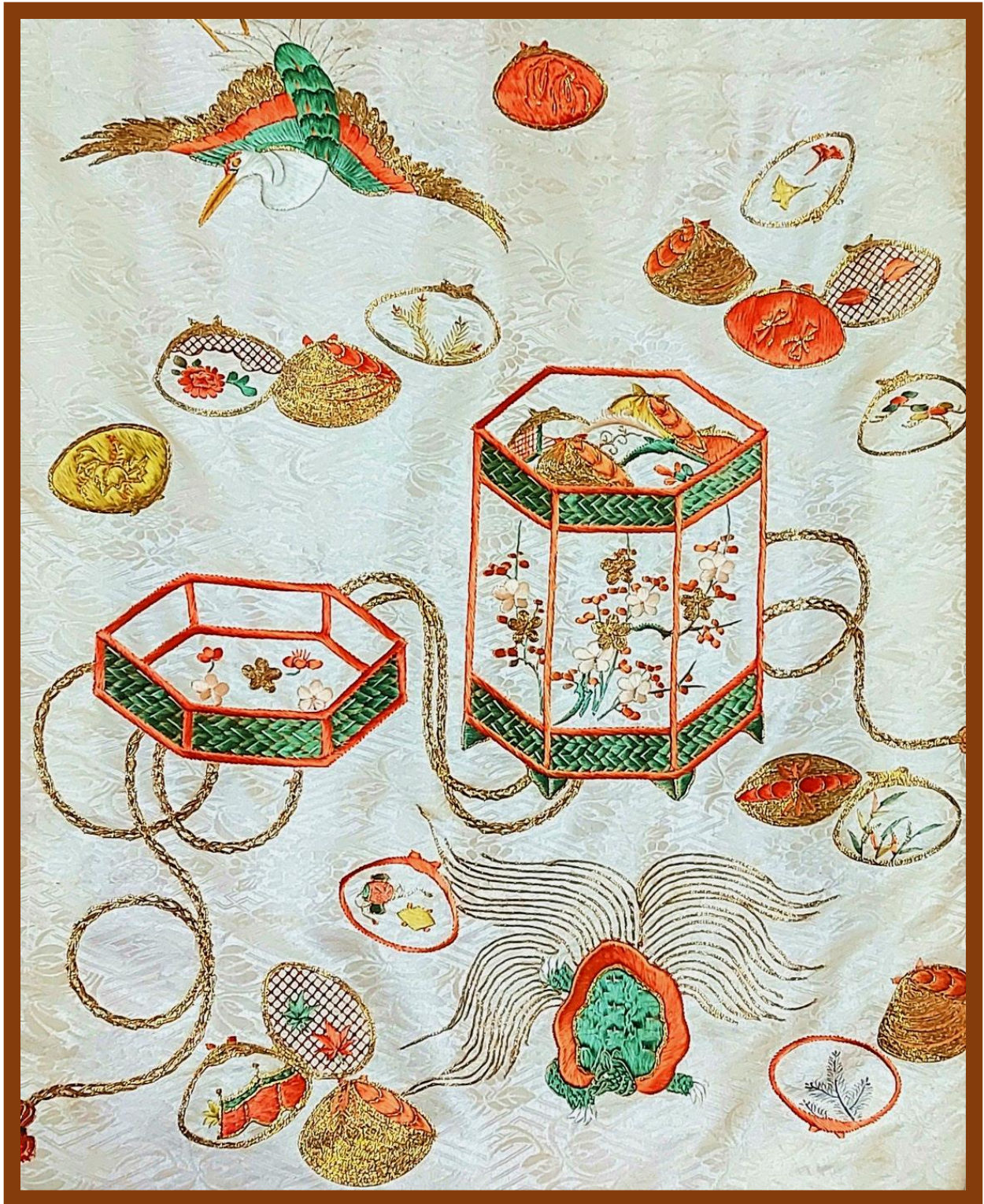


Figure 27: Kai-awase embroidery detail from Edo Period Wedding Kimono
(In Private Collection, Copyrights apply)



Figure 27: Monk Kisen Hoshi, A Courtesan Holding a Pair of Painted Shells, from the series Parodies of Six Immortal Poets in Modern Dress by Chobunsai Eishi, 1790

Wood Block Print in the Mary A. Ainsworth Asian Collection of the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio.

Identical print in the collection of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art
(Public Domain Image)



Figure 28:
 Girls playing "pairing
 of painted shells" by
 Suzuki Harunobu,
 1770, (Public Domain
 Image)



Figure 29: Women preparing shell game by Suzuki Harunobu, 1792, in the collection of the New York Public Library



Figure 30: The shell-matching game, early 1800's. Artist Totoya Hokkei.



Figure 31: Implements of the Shell Game, 1814, in the collection of the New York Public Library



Figure 32: Playing a Game with Shells by Chikanobu (1838 - 1912)

In Privation Collection (Copyrights apply)

From Kai-awase Shells to Karuta Cards

Near the end of the 16th century the Portuguese introduced playing cards to Japan and a variation of Kai-awase emerged known as Karuta. In the game of Karuta, playing cards are spread out on the floor in much the same manner as Kai-awase shells, then players race to match them.

Figure 33 contains examples of 17th century shell shaped Karuta cards illustrating the link between the two games. Each of these two cards is inscribed with two parts of the same poem, the first part of the poem is written on one card and the second half is on the other. However, the evolution of Kai-awase does not end there, Karuta gave rise to the very popular 19th century card game of Hanafuda which became the first game mass produced by Nintendo (yes, the video game company). Hanafuda remains very popular today, and nearly 10 centuries after Kai-awase was first played in an Ise Shrine, both it and Karuta are still played by many Japanese families on New Year's Day.



Figure 33: 17th Century Karuta Playing Cards

Image courtesy of the Miike Playing-Card Memorial Museum,

Fukuoka, Japan, <https://visit-fukuoka-japan.com/>

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“The broad sea sweeps
Depths: did our vow match them?
Upon the beach lie
Single seashells:
That is what we have become! ”

Waka by Lord Fujiwara no Tsune'ie (1149-1209), Minister of the Imperial Household
Presented as a member of the 'right' team in the Ropyaku-ban Uta-Awase comparison contest,
a 600-round mono-awase poetry game held in 1192. (a)

Image from Hanging Scroll, Seaweed and Shells by Shibata Zeshin, Honolulu Museum of Art