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Irises, the Zig-Zag Bridge, and The Tales of Ise

BY YUKARI YAMANO



Iris at the Seattle Japanese Garden photographed: Left picture is by Paul Watanabe in May 2015 and Right picture is by Mike Bay in May 2018

Japanese irises start blooming in June, coinciding with the time that rice seedlings are planted in Japan. Three species are native to that country—*Iris ensata*, *I. laevigata*, and *I. sanguinea*—and traditionally many Japanese farmers grew irises



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Japanese enjoy many wild and cultivated irises throughout the landscape in the late spring.

In the Seattle Japanese Garden, irises are planted along the shoreline of the pond. In concert with the Garden's beautiful zig-zag bridge, the shoreline irises hint at a famous scene from the 10th-century anthology of poems, *Isemonogatari* (伊勢物語), *The Tales of Ise*.

The Tales of Ise

The scene from *The Tales of Ise*, a love story, is the interlude in section nine. The central character (a nobleman, possibly Ariwarano Narihira—considered to be a ladies' man) in the story has an affair with a high-ranking court lady. He is exiled and leaves Kyoto, the capital of Japan during Heian period (794–1185) to find a new home to the east, in the countryside of Japan.

The nobleman's journey is a lonely one, as he is accompanied by only a few friends. They stop at a *yatsubashi* (zig-zag) bridge in Mikawa province. They get off their horses⁰, sit under a tree near the



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growing at the shoreline, and the nobleman uses the plant to create an acrostic poem, or word puzzle.

唐衣 きつつなれにし つましあれば はる
ばるきぬる 旅をしぞ思ふ

Karagoromo. Kitsutsu narenishi. Tsuma shi
areba. Harubaru kinuru. Tabi o shi zo
omou.

This translates to “I have a beloved wife, familiar as a well-worn robe, and so this distant journeying, fills my heart with grief.” However, there is also some wordplay within the Japanese characters, which essentially translates to “iris beautiful.”

When the nobleman shares the poem, his friends cry from sadness and moisten their dried rice with their tears.

An Inspiring Scene

The Tales of Ise was created prior to *The Tale of Genji* (published before 1021), an international



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aesthetic ideal (stressing aristocratic grace and elegance) to depict court society, culture, and love affairs. Scholars believe that *The Tales of Ise*

influenced Murasaki Shikibu, a writer of *The Tale of Genji*. The interlude in section nine of *The Tales of Ise* is a highlight of the story and nationally well-known—in fact, I read this scene in my high school's classic Japanese literature class.



伊勢物語 2冊 WA7-238 01-015

国立国会図書館

Tale of Ise: Printed in 13th year of the Keicho Era (1608), 2 books, 27.119.4cm from [National Diet Library](https://www.ndl.go.jp/)



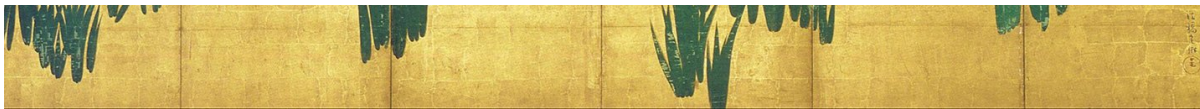
Tales of Ise and reproduced the scene of irises and the *yatsubashi* bridge in their works. Among these works, perhaps the six-panel screen of irises

created by Ogata Korin is the most famous.

Ogata Korin was an 18th-century artist representative of the Rinpa school, one of the major historical schools of Japanese decorative art. Korin depicted *Kakitsubata* (燕子花), *Iris laevigata* in abstract form. The screen panels were likely painted between 1701 and 1705, during the Edo period. For more than 200 years, the screen was kept at Nishi Honganji Buddhist temple, in Kyoto. It is now appointed as a National Treasure of Japan and preserved at the Nezu Museum, in Tokyo.

Similar screens by Ogata Korin, representing irises with a *yatsubashi* bridge, are held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. He also crafted a raden and gold lacquer ink stone case with irises and a zig-zag motif that is now also a National Treasure of Japan and conserved at Tokyo National Museum.





燕子花図 National treasure: *Irises* screen, Kakitsubatazu by Ogata, Korin (18th Century, Edo period) Each six-panel screen measures 150.9 by 338.8 centimetres (59.4 in × 133.4 in) from [Nezumuseum](#)



Irises at Yatsushashi (Eight Bridges, zig-zag bridge) after 1709 by Ogata, Korin (18th Century, Edo period) From The [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)





八橋蒔絵螺鈿硯箱 National treasure: Yatsushashi raden gold lacquer ink stone case by Ogata, Korin (18th Century, Edo period) Picture from [Agency of Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan](https://www.cultural-affairs.go.jp/en/kyouka/kyouka01.html)

Love for Irises

Japanese people adore irises and think of them as extremely sophisticated and absolutely beautiful. There is an expression in Japan: “Either *Ayame* or *Kakitsubata*.” We know that *Kakitsubata* is *Iris laevigata*; *Ayame* is the Japanese word for *Iris sanguinea*. When a person must choose from two items that are equally refined and elegant, Japanese people express their hesitancy and indecisiveness by saying, “Either *Ayame* (*Iris sanguinea*) or *Kakitsubata* (*Iris laevigata*),” meaning both items are equally beautiful and cannot be ranked by superiority.

The beautiful irises in the Seattle Japanese Garden have just started to bloom. They include five different cultivars of *Iris ensata*, as well as the straight species. We hope you will come and see them yourself.



*the Seattle Japanese Garden, a native Japanese and
a Japanese history buff.*

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