

Sean Thor Conroe

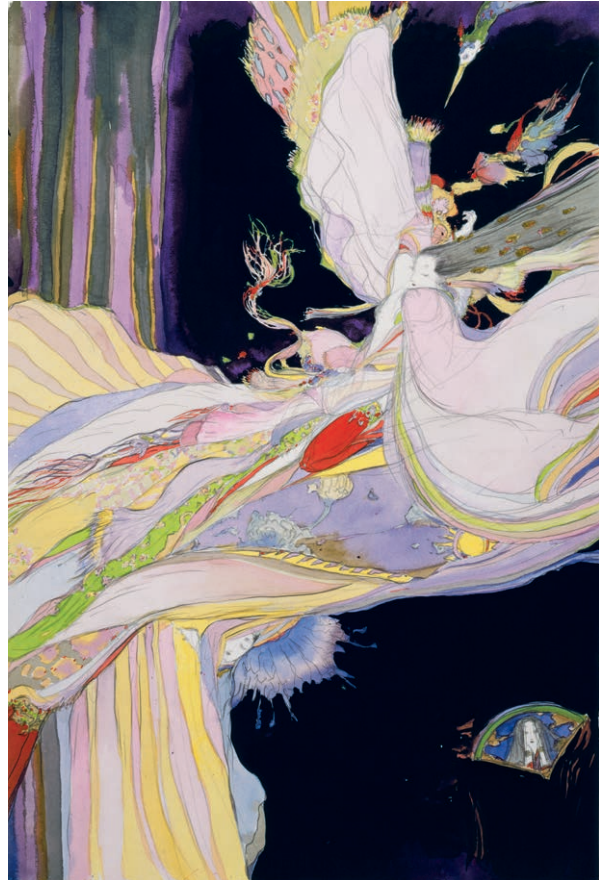
Shining Genji

Arts and Letters

Sean Thor Conroe
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for Yoshitaka Amano
Origins 始源

Arts and Letters



Murasaki-no-ue, from The Tale of Genji, 1992

Yoshitaka Amano's *Origins* 始源 is on view at the American Academy of Arts and Letters from September 26, 2026, to February 7, 2027.

This reader is part of a series of interdisciplinary texts commissioned by Arts and Letters to accompany its gallery program. *Shining Genji* is an essay Conroe wrote about reading Murasaki Shikibu's eleventh-century novel *The Tale of Genji*.

Shining Genji

Sean Thor Conroe

For whatever reason, it's lately felt as important for me to come up with a theory for why we make art in the first place as it is to make the art itself.

When Noa from Arts and Letters first invited me to write a text for Yoshitaka Amano's exhibition, the assignment seemed logical enough. We both, I thought, blend the ancient with the modern, combining classical forms and contemporary techniques—video game and character design in Amano's case, internet vernacular–inflected novels in mine—and reimagining foundational myths in order to depict romantic longing and the earnest desire, through art, for transcendence.

Surveying Amano's works, I was immediately drawn to his series based on *The Tale of Genji*, a story written in eleventh-century Japan by Murasaki Shikibu, a lady of the imperial court, and the selections from his *1001 Nights* project, inspired by the *One Thousand and One Nights* folktales, both of which I'd been meaning to read.

I found there to be something ineffably moving about these works. They depict ladies in flowing ornate gowns, seemingly lost in reverie, floating out into the dark night; there is a cosmic smallness to how they are set against vast expanses of deep space or highly detailed botanical backdrops, resting or traveling or coital, as if transported onto the canvas from a far-off wonderland . . .

I thought I could use this opportunity to read the unabridged *Tale of Genji*, which runs over a thousand pages long, and to try, in my own way, to connect it to both Amano's work and my own. (Like *Genji*, my novel *Fucchoi* is about a careless philanderer reckoning with himself and eventually coming into consciousness.)

Around the time Noa reached out, I'd been deep into my latest theory. I was reading the work of the American writer William T. Vollmann, who mines forgotten historical records of the most horrifying violences and forces the reader to confront these inconvenient truths about what shaped the world as we know it today. I'd come to think this might be the point of art: to pry open the reader's eyes to aspects of the world that we generally avoid looking at, to induce a type of unwitting empathy for those we're repulsed by and scared of—those we dismiss and ignore.

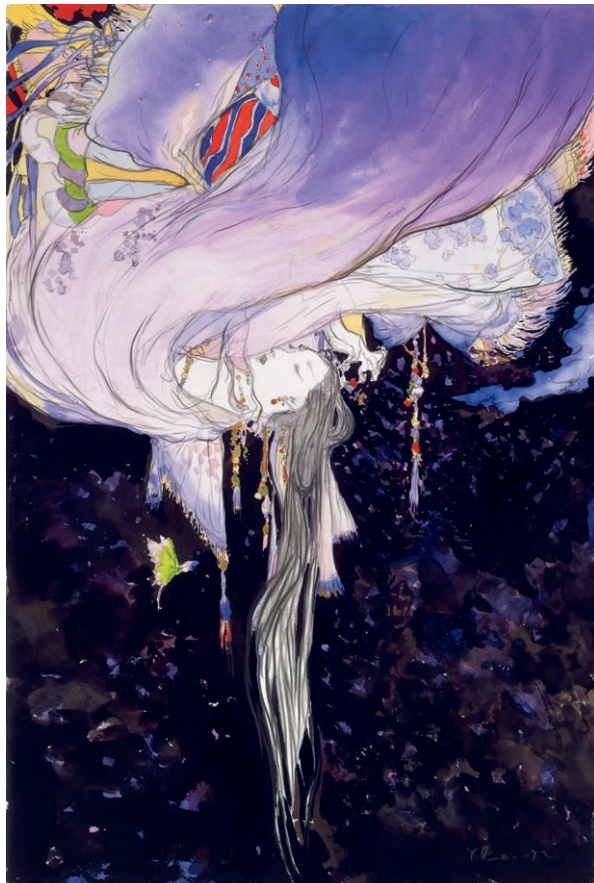
As a theory, it was all quite serious and somber.

Amano, it seemed, did just the opposite. Rather than dwell on the pain and suffering of this world,

he seeks out another one entirely—one filled with fantasy, beauty, dreams, and longing.

He works in flowing, elegant lines, smooth, sinewy, and plantlike, drawn as if according to an aquatic or arboreal logic, clusters of detailed patterns by turns tapestry-like or geological, colorful and floral. The effect is luxuriant, even decadent, some of his larger spreads resembling those of Hieronymus Bosch. But where Bosch often depicts crowds in his paintings, Amano tends toward the singular and fantastical, to man or woman as hero or knight, sorceress or fairy, seemingly about to burst off the canvas. Other works are moody or anguished or erotic, always seasonal and elemental, set in the light and shadow of spring or winter, the dim glow of dawn or the depths of the darkest night.

Early this past spring, I went to see Yoshitaka Amano's *Time and Light* exhibition at the gallery LOMEX in New York City. My first observation, simple as it sounds, was how peopled his paintings were by *beautiful women*. Women in states of longing, solitude, arousal, or dreaming. I approached Yoshitaka where he sat on a couch in the back room, looking stylish and serene. He was taking visitors, many of whom were requesting photos with him. Noa, the curator of Amano's Arts and Letters show, introduced me as "Sean, who will be writing the accompanying text for your upcoming show." Somewhat belligerently eschewing Yoshitaka's translator, feeling the weight



Murasaki-no-ue, from *The Tale of Genji*, 1992

of my ancestors on my shoulders, I attempted fluency in my mother tongue. I introduced myself by my Japanese name, Sho, and told him my *okaasan*, *to gigi*, *to baba wa nihonjin desu*, and that I was born in Tokyo. Ah, *soo desuka*, he said. He bowed and smiled, eyes twinkling beneath the brim of his Indiana Jones hat, amused as I stumbled over my words, hot with embarrassment and shame. Right before leaving him to his fans, I asked him about his fondness for Greek mythological figures. *Dare ga ichiban daisuki?* —“which Greek mythical figure is your favorite?”

Ah *soo ne*, he said, once his wife stepped in and clarified what I was trying to say. *Venusu, nee. Venusu wa ichiban daisuki.*

Back home upstate, fueled by an ancient sense of duty, I started in on *The Tale of Genji*, not knowing what to expect.

First circulated in 1021, *The Tale of Genji* is thought to be the world’s first novel, or in any case, the earliest novel that’s still read and considered a masterpiece today. Its author, whose real name is unknown but who went by Murasaki, was a poet and lady-in-waiting at the imperial court in Japan during the Heian period (794–1185). *Genji* follows the exploits of a beautiful, semidivine playboy in the court whom no woman can resist. (“Semidivine” since all descendants of the emperor were thought to be directly descended from the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu.) As the Emperor’s son, he possesses

the power to make his seduction of any woman politically advantageous to the woman herself, for the luxurious lodgings the imperial palace affords, if nothing else. There's something astonishing about the fact that this was the theme of the world's first novel, and that it was written by a woman who shared her nom de plume with the story's heroine, Genji's favorite wife, whom he finds as a young girl and raises up like a daughter (a move that would surely be both taboo and flat-out criminal today).

Genji arose under unique historical conditions. The Heian period in Japan was one of relative peace. For three centuries, aside from intermittent skirmishes with the Indigenous Ainu of the north, the country was unmolested by foreign invasion or political unrest. In their 1997 edition of *A History of Japan*, R. H. P. Mason and J. G. Caiger write that "unlike China, Japan had no frontiers to defend after 850, and no aspiration for foreign conquest. Unlike Chinese society, Japanese society had never experienced real social revolution, and even at its time of greatest change, power had always been linked to heredity."¹ This period of peace reached its peak under the virtually unchallenged leadership of Fujiwara Michinaga, who ruled from 996 until his death in 1027 and may have been one of the figures on whom Genji was based. According to her diaries, Murasaki married in 999 and wrote the bulk of the novel between around 1001, the year her husband died, and 1007. It wouldn't be completed until

approximately 1021, likely by her daughter, since Murasaki is thought to have died in 1014.

At the time *Genji* was written, the emperor housed numerous women of varying status in the wings of the palace—consorts, intimates, and so forth—and replaced them when their time came. Genji is the son of the Emperor and the lowborn Kiritsubo Consort. Without a powerful father to protect her, Genji's mother lives at the mercy of the Emperor for protection. She is, however, the Emperor's favorite and invites envy and castigation from the other ladies in the court. She dies shortly after Genji's birth. Genji, like many archaic heroes, is exceedingly beautiful. "Genji's looks had an indescribably fresh sweetness . . . and this moved people to call him the Shining Lord."² At the age of twelve, he is married to sixteen-year-old Aoi, who eventually bears him a son, Yugiri, and who passes away shortly after giving birth. Genji engages in a series of trysts throughout his life: with Fujitsubo, his stepmother, "who resembled [his mother] to a truly astonishing degree," and with the mysterious Utsusemi, who, to his utter disbelief ("no woman has ever rejected me") repeatedly evades him, only for his desire for her to grow ever more urgent. (He'll eventually "accidentally" sleep with one of her ladies-in-waiting instead.) He sleeps with Oborozukiyo, the daughter of his political rival, a transgression for which he is exiled for a time to Suma, on the shores of Kobe. There he meets an eccentric gentleman, the Akashi

Novice, only to sleep with the Novice's daughter, the lady from Akashi, with whom he has a child. He falls for the young princess Asagao, a courtship that roundly fails.

His favorite, however, is the young Murasaki, who reminds him of his stepmother Fujitsubo. He finds her during a mountain retreat north of Kyoto, while recovering from an illness, when Murasaki is only ten. Like Genji's own mother, Murasaki does not have a father to care for her. Genji kidnaps her from her grandmother, brings her to the imperial palace, and raises her into womanhood, before making her his effective wife.

Fujiwara's reign allowed for women of the court to write letters, diaries, and, in Murasaki's case, a novel. Although writing remained a skill limited to the elite, it is notable that it was during the Heian period that a distinctly Japanese writing system, or the phonetic syllabary *hiragana*, was invented and proliferated. Prior to this, only Chinese characters, or *kanji*, were used, and then only by highborn men, for the most part priests. During the Heian period, men continued to use *kanji*, while women in the imperial court wrote in *hiragana*, extending writing into the female domain. They largely wrote love poems, delivered in secret to the objects of their desire.

How fascinating, I thought, that this fledgling skill of setting down thoughts in ink was directed toward the expression of nocturnal yearnings, a new

technology with the Promethean power to bring catastrophic, destructive consequences if a tryst went awry. Today, we swipe right or left on dating apps; in Heian Japan, members of the court were very deliberate about their love letters, and their responses, even down to the type of paper on which they wrote them. You judged a lover based on their handwriting and ability to make you feel something using only short lines of poetry. As members of an elite imperial court during a period of relative peace, they had no responsibilities, and so they slept through their days and engaged in trysts at night, customarily "leaving at dawn" to prevent rebuke or gossip. Women of the court remained behind sheets and screens, protected by their ladies-in-waiting. This was an insular world, in which rumors spread quickly, so the care you put into your messages and your choice of whom to court were paramount.

After I read and processed *The Tale of Genji*, I returned to Amano's work. Besides *Genji* and *1001 Nights*, he had painted the series *Venus* (2024–), *Celtic Fantasy* (1995), and *Fairies* (2006), which include portraits drawn from Arthurian legend, such as Lancelot and Guinevere, and even Cuchulain, hero of the often overlooked Irish Iliad, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Amano's work demonstrates an ongoing interest in myths—in stories that, like *Genji*, amplify our desires and aspirations, our hopes and sorrows, concentrating them into their core aspects. Heroes in myth are early

aspirational symbols connected to fertility, growth, and abundance in nature—to an archaic consciousness less disconnected from nature. Heroes are beautiful and bountiful the way nature is. In *Genji*, we see our fundamental desires for romance, the adventure of courtship, and the protection of a partner laid bare, stripped of modern propriety. Like the Fall and Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden—arguably our most foundational story—*Genji* takes the timeless struggle of a romantic union, with all its perceived betrayals, projections, and jealousies, as *the most fundamental struggle*.

It was during these same centuries surrounding the turn of the first millennium that the figure of the wandering knight, or knight-errant, emerged in European literature, distinguished by codes of behavior governing how to love and to protect women in an honorable fashion. Two centuries after *Genji*, in 1191, Wolfram von Eschenbach would write the first version of the epic Arthurian poem *Parzival*, which tells of a knight on a quest for the Holy Grail, a task that was inextricable from the proper calibration of one's libidinal urges. (It is the Grail King's wound to the groin that causes the land to fall fallow; Parzival's task is to renew it.) A century before *Genji*, around 850, the earliest surviving fragments of the *One Thousand and One Nights* are thought to have been set down. The tales are framed by the story of Shahrazad and King Shahriyar. Upon catching his wife sleeping with a slave, King Shahriyar falls into



Genji, from *The Tale of Genji*, 1992

a rage, murders his wife, and resolves to sleep with and kill a new virgin, night after night. Then he encounters the clever Shahrazad, who tells him these nightly stories, which always end on a cliff-hanger. Each morning, the king lets her live, desperate to know what comes next. Both the *One Thousand and One Nights* and *Genji* can be understood in the light of Adam and Eve: calls to forgive Eve despite her transgressions, to let Eve tell her story, to listen to her, to read her letters written in careful calligraphy on special paper folded up and knotted to keep its secrets contained—or rather, as Amano does, to simply sit in a room and paint her, paint every Eve, observing and appreciating and capturing her specificity.

It took King Shahriyar a thousand and one nights of listening and restraining himself and observing Shahrazad to see her as a person he could love, and not simply someone who would repeat his previous wife's transgression (Eve betraying Adam).

Perhaps Amano's portraits, his nighttime dreams—Shahrazad tells King Shahriyar stories only at night; Genji's trysts end at dawn—commit to a similarly commendable quest, viewing each woman, whether in a state of longing or dreaming, jealousy or sadness or pain, as uniquely particular and beautiful. In *Genji*, people are born, grow old, and die. They are mourned, and time keeps going, with the roles the dead left behind filled by others, who will themselves one day die and be replaced. It is a story about *repetition* and *transience*. Genji's first love, his stepmother

Fujitsubo, ages, then joins a convent—becoming Her Cloistered Eminence—and, as time passes, herself passes. Elaborate mourning rituals are observed. It was because she reminded the Emperor, Genji's father, of Genji's mother, the Kiritsubo Consort, that he was drawn to her; and it was because the young Murasaki reminded Genji of his stepmother that Genji was drawn to her. Genji's son Yugiri takes after his father: Similarly handsome and charming, he continues his father's legacy of courting ladies with poetry and nighttime letters.

Near the end of the novel, as Genji approaches the age of fifty, and Murasaki her late thirties, the hero's gaze falls upon a new young princess, Onna San no Miya. She is beginning to come of age, as Murasaki was when Genji first met her, and he plucks her from her father's care and houses her in the imperial palace, in the coveted west wing where Murasaki is living. Murasaki wants to join a convent, but Genji refuses to let her. He moves her out of the west wing to be replaced by his new princess. Murasaki then falls gravely ill, and Genji begins to spend more and more time with her, taking his eye off Onna San no Miya.

As a seventeen-year-old, Genji slept with Fujitsubo and impregnated her. Their son, Reizei, became the Heir Apparent to the throne, since everyone believed that he was the Emperor's child. Yet Genji, secretly, was the true father of the future emperor.

Now this story repeats itself: While Genji is off tending to Murasaki, young Onna San no Miya is aggressively courted by a young man, Kashiwagi, who is overcome by desire and, despite Onna San no Miya's objections, steals her away and impregnates her. Once Kashiwagi realizes what he's done, he dies from shame. After giving birth to her son, Kaoru, Onna San no Miya becomes a nun against Genji's wishes.

Genji, like Adam in the Garden, is enraged. And yet the chain of cosmic repetition is broken. Murasaki, now in her early forties, falls victim to her illness—is “gravely afflicted by a spirit”—and dies. Genji is devastated: “Waking or sleeping, Genji's tears never dried, and he spent his days and nights swathed in fog.”³

It is only then—like King Shahriyar on the one thousand and first night, when he finally *sees* Shahrazad—that Genji understands his actions, how special Murasaki was to him, and how hurtful his transgressions must have been to her.

Remembering from the depths of his present detachment how affairs he never thought would last, some amusing and others genuinely painful, had sometimes put [Murasaki] in a temper, he wondered why he had been so unkind, and he felt his heart burst with sorrow and regret at ever having upset her. In her wisdom she had seen through him perfectly well, but even so,

she had never turned against him, although she worried each time about what might become of her. . . . She had betrayed no hint of her feelings even when Her Cloistered Eminence [Fujitsubo] first came, although he gathered sadly at certain moments how much she was hurt.⁴

Distraught by these revelations, Genji resolves to leave the world forever. He undergoes one final year of festivals, rituals, and annual celebrations. Knowing these will be his last, the events take on a heightened, shining quality. When his time is near, he begins preparations for his departure, bestowing a gift upon every member of his household.

His final step is to go over all of his letters from his many lovers—the portraits of longing, of hopes and hurts. However, when he comes upon Murasaki's letters, particularly those from when he was exiled to Suma as a young man, he's overwhelmed by them.

One always feels a pang upon recognizing the handwriting of someone who has died, even someone of less moment than she, and Genji's sight therefore naturally went dark. Blinding tears might have streamed down to flow away with the brushstrokes on the page, were it not that he recoiled in shame from betraying his weakness to women. He pushed the letters away.

“Swept on by longing to follow her now she has crossed the Mountain of Death,

*I looked on the signs she left, and still I strayed
from the path.”⁵*

The ladies-in-waiting observe Genji, catching glimpses of the letters.

The words describing the depths of [Murasaki’s] despair over their separation . . . called forth sorrow sharper than it had ever been, and tears, too, in a stream not to be stemmed. . . .

*“I shall have no joy from gathering sea-tangle
traces of her brush:*

*let them rise above the clouds as she also rose,
in smoke.”⁶*

At his command, Murasaki’s letters are burned. Shortly thereafter, he dies.

It took me almost a month to read *Genji*. I still find myself mystified by the simplicity of the story: that it is about the longings and exploits of a promiscuous man who nonetheless appreciates and remains loyal to each of his lovers. Once he begins a courtship, he sticks with the woman to the end. I was at times appalled by the foreign moral codes, yet unable to write the story off as archaic or irrelevant to the present day, especially since it was written by a woman. Moreover, I felt some latent traditionalism in me, some rigid inclination toward strict monogamy, some resistance to the laxness of modern codes of courtship and promiscuity, willingly crumbling in light

of Genji’s openness and acceptance of a wide range of unique and particular loves.

It’s true, we come from dust and return to the heavens in plumes of smoke, fall back to the earth as ash, and so perhaps my initial theory still stands: Art is about death, and pain, and sorrow, and the cruelties we inflict upon each other, and spend so much of our lives avoiding looking at. And in the world’s first novel, Genji’s confrontation with his own transgressions against the one he loves the most proves too much to bear, and so he burns all her letters—her “signs” recording her longings, sorrows, hopes.

And yet, what a miracle that this document, this imaginative story of a life lived through myriad loves and seasons and losses, remains with us still, for how could Murasaki the author not be related to Murasaki the heroine? It was immediately after her husband’s death in 1001 that she embarked on this vast, loving project—a quest, as I see it, to forgive her shining Genji, for all his faults, his transgressions, his many loves.

And who’s to say it wasn’t precisely Genji’s appreciation for every woman he loved, in all their different forms, that led him to that most difficult moment of genuine self-reflection, the prerequisite for coming into consciousness of self?

When he first brings Onna San no Miya into the west wing, having only glimpsed her from afar, he’s surprised to discover that, though “charmingly

girlish”—she’s only a teenager—“at her tender age she had hardly a thought in her head.”

It was all very disappointing, but he looked on her kindly enough. She would meekly do whatever he asked, and in the way of an answer she would simply blurt out whatever came into her head. No, he could not abandon her. As a young man I would have felt betrayed, he reflected, but wider experience has made me more tolerant; women can be this or that, I know. . . . There are simply all kinds.⁷

Archaic and adolescent as some of this may seem, not to mention totally taboo, I contend that we are all still Eve trying to find herself outside of Adam’s purview, and we are all Adam reckoning with his anger at her betrayal—still King Shahriyar reckoning with his jealous rage at seeing his wife with another man, clever Shahrazad telling him stories, night after night, to get it into his thick skull that not every virgin he decrees to die is one and the same.

In Amano’s *Genji*, in his *1001 Nights* and his *Venus* series, we see an artist imagining, with specificity and sensitivity and nuance, the range of ways beauty and longing and loss can appear. To do so, to discover this, to tell a new story night after night, requires patience, a keen eye, a light touch. For Venus comes in many forms—it is an ongoing, slippery, and collaborative act between the painter and the painted—and, after all, “women can be this or that. . . . There are simply all kinds.”



1. R. H. P. Mason and J. G. Caiger, *A History of Japan*, rev. ed. (Tuttle Publishing, 1997), 71.
2. Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Royall Tyler (Penguin Books, 2001), 15.
3. Murasaki, *Tale of Genji*, 762.
4. Murasaki, *Tale of Genji*, 767–68.
5. Murasaki, *Tale of Genji*, 777.
6. Murasaki, *Tale of Genji*, 777–78.
7. Murasaki, *Tale of Genji*, 596.

Sean Thor Conroe (香村 翔宇) is a Japanese American writer. His fiction has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *n+1*, and *Playboy*, among other publications. He is the author of two novels, *The Walk Book* (2026) and *Fuccboi* (2022).

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