



# Fujiwara Narimichi playing the flute

Hanabusa Itchō

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**Not on display**

**Title/Description:** Fujiwara Narimichi playing the flute

**Artist/Maker:** Hanabusa Itchō (Artist)

**Born:** 1720 c.

**Object Type:** Scroll painting

**Materials:** Fibre, Ink, Paper, Silk, Watercolour

**Measurements:** h. 1993 x w. 616 x d. 27 mm

**Accession Number:** 856

**Historic Period:** Edo period (AD 1600-1868)

**Production Place:** Asia, East Asia, Japan

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Mounted as a hanging scroll, Hanabusa Itchō's (1652-1724) painting on silk presents the elegant figure of a cultured nobleman attired in a ceremonial black gown with red lining (J. *sokutai*) and a courtier's cap (J. *kanmuri*). The work is signed *Hokusō Itchōkinsho*, which translates as 'Respectfully transcribed by Itchō, Sage at the Northern Window' (□□□□□□), and sealed *San'unsen* meaning Mountain - Cloud - Spring (□□□). [1] The scroll has a companion storage box, which contains a paper of authentication written by the artist's great-grandson, Hanabusa Ikkei □□□ (1749-1844). [2]

The courtier pictured in the painting is identified on the outer lid of the box as 'Dainagon Narimichi' (□□□□□). [3] Fujiwara Narimichi (1097-1162), a senior figure at the Heian court, was promoted to the position of Chief Councillor of State in 1159. A multi-talented courtier, Narimichi composed poetry, played instruments, and sang popular ballads (J. *imayō*). [4] His *waka* poems have also been preserved in the anthologies: 'Collection of Golden Leaves' (J. *Kinyō wakashū* □□□□□, 1124-26) and 'Collection of a Thousand Years' (J. *Senzai wakashū* □□□□□, 1187). [5]

Using fine brushstrokes, Itchō has depicted Narimichi in court dress, seated cross-legged playing a traverse flute, with an open fan positioned on the ground before him. In the painting, the fan is an upward-pointing, triangular form with golden decoration painted on its leaf. The flatness of the fan makes the viewer conscious of the absence of pictorial recession or foreshortening in this work.

Although Itchō trained under Kanō Yasunobu (1614-1685), the style and antique subject matter of this particular work is closer to the Japanese nativist Yamato-e tradition. During the Edo period

(1600-1868), the espousal of aristocratic taste was seen as a subtle defiance of the Neo-Confucian, Tokugawa military government. [6]

The formality of Narimichi's dress and deportment suggests that the courtier is performing to an audience. Much of the scroll has been intentionally left blank, and Narimichi is pictured alone, seated within an unembellished, vacant space. Although it was not uncommon to portray figures without the heaviness of background detail, in this instance, the sparse composition serves to emphasise the musician's mood of concentration.

As a *haikai* poet and singer and composer of ballads, Itchō may have self-identified with Fujiwara no Narimichi's artistic talents. [7] The younger son of a samurai family of the Fujiwara clan, Hanabusa Itchō chose to acknowledge this ancestry by taking the artistic name 'Fuji Nobuka' early in his career. [8] At different points in their lives both Narimichi and Itchō took the tonsure and publicly renounced their official duties. [9]

Itchō made an income through artistic commissions and worked as an entertainer and go-between (*J. taikomochi*) in Edo's Yoshiwara pleasure district. [10] He was banished to the remote island of Miyake for eleven years (1698-1709) by the Tokugawa government as punishment for committing an offence against public morality and breaking the 'Laws of Compassion'. [11] The details of the scandal have remained a mystery; however, this clash with the government secured Itchō's reputation as an artist-rebel and political dissident.

The painting in the Centre's collection was produced after Itchō received an official pardon and was permitted to return to Edo. [12] Together with the artists Iwasa Matabei (1578-1650) and Hishikawa Moronobu (1618-1694), Hanabusa Itchō is credited as a founder of the 'Floating World' mode of visual expression. [13]

Vanessa Tothill, October 2020

[1] Lawrence Smith and Yutaka Mino in Stephen Hooper, ed., *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Catalogue*, vol. 3. (New Haven, Connecticut; Norwich: Yale University Press in association with University of East Anglia, 1997) p. 171; illu., p. 171

[2] Hooper, p. 171.

[3] Hooper, p. 171.

[4] <https://japanese-wiki-corpus.github.io/person/FUJIWARA%20no%20Narimichi.html> [Accessed 3 October 2020]

[5] <https://japanese-wiki-corpus.github.io/person/FUJIWARA%20no%20Narimichi.html> [Accessed 3 October 2020]

[6] Hooper, p. 171.

[7] Miriam Wattles, *The Life and Afterlives of Hanabusa Itcho, Artist-Rebel of Edo* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013), pp. 143-46

[8] Wattles, p. 14; 23.

[9] Wattles, p. 39.

[10] Wattles, p. 20; 30.

[11] Wattles, p. 55.

[12] Wattles, pp. 93-8.

[13] Wattles, p. 147.

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## Further Reading

Hooper, Stephen, ed., Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection: Catalogue, 3 vols (New Haven, Connecticut; Norwich: Yale University Press in association with University of East Anglia, 1997)

Wattles, Miriam, The Life and Afterlives of Hanabusa Itcho, Artist-Rebel of Edo (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013)

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