

Japanese Symbolic Animals and Plants and their Meaning



Tokonoma-kazari of Mr. Ôguchi Kennichi with Matsu, the couple Jo and Uba as Okimono and scroll painting with the sign for dream "Yume". Mr. Ôguchi has written exclusively the kanji "Yume" for a long period of time. Normally, horizontal images are not used in the tokonoma, but Mr. Ôguchi is allowed to do so because he is highly respected as an art expert and artist.

In this and the next issue I would like to give some information about the meaning of symbols that play a role in Japanese art, culture and everyday life. I hope that this information will help the reader to make the right composition when presenting bonsai or suiseki

Plants, Grasses and Trees

In most civilizations, flowers play an important role in customs, rites, and ceremonies. Some flowers also have clear symbolic meaning, such as the red rose, which in our country clearly represents love. In the everyday life of the Japanese, however, plants, or rather flowers in their meaning and symbolism, play a far more important role than anywhere else in the world. In Japan, flowers are not primarily used for special occasions, but are an integral part of daily and seasonal life.

Every traditional Japanese home, whether elaborately built or poor, has a tokonoma in which objects of the family treasure or a suitable flower arrangement are displayed. Flowers are directly related to almost every daily act of Japanese life. The symbolic attributes of flowers are so complex that formal rules have been established to clearly regulate their use and application. Ikebana, the art of flowers, is known to be a highly respected art form and the Ikebana masters enjoy an extraordinary reputation.

The rules are sometimes so restrictive that even the number of flowers used are prescribed, the combinations of flowers and leaves, and the combination of colors. All these factors are related to the different symbolism of individual flowers. The beauty of the various flowers, grasses and trees is so highly valued in Japan that people travel to the locations of the various plants in the different seasons to see them in the wild in the most beautiful bloom.

From this point of view, it is the logical consequence that the great appreciation of the plants with the symbolic values embedded in strict rules also find their expression in art. To better understand it is inevitable to know the relationships and symbols of the various things and the associated seasons, which can be interpreted as a floral calendar.

Floral calendar

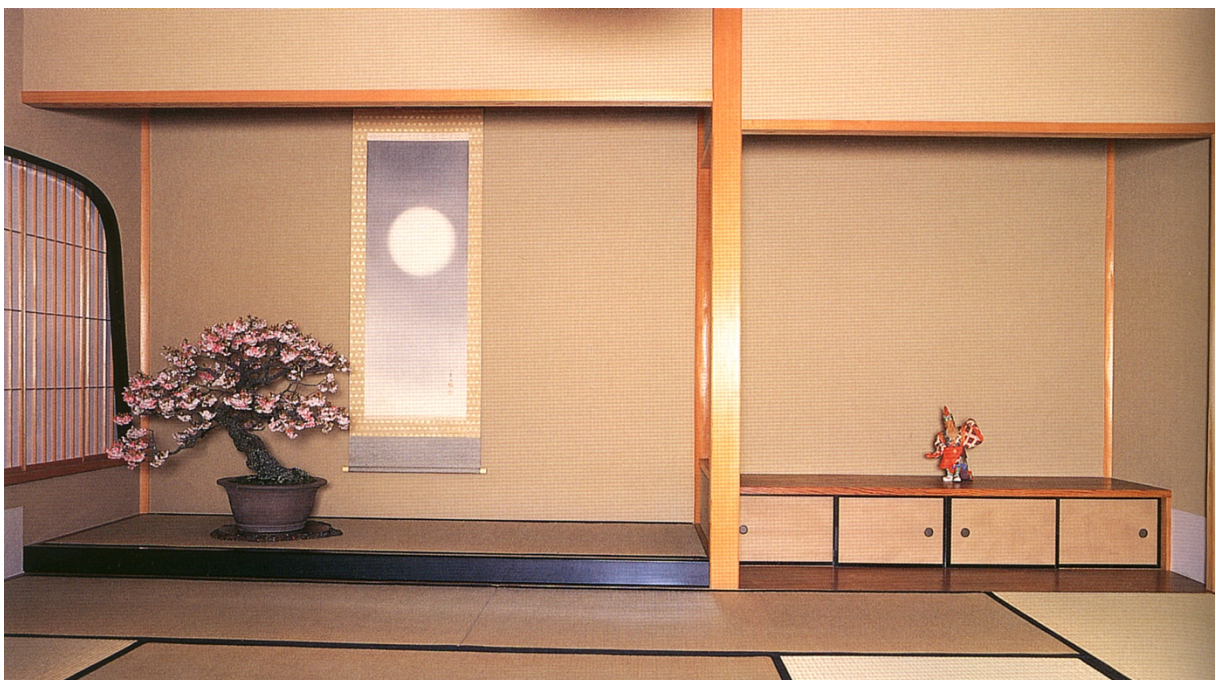
Month	Flower, plant	Meaning
January	Pine "matsu"	Long life
February	Plum "ume"	Spring
March	Peach "momo"	Long life
April	Cherry "sakura"	Loyalty (national flower)
May	Iris "shobu"	Victory
June	Peony "botan"	Youth, Spring
	Wisteria "fuji"	
July	Winds "asagao"	Affection, emotion
August	Lotus "basu"	Purity
September	Seven autumn grasses	Balance, Change, Mystery
	Lespedeza "hagi"	
	Arrowroot "kuzu"	
	Pampas grass "susuki"	
	Wild carnation "nadeshiko"	
	Maidenflower "ominaeshi"	
	Chinese bellflower "kikyo"	
October	Chrysanthemum "kiku"	Long life (imperial emblem)
November	Maple "momiji"	Autumn, changing affection
December	Daffodil "suisen"	Devotion

Bamboo "take"

There is probably no plant that has been depicted more frequently in art and handicrafts than the bamboo. Bamboo is one of the tree grasses and from over 400 different bamboo varieties about 100 are of Japanese origin. In Japan, about 1400 objects are known to be made of bamboo and used in everyday life. From the bamboo shoot "takenoko" in the kitchen to the artistically designed tea whisk.



The roots of bamboo rest in the ground and only the culms grow out of the ground in various sizes and colors. It is a fast-growing plant, an evergreen and practically indestructible. Bamboo is a symbol of well-being, constancy and long life. In this context often depicted with cranes. When depicted in winter landscape with sparrows sitting among the snowy stalks symbolizes friendship. Bamboo depicted in dense groups represents family loyalty. In art, bamboo is depicted in many forms in all seasons. Sometimes bent under the weight of snow or heavy rains, or gently swaying in the wind or growing straight up into the sky. The ability of the bamboo to bend without breaking symbolizes the ability to suffer, the strength of the straight stalk strong will and character. There are many legends about bamboo. One of the most famous is the legend of the "Seven Heroes in the Bamboo Grove".



Tokonoma-kazari with plant in pink and white flower and scroll image with full moon (Ichi-U-Kai Kazari)

Camellia "Tsubaki"

This is one of the few plants with negative connotation. The fading camellia, unlike all other flowers, drops all its petals at once, as an entire flower. In feudal Japan, the camellia symbolized the prescribed suicide seppuku or hara-kiri. The sight of the camellia was a daily reminder to the samurai of the consequences of failure. Understandably, camellias were never planted in samurai gardens. They are also very rarely depicted in Japanese art.



Carnation "nadeshiko"

One of the seven autumn grasses that grow wild. In the famous epic "The Tales of Prince Genji", Genji gives his lady love a bouquet of pink "beni" colored wild carnations. The flower in the color pink "beni" symbolizes eternal affection and love.

Cherry blossom "sakura"

This lovely - only found in Japan flower is considered the national flower of Japan and the queen of flowers and blossoms. The cherry blossom is depicted in many forms in art and often served as an emblem in family crests of ruling families. The cherry blossom has a short life and is compared to the life of the samurai, who had to be ready at any time to give his life for his master. The extraordinary beauty of the cherry, which was rather the blossom than the fruit, has always inspired artists to create everlasting works. Thousands of poems were inspired by the beauty of the cherry blossom, which appears every year in April and which millions of Japanese still go to nature to admire.



Chrysanthemum “kiku”

The Chrysanthemum is probably the most commonly portrayed flower in art, depicted in realistic form or as a symbol. Although the Chrysanthemum blooms most beautifully in October and November, the Chrysanthemum is one of the few flowers that blooms throughout the year. Therefore, it is also allowed to display the Chrysanthemum in all seasons.

The 16-petaled flower is the official emblem of the Japanese Emperor. The 16 petals symbolize the rays of the sun, which the ancestors of the Japanese worshipped as part of their faith (Shinto). The Chrysanthemum symbolizes peace and majesty.

The fact that it blooms all year round and its beautiful flower never drops its petals emphasizes the aspects of longevity and endurance. Often in art you can find the depiction of Chrysanthemum by a river. This depiction refers to a Chinese legend that says that a member of the court was banished to the mountains where he drank chrysanthemum sake and lived to be 1000 years old. In Japan, many hundreds of different varieties of chrysanthemum are cultivated.



Fern “shida”

The fern appears as a symbol in connection with the New Year. The branch with leaves growing out regularly grows directly from the center of the root and therefore symbolizes health and many offspring.

Fungus “kinoko or reishi”

This is an interesting variety of fauna that appears with great frequency in Japanese art. It is usually represented in the form of the head of a “rejuicer”. The fungus, because of its durability, symbolizes long life and is often represented with symbols of the same character



Hengaku or plaque for an Omote Senke tea room, of reishi fungus in a fan-like form carved with the gilt lacquered characters Utsuki-ken or hall of rain and stone. Edo Period, 19th century. Associated with the fungus of immortality, reishi represents long life.

Bottle gourd “hyotan”

Several variations of gourds are cultivated in Japan. The type most often depicted in art is the “hyotan”, whose graceful form had inspired artists of all directions. Many legends are connected with the pumpkin. Besides being an ideal container for sake, the dried gourd is extremely durable, which makes it a symbol of long life and health. In early times, the gourd was worn as an amulet against failure. Hideyoshi used the symbol of the gourd on his war banner.



Iris “shobu”

The iris, an easy-to-cultivate flower not only symbolizes the month of May but is also the main symbol of the Boys' Festival held in May. The long, flat blade-shaped petals are

reminiscent of the sword. Therefore, the iris symbolizes various disciplines and strength and victory. Also, the straight upright petals are compared to the upright character and posture of the samurai. The iris also stands for good health and renewed vitality. The shape of the iris is also interpreted as a phallic symbol.



Lotus “hasu”

The lotus is a form of water lily that grows in shallow ponds and pools. The lotus is a very commonly depicted and important flower and is primarily understood as a Buddhist religious symbol. Buddha is always depicted sitting on an eight-petaled lotus flower, as well as many other Buddhist deities and saints. The round shape of the lotus and the leaves representing the wheels of a chariot symbolize the Buddhist philosophy of perpetual existence as a wheel that is always turning, without beginning or end. The main symbolism, however, is purity and refers to the beautiful, pure flower standing in a marshy pond, unaffected by the dirty environment, just like the human being who grows out of a dirty environment and whose soul is able to remain pure.



Maple “Momiji”

The fantastic color variations found in maple foliage have inspired many an artist. Symbolically, maple foliage characterizes the changing sensibilities of man. Sending a maple branch to a person says something about the loss of affection towards him and a growing sense of indifference. The deer is often depicted with maple. Both symbolize the middle of autumn, a moment when the two appear most dominant. A white stag instead of a spotted stag signifies wishes for a long life.



Bindweed “asago”

The bindweed is a very popular plant in Japan. As a climbing plant, it symbolizes affection. Because it grows very quickly and decays rapidly after a short life, the bindweed is not a flower that one would give on a happy occasion. Often the bindweed is depicted with the

bamboo to show the two contrasting characters of the plants, the strength and longevity of the bamboo contrasting with the characteristics of the bindweed. Sometimes the bindweed is depicted growing around a kettle. This refers to a famous poem by Chiyo that tells how she prefers to ask for water from her neighbor than to remove the bindweed from the kettle. In fact, the bindweed was a favorite subject of poets and many poems were written about it.

Orange “tachibana or daidai”

The orange is a rather rarely represented plant and then always in conjunction with other objects or subjects. For example, a bitter orange, not meant for eating, is often depicted in conjunction with objects for the New Year. The variant of the fruit called “daidai” is interpreted as a good omen, as the name is synonymous with "generation upon generation. The tangerine is one of the "takaramono" of the list of precious things. The orange symbolizes sweetness. When it is represented with a cuckoo, it symbolizes "pleasant memories.



Paulownia “kiri”

The wood of the Paulownia has always been used by craftsmen and artisans to make sculptures, containers, cabinets and more. The flowers of the kiri were the sign (mon) for the empress. The most cherished phoenix loves to rest on the branches of the kiri



Peach "momo"

Based on the Chinese legend that tells about peach trees whose fruits bear the elixir of eternal life, the peach and its blossom are considered a symbol of long life. Peach blossoms also appear dominantly as part of the girls' festival.



Peony "botan"

The peony is usually depicted together with the "shishi" lion dog. They are both depicted as the "king of beasts and king of flowers. Furthermore, the pine symbolizes power and wealth. A crimson "beni" blossom represents great wealth, prosperity, dignity and power.



Pine Tree “matsu”

Many different species of pine trees grow in large quantities on the Japanese islands and this in large forests. The evergreen pine can live up to 1000 years, and legends say that when it reaches this age, it turns into amber. It is often depicted in Japanese art and is considered a symbol of longevity and stability. Some of the pine species have needles that grow together in pairs. It is said that if one of the needles gets loose and falls to the ground, the other one will soon follow it. Thus, the pine tree became a symbol of strong affection and loyalty. A legend tells of Jo and Uba, an old man and his wife, whose spirit is said to dwell in pine trees. The couple lived a long life in extraordinary harmony and when they died shortly after each other at the end of a long life, the gods allowed them to return to earth on full moon nights and collect pine needles on the beach, as they had done all their lives. The story is often depicted in Japanese art. The couple is always shown together with a rake and broom, wiping away evil. Often the two are also depicted in union with other symbols of the Long Life, with crane and turtle.



These pines were considered a good omen and were often planted in samurai gardens where they were omens of strength, longevity and character. The pointed needles are also said to keep evil away and an old wounded pine tree is considered to represent old age. The pine tree is often depicted together with other symbols of Long Life, with bamboo, crane, turtle and plum blossoms. The trio of pine, bamboo and plum is called "sho-chiku-bai" and this very popular combination symbolizes lasting happiness.

Plum “ume”

Possibly no other single flower is more prized for its beauty than the plum blossom. The beautiful plum was introduced early from China to Japan where it was considered the national flower. Plum is one of Japan's favorite trees and had long inspired artists and poets. The artistic representation of the plum blossom is very similar with the cherry blossom. The petals of the cherry blossom have a slight notch in the center whereas the plum blossom is fully rounded. The plum is the first flowering plant of the year and is often depicted together with the nightingale, symbolizing the approaching spring and happiness. The white flower with its fragile petals symbolizes pure femininity, with an alter twisted tree trunk representing the strength, durability and vitality of old age.



Cleyera japonica «sakaki”

The sakaki is a sacred tree directly related to Shintoism and the sun god Amaterasu. In the Kojiki there is a story that tells how the Sun Goddess hid in a cave to express her displeasure because of the misdeeds of her brother. To move her out of the cave, to bring the light back to earth, a “sakagi” tree was planted at the entrance of the cave and the gifts of the united gods were hung on it including "gobei" the sacred jewel and the mirror. This representation is often found in Japanese art. The sakaki is very similar to the camellia, is evergreen and can grow up to 12 meters high. The leaves are small and narrow and in spring it bears small clusters of yellow flowers.



Willow “yanagi”

The elegantly bending branches of the willow are very often depicted in art. It is considered a lucky tree because it grows quickly and its branches are supple. The willow is usually depicted in its natural environment, by rivers or in marshlands. It symbolizes thoughtfulness, flexibility and patience. Because of its slenderness and agility, the willow is considered a female tree. A willow depicted with sparrows symbolizes submissiveness, serenity, friendship and kindness.



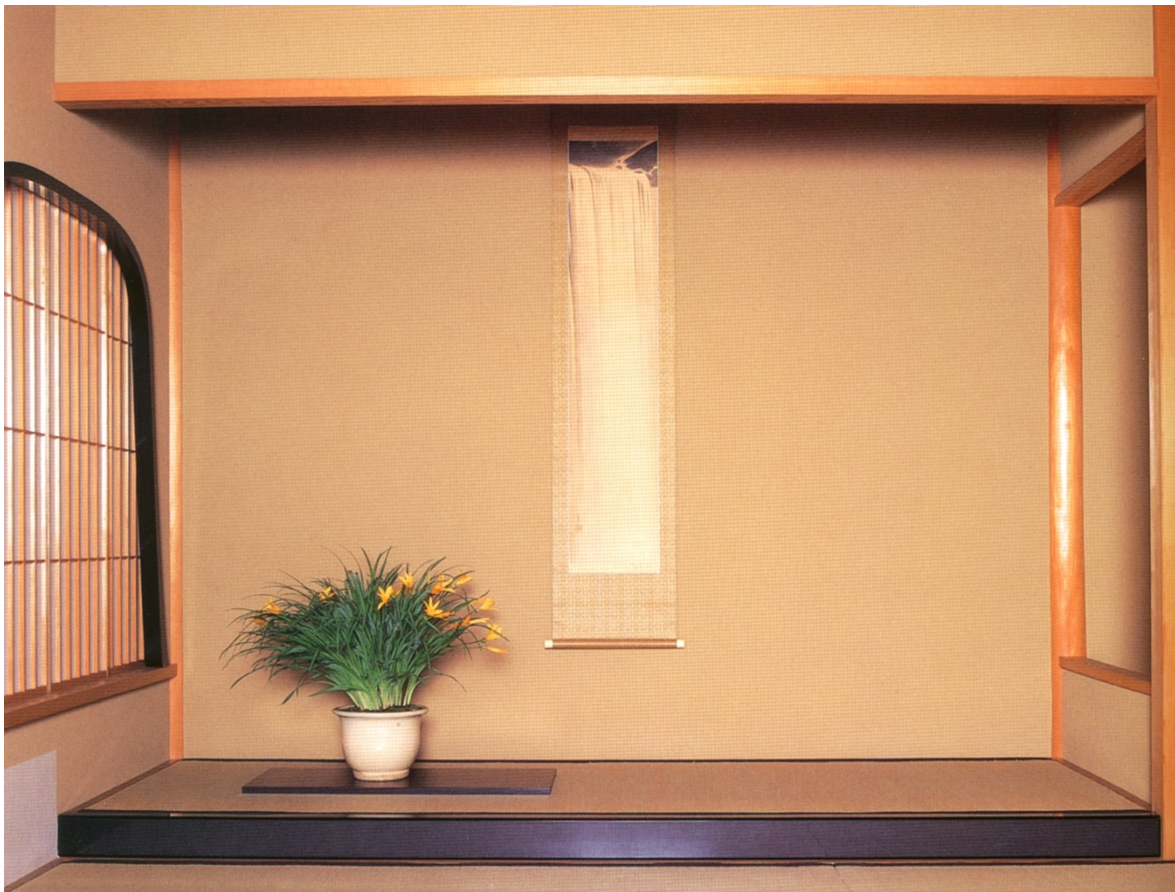
Wisteria “fuji”

This vigorously growing vine-like plant that blooms in spring is considered a symbol of femininity, youth and spring. Its beautiful white or lavender flower clusters have often been depicted in art but are also often found as emblems in family crests. Lovers attach poems to the flower clusters and return later to see how beautifully the flower body unfolds. From this, one infers how the couple's married life will develop. The first emperor of Japan was named Fujiwara (Fuji = wistria, wara = swamp). A later descendant of the Fujiwara left the court life and founded under the name Mitsui (Mi = three, tsui = well) in Osaka a trading company which still belongs to the largest company conglomerates, including the Mitsui Co-operation, Mitsui Bank, Mitsubishi Motors, etc.



Water Lily «sui ren»

Most people will agree on something: water lilies are simply beautiful and special! They are beautiful because of the shape of the flower, its petals, and even their lily pads. And they are special because they can grow in dirty soil or mud. Continue reading and discover the many meanings that are associated with water lilies: There are many types of water lilies and they all prefer to live in ponds, lakes, and or aquariums, and they have been the subject of many works of art throughout the world. Buddhist think water lilies and lotus represent enlightenment. They also think these flowers have many different meanings that all depend on the color of the flower. For example, red lilies are a representation of passion and love, white Lilies connote peace and purity, and purple Lilies represent power. However, the water lily they respect the most is the pink lily, as it represents knowledge.



Tokonoma-kazari with water lily and scroll painting with waterfall (Ichi-U-Kai Kazari)

Insects

In Japan there is a large number of insects that find their representation in Japanese art. So it is not surprising to find ants or other insects on a chrysanthemum flower or that they appear everywhere as ornaments.

In our country insects are not very popular whereas the Japanese are fascinated by insects. A popular pastime was and still is to catch fireflies or crickets and collect them. The captured insects are then kept in small cages and admired for their beauty and enchanting "songs". Furthermore, some insects are symbolic, such as the moth or the cicada, which go through two complete stages of development, from caterpillar to butterfly. They symbolize rebirth and the perpetual cycle of life and the world as understood in Taoism and Buddhism.

However, many insects are depicted in Japanese art only because of their special shape or color.

Then there is another large group of insects called the "singing insects" or the "music making insects". Among others, the cricket "korogi", the cicada "semi" the grasshopper "kirigirisu", the grass lark "kusahibari", the pine beetle "matsumushi", the bell insect "sutsumushi" and many other variations of beetles "kabutomushi" found in various representations. (kabuto is the word for the samurai's helmet, which often resembles beetles, especially the head of the stag beetle).

On the whole, however, insects are appreciated more for their appearance and the different variations of sounds, which in turn are seen in harmony with nature and the seasons. Thus, the cicada is considered the loudest insect heard on a hot summer day, whereas the grasshopper rises to full volume in late autumn and appears as the dominant insect. And among all the "singers of the night", crickets and beetles are most highly appreciated....

Below, in alphabetical order, you will find some of the most important insects described.

Ant "ari"

The ant - frequently depicted and in all variations - stands as a symbol of industriousness and industry. Mostly ants are depicted in inlay work on lacquer objects or metal objects.



Bee "mitsu bachi"

Like the ant, the bee symbolizes diligence, industriousness and represents industry. Often depicted in painting or as a figure on objects such as netsuke or inro. A swarm of bee flying behind a horse symbolizes prosperity.



Butterfly "choho"

Its natural beauty, delicacy and colourfulness makes the butterfly one of the favorites of the Japanese artist. The butterfly symbolizes summer and is also for three other symbolic connections:

1. Two large butterflies, one male "o-cho" and the other female "me-cho" play an important ritual role in the wedding ceremony. They symbolize the wish for a harmonious, happy and long married life.
2. According to the legend, the butterfly - especially the white butterfly - embodies the soul of a living or a dead person. If a white butterfly flies into the house, it means that someone you know is dying or has died and the soul has become a butterfly. But it can also mean that a friend will arrive.
3. the characteristics of the butterfly are compared to those of a young girl: both fragile, delicate, capricious, gullible and lighthearted in nature. In the past, girls were said to be similar to the butterfly that flies from flower to flower to gather nectar from lover to lover. This is symbolized by the colourful dresses of young girls and hair arrangements resembling butterfly wings.



Dragonfly "tombo"

There is an infinite variety of different types of dragonflies in Japan, often given funny names. These appear dominantly in the summer months. Thus, the dragonfly stands for this specific season. According to a legend, the first emperor of Japan "Jimmu Tenno" once climbed a high mountain and looked down at the island in front of him. He saw in it the shape of a dragonfly cleaning its tail with its head and thus gave the island the name dragonfly island "Akitsu-shima". Akitsu was the ancient name for dragonfly. Thus, the dragonfly has played an emblematic role in Japan since ancient times. Although the dragonfly seems fragile and delicate, it is a powerful fighter that symbolizes victory and courage. The dragonfly can be found in almost all arts. Objects depicting dragonflies were often worn by warriors, amulets by boys.



Firefly "hotaru"

This small, very popular insect is associated with summer and many stories and myths surround the firefly. It is exceptionally appreciated by the Japanese and people even take picnic trips in the warm summer night to look at the flying and glowing insects. They are also often captured and kept in small cages. Many stories tell of poor students who have no money for candles and who study the books in the light of a swarm of fireflies.



Praying mantis "kamakiri or toro"

A strong and powerful insect whose hunting abilities and fighting techniques make it a symbol of courage. Its elegant figure and swinging antennae have inspired so many artists.

**Spider "kumo"**

The spider has always been associated with good and evil, diligence and supernatural craft. The Japanese artist has always been fascinated by the spider, especially by its extraordinary industriousness but also for pictorial reasons of woven spider web, which was often used ornamentally.



The birds

The beauty of nature was often enhanced with depictions of birds. Artists of all directions accepted the challenge to depict birds in all shapes and colors, and especially to show the softness of their plumage.

Symbols associated with birds are ubiquitous in Japanese art and anchored in Japanese everyday life.

Rooster "tori or niwatori"

The rooster takes an important role in Japanese art because of its connection to the sun. In the "kojiki" it is mentioned that a rooster was brought to the cave where the sun god was hiding and was made to crow there to make the sun god in the cave think that the sun had risen without him. Thereupon the sun god left the cave and reappeared. It is believed that the rooster with its cry pays homage to the rising sun, respectively to the sun god. It is also believed that the cock's cry frightens away the evil spirits that had appeared during the night. Thus, the rooster stands as a protector from evil.

The rooster also symbolizes the Yang "yô", the male principle of Chinese and Japanese culture. The rooster fights against his enemies without fear and with great courage. It has a proud posture, strong feet and beautiful plumage, and mainly represents beauty and a

fighting spirit. Few things symbolize beauty and courage as clearly as a fighting rooster. Many artists have depicted the rooster in a variety of ways.

Often one sees the rooster depicted standing on a drum. This means peace and contentment. An old legend tells that emperor Kotoku in the Century before the palace walls a drum set up, which could be beaten if someone had a request and wanted to be heard. It happened that the emperor ruled with such kindness and wisdom that the drum was never used and ended up as a chicken nest overgrown with plants. Another version of the legend says that the drum was a war drum, with which the warriors were summoned to fight. For the same reason, since no wars took place, during the reign of Emperor Kotoku, the drum served only sometimes just as a resting place for chickens.



Cormorant "u"

The cormorant is valued in Japan for its ability to be extremely nimble in hunting fish. Even today you can see trained cormorants at the service of fishermen. An adult cormorant reaches just the size of a small duck. It catches up to 150 fish in an hour. The cormorant symbolizes devotion and unceasing commitment to its master.



Crane "tsuru"

The crane is one of the most famous and important symbols of longevity and eternal life. It is said that it can live for 1000 years. Because of its graceful form and natural beauty, the crane is highly suitable to be depicted in Japanese art. It is usually depicted together with other symbols of the same meaning, such as the turtle, the pine tree or the "sennin". The crane alone symbolizes a good future and luck, with the turtle luck and long life. A crane flying in front of the sun means long life, the sun eternal life - considering the relationship with the sun god from which the Japanese descend. A flock of cranes means many good wishes. Often the crane is depicted together with the pine tree, symbolizing a prosperous and good life. When the bamboo is added, it symbolizes continuity and constancy. No wedding decoration would be complete without at least one representation of a crane. Furthermore, the crane is monogamous and will stay with its female in any case if, for whatever reason, she would not be able to continue flying with the flock. The crane also stays with its young until they can fend for themselves. Thus, the crane is also a symbol and role model for young girls.

The crane is also an attribute of "Fukurokuju", the god of long life. The crane's powers have always been so highly valued that in early times laws were passed forbidding anyone to harm the crane. Also, the crane is represented in the association of the other symbols of long life and immortality in connection with the sacred island mountain "Horai".



Crow "karasu"

Both crow and raven are called karasu. As in other countries, the raven is associated with evil, equipped supernatural powers, messenger of the gods. The karasu is often associated with fire. It is said that the karasu is the only bird that can fly up to the sun and that its feathers are black because they were singed by the sun's rays. The karasu is therefore often depicted in connection with the sun. The black raven is often depicted together with the white heron. These symbolized "in" and "yo", good and evil, day and night. Its shimmering color and striking form is often depicted in lacquer art, usually as a black portrait over a gold lacquer background. Sitting on a plum tree, he also symbolizes autumn. Also, karasu symbolizes parental love. It is said that crows, after fledging, provide food for their parents to repay their love and care when they are young.



Cuckoo "hototogisu"

The small bird is usually depicted flying in the rain. This symbolizes the coming of spring or is supposed to remind the farmer that the time has come to plant the rice. It is also depicted flying in front of a crescent moon. It is said that the cuckoo sings only when the moon fades and dawn breaks. The representation of the crescent moon also recalls a legend that in 1153, just before sunrise, the hero Yorimasa killed the monster that was slowly destroying the health of Emperor Konoe. The cuckoo is rarely seen because it flies too fast. You can only hear it in the rain.



Dove "hato"

The dove symbolizes parental love. It is said that a dove sits at least three branches below that of its parents when they landed in the same tree. A wooden dove on wheels pulled by children on a string was at one time a popular children's toy. It is often depicted in Japanese art. The dove is also considered a messenger of Hachiman, the god of war. The Minamoto clan has the dove as a symbol on their war standard



Eagle "washi"

The eagle is rather unknown in Japan and played almost no role in art. There is also no clear symbol attributed to it.



Hawk "taka"

The word taka sounds exactly the same as the word for "heroic. In fact, the falcon symbolizes strength, courage and heroism. It is very often depicted in Japanese art. Falconry came to Japan from Korea around 350 and enjoyed great popularity. The falcon was popular because of its intelligence, sharp vision, the speed of its flight and the precision of its hunting method. The falcon symbolizes victory but also generosity. A legend describes how a falcon was trapped in winter with its claws frozen. He caught a small bird and held it to his frozen talons until they thawed. In gratitude, he let the bird fly unmolested and promised not to fly in the direction the small bird was fleeing for 24 hours.



Heron "sagi"

The heron is common in Japan. Like all white birds and animals, the heron symbolizes long life and is considered a sacred animal. It is often depicted still in a pond with lotus, where it is seen in connection with divine purity. There is a NOH game called sagi. It tells about the meeting of the emperor Go Daigo with the sagi.



Sparrow «suzume»

The old Japanese fable “Shita-Kiri Suzume” (“Tongue-Cut Sparrow”) tells the story of an old man who found an injured sparrow crying for help in the woods. The old man brought the injured sparrow home and sheltered it, but his wife was upset that he wasted food on the bird. While the old man was away, his wife removed the sparrow’s tongue and released it back into the wild—ensuring it would never cross paths with her husband again. When the old man learned of this, he took off into the forest to find his friend.

A flock of sparrows reunited the old man with the bird. The old man was gifted with a small basket of treasures. Seeing the treasure, the wife took off into the woods, wanting a larger basket of her own. Unfortunately, the basket she was given was full of deadly snakes and beasts, leading to her demise. In this story, the sparrow symbolizes the purity of friendship and that it can overcome greed and jealousy.



Mandarin Duck “oshidori”

This duck is a favorite object of many artists, especially lacquer artists, because its beautiful, colorful plumage can be excellently depicted, but also because of its symbolism of honesty, love and affection. It is precisely because of their symbolism that Mandarin Ducks are always depicted in art as a couple. Thus, marriage gifts are often given with mandarin ducks as

decorations. Mandarin duck couples stay together for life, and when one of them dies, the other will stop eating and die shortly after as well. These ducks are perceived as peaceful, elegant and friendly. There is a legend that Buddha once reincarnated as a mandarin duck to teach people the extraordinary character traits of ducks in a later life. Wild ducks are known as kamo and are also popular subjects of artists. They are said to have the same character traits.



Nightingale “uguisu”

This small bird is highly prized in Japan, but more for its beautiful song and romantic suggestion than for its visual beauty. As in Western culture, the nightingale is associated with poetry and romance. The nightingale is often depicted together with a plum branch, which in turn is the favored tree of Japanese poets. The nightingale is known for being the first bird to welcome spring, singing. The nightingale is also considered a religious bird, since its song is reminiscent of the intonation of a Buddhist sutra. It is also called the talking bird.



Owl “fukuro”

Since the owl lives at night, it is associated with the mystical and evil.

Since it can see in the dark, it is said to have wisdom and the ability to predict the future.

However, the owl represents ingratitude to its parents. It is also said that it sometimes eats its parents. In art, the owl appears rather rarely, precisely because of its reputation for being associated with evil.



Peacock “kujaku”

One of the few animals that has no symbolism in Japan. The peacock is not a Japanese animal and was only introduced to Japan in the 17th century. From time to time, one sees the peacock depicted as the mount of the goddess Benten and probably more often in the same function as Kujaku Myo-o, the mother of Buddha. It is said that the peacock also kills snakes, and therefore it is often depicted together with snake. On the whole, however, the peacock is depicted in art solely for its extraordinary plumage and colors.



Pheasant “kiji or kigisu”

One of the most beautiful birds of all, especially popular with lacquer artists, for whom the depiction of its unusual plumage is a real challenge. Often the pheasant is depicted with the cherry blossom exclusively to show that the beauty of one compliments the beauty of the other. The pheasant is also associated with Shintoism and is often used as a messenger of the Sun God. In the pheasant is seen good omen, parental love and sacrifice. Pheasants are known to take great risks when protecting their young.



Dove “hato”

The pigeon is not often seen in Japanese art. The pigeon is one of the few birds that care for their elderly parents, and is therefore associated with parental love and protection. There are many temples throughout Japan that hold dovecotes to exhort visitation, honor old age, and care for the elderly.



Plover “Chidori”

These small birds, which always live in large flocks, have always been popular subjects for poets and artists. The birds were first mentioned in the Kojiki. Usually, they appear in the depiction amidst rough waves of the ocean. Therefore, they are associated with the ability to maintain balance and overview even in turbulent times. They have always been positive symbols for the samurai, as the plover, although comfortable in a flock, is always independently active and ready.



Quail “uzura”

The quail used to be kept as a fighting cock, and therefore it represents fighting spirit. Because of its rather squat appearance, it is also associated with the association of poverty. Quail is often depicted amidst long stalks of grass or grain. This image simply represents autumn.



Sparrow “suzume”

This small bird, a species different from those living in the West, is often depicted in art. A flock of sparrows is a symbol of friendliness, friendship and prosperity. Furthermore, the call of the sparrow sounds like the Japanese be loyal. That is why the sparrow stands for loyalty. It is also understood as a very attentive bird. The sparrow is represented in all seasons. Together with chrysanthemum it symbolizes autumn, together with bamboo and snow it symbolizes winter, together with bamboo and plum blossom it symbolizes spring and together with peony it symbolizes summer.

There is a well-known legend in Japan *shitakiri suzume* or the sparrow with the slit tongue in which he lives as a pet with a farmer and his evil, stingy wife. One day, the farmer is working in the field and his wife is washing, the sparrow pecks at the detergent. The wife punishes him by splitting his tongue, and he flies away. When the farmer comes home in the evening, he finds out what his wife has done and goes out to look for his beloved pet. When he found it, the sparrow invited him to his home. When the farmer was about to leave, the sparrow showed him two chests, one small and one large, and asks him to choose one. The farmer takes the small one and goes home with it. When he opened it, she saw that it was full of gold and jewels. His wife scolded him for being a fool and set out to find the sparrow. She too was invited to his home, and as she left was asked to choose between two chests. She, of course, chose the larger one and carried it home. There she opened it and out came ghosts and demons punishing themselves for the sparrow's injuries.



Swallow “tsubame”

Interestingly, the symbolisms attributed to the swallow refer to two extremes. When the swallow is depicted together with the willow, the meaning of gallantry and chivalry emerges. But if it is represented alone, it is emblematic of an unreliable assistant, always looking for new challenges and quick to fly away. However, she is also said to be an excellent mother and so she also symbolizes parental love. A white swallow means an extremely good and lucky omen.



Swan "hakucho"

The swan is not found too often in art, but is associated with transformation, prophecy and enchantment. These are ancient symbolic associations.

Wild Goose "gan"

Their beautiful plumage and graceful form makes the wild goose a popular subject in art. Wild geese always fly in pairs, and therefore symbolize happy marriage. Flying depicted in V formation in front of the full moon means autumn. When rice is ripe in autumn, wild geese arrive. This is an extremely good omen. Their strong and fast flight movements are associated with the male element Yang. Geese always fly in a straight line in formation, unless they are irritated by something on the ground. There is a story about two warriors, Yoshiie and Kiyowara Takenori, who were able to determine the position of the enemy because a flock of flying geese broke formation as they flew over the enemy's hiding place.



Animals

Japanese culture is surrounded by a variety of animals that find their representation in art. Most commonly depicted are the Twelve Animals of the Zodiac, which hold significantly different symbolism than just that of the zodiac. Animals that were not native to Japan or were introduced late to Japan are also heavily laden with symbolism.

Badger “tanuki”

The badger is said to have supernatural powers, and is believed to be able to change shape. It can transform itself into both human and animal forms and thus get up to all sorts of mischief. The folk legends describe the badger in two different typologies. One of them shows him with a dog-like face, bushy tail and a huge belly that resembles a drum tanuki no hara tsuzumi or the badger's drum belly. Thus, when the badger beats its drum, a strange sound is produced that causes the immortals to go out of their way to see where this sound comes from. In the second form, he appears with a more fox-like face and an oversized scrotum, which he wraps around himself like a kimono and plays his tricks in. In general, however, the badger is not given any symbolic meaning. In art, however, he is very often depicted for his graphic variety of forms and the countless legends.



Bat “komori”

The bat symbolizes good luck. This symbol is found much earlier in China, where the bat represents good luck and prosperity. Five bats symbolize the five idols of Confucius: long life, wealth, offspring, virtue and easy death. It is common to see the five bats on gift boxes to add value to the gift. If the bat is depicted with coins, it symbolizes good luck and great prosperity; if it is depicted together with clouds, it symbolizes long life and happiness as far as the sky is high. Besides the symbolic meanings, the bat has an interesting shape and elegant wings that have inspired artists since time immemorial.



Bear “kuma”

The bear is considered powerful and wise, and its appearance is generally understood as a good omen. It is also said to be able to recognize a good person. The most famous legend about the bear is that of Hachisuke and Kintaro. The bear is also an important and sacred animal of the indigenous people of Japan, the Ainu. It was believed that when one ate bear meat, its wisdom and power passed into one. Otherwise, the bear is not often seen in Japanese art.



Wild boar “inoshishi or I”

The wild boar is part of the zodiac and generally a subject much appreciated by artists. Not only in art, but also in countless legends and stories, the wild sow can be found. It is so highly prized that at one time it was even depicted on the 10 yen banknote. It was also believed that the meat of the wild boar was good for baldness and epilepsy. It was also believed that the wild sow would kill and eat any snake and be immune to its poison. However, what is most appreciated about it is the strength and fearlessness with which it attacks and defends itself, always going straight at its opponent without dodging or hinting. Therefore, it stands for consistency and continuity, and was an important symbol especially for the samurai, but was also considered an excellent hunting prey.



Cat “neko”

The domestic cat was brought to Japan from China. Early cat species were short-tailed, and cats with long tails were long considered symbols of evil. In legends, cats with one or more long tails are often found to embody evil; the more tails the depictions bore, the more evil, they were understood to be. It was believed that the cat could take human form and then cast a spell on people. Probably the most famous legend is the Nabshima no neko. Neko in Japanese means rat killer and it was believed that just a picture of a cat could free a house from rats. The cat is the only animal that is not found in such pictures, on which the dying Buddha is depicted. It is said that the cat was probably too busy catching rats and therefore did not find time to come to Buddha's deathbed.



Pictures of cats were very appreciated by merchants. They were hung in the store, but also in front of the store, to encourage passers-by to enter the store. It was believed that cats guaranteed prosperity not only by keeping rats away, but also because they attracted customers. Cats also adorned talismans for children to protect them from accidents and illness. Cat figurines made of tortoise shell were very appreciated by sailors, as they could keep away fire, rats and all the existing sea spirits. In general, the cat in art symbolizes magical, supernatural and not only pleasant elements.

Deer “shika”

Most of the symbols embodied by the deer were taken from Chinese culture. In Chinese, the deer is called lu, which sounds like the word for good luck. In Japan, the deer or stag represents good luck and long life. A Buddhist legend says that Gautama Buddha reincarnated eleven times as a deer and his first teachings he spread in this form. This small graceful animal is said to have a very long life. In art, the deer is usually depicted in its natural environment. In summer its fur has small white spots, while in winter it has different brown tones. It is said that its fur turns gray at the age of 1000 years. In the following 500 years, when it eats nothing but sacred mushrooms, its antlers turn black. At this point it has attained immortality and from then on lives with the other immortals on Mount Horai. The deer and maple pictured together represents autumn. The deer is also a frequently seen companion of gods and figures of Japanese legends. Most often together with Fukurokuju and Jurojin, the two gods of household and happiness.



Dog “inu”

In Japanese folklore, there are two types of dog gods “inugami” that represent both evil and good. Dog demons exist, symbolizing evil and witchcraft. However, much more often the good form, which is helpful and friendly. In general, the dog protects from the witchcraft of the cat, the pranks of the badger and the fox, that they cannot develop their supernatural powers in the presence of the dog with his honest character. Furthermore, the dog protects its master from evil spirits, fire, attack and disease. Its power is so great that even an amulet with a dog on it can replace the dog.



Most often you can find the dog depicted in connection with children. A common toy was a papier mache dog or the inu-bako a box in the shape of a dog. At certain times it was the custom to take children in the night and write the ideogram for dog on their forehead with red ink, which was supposed to save it from illness and other evils. It is known how easily a bitch throws her puppies and therefore an amulet with a dog on it was hung on the bed of a heavily pregnant woman, which was supposed to favor an easy birth.



By and large, the dog is understood as a good omen and is part of the zodiac. The most popular legend about the dog is the “Hakkenden” saga of the eight dogs.

Dragon «ryû»

Dragons are among the most familiar and powerful symbols in Japan. Conveying the form of the mythical beast, this *Articulated Dragon* combines elements from several creatures: a snake’s body, a fish’s scales, and an eagle’s talons. This sculpture is the oldest surviving inscribed jizai—a jointed object made from hammered metal plates that allow the limbs and claws to move and the body to bend from neck to tail. Makers of jizai were artisans who had supplied arms and armor to the warrior class. During the peaceful Edo period (1603–1868), they applied their skills to producing decorative arts like this sculpture. Dragons were worshipped as water gods that could bring rain, prevent floods, and control the change of seasons.



When dragons emerged from their watery abyss to rise into the heavens (on the vernal equinox), they brought spring; when they resided in heaven, it was summer; and when they descended (on the autumnal equinox) to lie dormant in the water, it became fall and winter. “Dragons bring the clouds,” according to an old Chinese proverb, while “tigers call forth the wind.” In these scrolls, the wind seems to swirl through a crouching tiger’s bamboo grove and into the clouds, revealing a dragon. The tiger turns its head as if sensing the turbulent weather to come. As the dragon and tiger govern the elemental forces of wind and rain, they were revered as rulers of the cosmos and the natural world. Their symbolic pairing was believed to bring about the blessings of rain and peace.

The flying dragon and prowling tiger also came to represent heaven and earth. The two creatures convey the ancient Chinese concept of yin and yang, whereby all things—male and female, calm and movement, shade and sunshine, moon and sun—are defined and complemented by their opposites. The dragon, representing yang, is placed on the right and the tiger, representing yin, on the left. In this way, the balance between wind and water may be secured and a peaceful world made possible.



Tiger “tora”

As the dragon and tiger govern the elemental forces of wind and rain, they were revered as rulers of the cosmos and the natural world. Their symbolic pairing was believed to bring about the blessings of rain and peace. The flying dragon and prowling tiger also came to represent heaven and earth.



Monkey “saru”

Maybe because they look so much like humans, monkeys appear in many Japanese folktales, playing roles that range from wicked villains and mighty heroes to creatures symbolizing long life. Long-armed monkeys gather in trees and form chains, swinging from great heights across chasms. Japanese lore credits monkeys with the ability to live a long life, possibly because the Japanese character for the word “monkey” also refers to fate or luck be a wish for long life or good fortune.



Rabbit “usagi”

In Japan, rabbits are seen as a positive symbol of good luck, and they are also connected to the Moon. According to Japanese tradition, rabbits live on the Moon, where they are busy all the time making mochi, a Japanese snack based on rice. The Japanese also tell a story that is strikingly similar to the Aztec tale of Quetzalcoatl. In the Japanese version, a deity comes down to Earth from the Moon and a rabbit offers himself as food. The deity doesn't eat the rabbit but instead takes him back to the Moon to live with him.



Carp «koi»

‘Koi’ means Carp in Japanese, and this fish is a symbol of perseverance due to the fish’s tendency to swim upstream and resist the flow of water. Koi Carp also symbolise faithfulness and marriage in Japan. A design of carp swimming against rapids symbolises the Children’s Day Festival on May 5th. Firstly, the koi signifies perseverance due to the fish’s tendency to swim upstream, never stop moving, and resist simply going with the flow. This symbolism represents how a person can remain strong in the face of adversity, never give up, and develop strength of character, purpose and ultimate success through perseverance. The koi is a common symbol of strength and steadfastness in the face of adversity and the much-admired trait of remaining strong when faced with poor odds. The imagery of koi swimming upriver is often used to symbolize overcoming obstacles and ultimate victory in the face of adversity.



Turtles «kame»

The Japanese word for turtle is kame, and the Japanese believe that the turtle is a symbol for wisdom, luck, protection, and longevity; longevity due to their long lifespan and slow movements. The turtle is magic and unites heaven and earth, with its shell representing heaven and its square underside representing earth.

