

# RISD MUSEUM

## *A Wealth of Symbolism: Bird-and-Flower Prints from the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Collection*, March 9, 2001-June 3, 2001

Japanese bird-and-flower prints and decorative objects share a common language to express auspicious wishes and to symbolize specific concepts and ideas. This vocabulary, which is derived from Chinese and Japanese mythological, literary, and popular religious sources, can be used in a variety of combinations to signal different nuances of meaning. For example, in the large vertical print of a *Falcon and Cherry Blossoms* by Hokusai (acc. no. 34.498) included in this exhibition, although there is a seasonal reference to spring through the flowering cherry, the impact of the image resides in the dominant scale of the falcon as a symbol of martial strength. In contrast, Hiroshige's print of the *Falcon on a Pine Tree with the Rising Sun* (acc. no. 34.277.2) subordinates the military aspect of the falcon to the New Year's theme of the auspicious dream.

The deeply rooted cultural associations of these motifs resonate with meaning, whether it be simple seasonal references or more complicated allusions to historical tradition and to Chinese and Japanese literature. This exhibition highlights four aspects of that symbolism: New Year's allusions, birds associated with the four seasons, the symbolic meanings of animals, and the auspicious connotations of flowers.

### CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Kitao Shigemasa, Japanese, 1739-1820  
Urokogataya Magobei, Japanese  
*Dragon and Tiger (Ryuko)*, 1770s  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1093

This potent image of dragon and tiger derives its impact from a number of carefully balanced references. The dragon, regarded as the protector of the cosmos and bringer of thunder, rain, and fertility, alludes to spring and to the east, whereas the tiger, which symbolizes courage and physical strength, is associated with the earth, autumn, and the west. As the most powerful animals in their respective celestial and terrestrial abodes, the two make a striking combination.



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Kitagawa Utamaro II, Japanese, 1804-1855

Kitagawa Utamaro, Japanese, 1754-1806

*Flower arrangement with red plum (Seika kobai)*, ca. 1810?

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.595

In Japan, although the plum flowers in early spring, it is distinctly associated with the New Year.



Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

*Flying Cranes (Hikaku)*, 1860s

Color woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.412

As symbols of long life, cranes are often included in the design of New Year's prints. These cranes are also associated with Minamoto no Yoritomo (1147-99), who in 1185 asserted the political power of the Minamoto clan by becoming *shogun* (military ruler) to the emperor. He made a practice of releasing white cranes with labels attached to their legs and asked that, when the cranes were found, he be informed and the cranes released to fly again.



Kawanabe Kyōsai, Japanese, 1831-1889

*Still life with weeping willow, plum and camellia (Seika shidareyanagi to ume to tsubaki)*, ca. 1880s

Polychrome woodblock print with embossing

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.427

These plants all flower in spring, and the plum and Japanese camellia are closely associated with the New Year's season because both blossom very early.



# RISD MUSEUM

Keisai Eisen, Japanese, 1790-1848

Soshuya Yohei

*Mount Fuji, falcon and eggplants (Ichi fuji ni taka san nasubi)*, 1830s

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.508

A dream of a falcon, eggplants, or Mt. Fuji on New Year's Eve is considered an auspicious omen for a happy year. This print combines all three in a single image. The monochromatic color scheme probably indicates that the print was made soon after the introduction of "Prussian blue" pigment into the palette of Japanese printmakers in the late 1820s. This ink did not fade as easily as the blues used previously. Its extensive use here may be related to its novelty.



Katsushika Hokusai, Japanese, 1760-1849

Moriya Jihei, Japanese

*Hawk and Cherry Blossoms (Kaido ni taka)*, From a set of five untitled prints of animals, ca. 1834

Color woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.498

The falcon, which symbolizes military prowess and strength, is depicted here tethered to a perch. The cherry, a member of the prunus family to which the plum also belongs, generally blooms slightly later in the spring, in April.



# RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Kunisada, Japanese, 1786-1865  
*Cuckoo and Moon (Tsuki ni hototogisu)*, 1828  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.311

This striking image of the cuckoo (*hototogisu*), whose call is associated in poetry with unrequited love, also makes a seasonal reference to summer.



Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858  
*Falcon, pine and rising sun (Hatsuhinode matsu ni taka)*, 1830s  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.277.2

This print combines a variety of New Year's associations: the pine tree is used for New Year's decorations, and the falcon and the rising sun evoke the theme of the first dream of the New Year. The Japanese believe that if you dream of Mt. Fuji, eggplants, or a falcon on New Year's Eve, you will be lucky in the coming year.



# RISD MUSEUM

Katsushika Hokusai, Japanese, 1760-1849

Moriya Jihei, Japanese

*Cranes on Snow-covered Pine Branch (Yukimatsu ni tsuru)*, late 1820s

Color woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.496

This wintry print is clearly a seasonal one. The presence of the cranes and pine, as symbols of longevity, bring greetings and good wishes for the New Year.



Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Surugaya Sakujiro, Japanese

*Autumn: Judo's Chrysanthemums in a deep ravine in China (Aki)*,

*Flowers of the four seasons with historical associations*, mid 1840s

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.332

The boy depicted in the cartouche is Judo, also known as Kikujido, who, according to Chinese legend, offended the Emperor Muwang and was exiled. The emperor first instructed Judo in a chant that would protect him and give him long life. The young man found his way to a valley where chrysanthemums grew prolifically and passed his time painting the chants on their petals; thus he is associated with longevity. The text below the title "Autumn" in the red cartouche describes the illustration as "the chrysanthemums of the Chinese Judo seated in a valley." In addition, the print makes a seasonal reference to autumn, the time when chrysanthemums bloom; it is titled accordingly.



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Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Maruya Seijiro

*Turtle [in stream]*, ca. 1840

Woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.380

This print, executed exclusively in blue, has an inscription that alludes to the tortoise's fabled longevity by comparing it to a Daoist immortal (*sennin*).



# RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Kawaguchiya Shozo, Japanese

*Mandarin Ducks and Reeds (Ashi ni oshidori)*, 1840s

Polychrome wood block print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.129

In both China and Japan, mandarin ducks are symbols of conjugal fidelity because they are believed to mate for life.



# RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Yoshimori, Japanese, 1830-1884  
*Cockerel, ivy and drum (Tsuta ni niwatori to taiko)*, 1860s  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.289

The cock symbolizes virility, male beauty, and the prediction of weather and the telling of time. Depicted with a drum, however, the bird alludes to a Chinese legend in which a drum once used to summon troops in wartime became a perch for birds during the reign of the legendary Chinese emperor Yao. The drum and bird therefore came to stand for a time of peace.



# RISD MUSEUM

Isoda Koryūsai, Japanese, active ca. 1764-1788  
*Pheasant, bird and peonies (Botan ni kinkei to kotori)*, 1770s  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.646

In China the golden pheasant symbolizes the attainment of high office. In combination with the peony, which alludes to wealth and distinction, this print clearly denotes worldly success.



# RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858  
*Peacock and Peonies (Botan ni kujaku)*, 1830s  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.279.1

The association of the peony with wealth and high position is clearly articulated by the Chinese philosopher and writer Zhou Dunyi (1017-73) in an essay on the lotus. In distinguishing the characteristics of the chrysanthemum, the peony, and the lotus, he describes the peony as “[someone] of wealth and high position.” It is this phrase from his text that is inscribed on the print.



Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858  
Aritaya Seiemon, Japanese, ca. 19th century  
*Butterfly and peonies (Botan ni cho)*, 1830s  
Polychrome woodblock print  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.345.1

This print is inscribed with the same text by Zhou Dunyi (1017-73) that appears on the image to the left.



# RISD MUSEUM

Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

*The everlasting chrysanthemum (Toshigiku), Parody of happiness, luck and longevity with collected flowers*, 1843-1847

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.305



This print is from a series that matches types of flowers with auspicious wishes for "happiness, official salary, and long life." The fan print to the right clarifies the association between chrysanthemums and auspicious wishes for longevity.

Utagawa Hiroshige, Japanese, 1797-1858

Kawaguchiya Shozo, Japanese

*Wild Geese and Moon (Tsuki ni gan)*, 1830s

Color woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.227.1



This print combines a depiction of the autumn moon with a striking image of migrating geese. The poem may be translated as follows: Will it come again—/another night like this one?/Wild geese and the moon. (translated by Alfred H. Marks)