

Nuance in Nature: Birds and Flowers in Japanese Textile Design,
February 16, 2007-July 8, 2007

Bird-and-flower imagery is part of a long and evolving design tradition in Japan. The Japanese reverence for the natural world has its roots in ancient Chinese belief systems that mixed with the animism of Japan's indigenous Shintō religion and the later influence of Buddhist practices from India and China. A vocabulary of literary and visual symbols based on observation of nature from an aesthetic standpoint came to the fore during the Heian period (794-1185). Birds and flowers became the most popular design motifs for cloth during the Muromachi (1338-1573) and Momoyama (1573-1603) periods and provided a rich and complex stock of motifs originating from Heian poetry and courtly traditions.

Since first becoming part of Japan's cultural awareness, these designs have been used to mark auspicious events, celebrate the turn of the seasons, indicate rank and nobility, and manifest beauty and refinement. They are fully understood by the entire society and bestow poetry and magic upon the textiles associated with ritual and folk practices and celebrations such as the turning of the lunar new year and weddings, as well as everyday dress.

Japanese textiles integrate both abstract and figurative elements, and the resulting designs are narrative in quality. Japanese art carries as clear a message and meaning as written language. Like *kanji*, the Chinese characters that are part of written Japanese language, the visual elements combined in a textile design communicate much more than the mere objects they mimic. This results in a remarkable ability to use complex ideas as the basis for compositions on textiles that are clear in meaning, strikingly rendered, and powerful.

The Japanese use of a character-based (*kanji*) language would seem to have influenced the art and design culture, enhancing the richness of meaning the Japanese extract from visual symbols on clothing and textiles.

Unlike in the West, there are no hierarchical distinctions among the arts in Japan. The artist who designs cloth was and is the equivalent in status of a master ceramist or painter.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Japanese; Edo
Sample book, 1700s
Silk, metallic-paper-wrapped thread; compound weave
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 02.025

This textile design is composed of rows of medallions or roundels featuring paulownia flower and dragon images. Dragons were associated with the East, one of the four quadrants of the universe,

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and were one of the four sacred creatures representing these realms. They also became associated with the imperial institution of Buddhism in Japan, mainly because of their vigilant character. On textiles, dragons are often teamed with flowers, such as the paulownia, another motif associated with the imperial family.

Japanese; Edo

Textile, 1700s

Silk, metal, paper; continuous supplementary weft patterning

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 04.1455

The combination of motifs woven into this fabric: cranes, dragons, flowering peonies, and paulownia, all connote imperial rank and suggests that this textile may have been produced for imperial consumption or gift offering.



Japanese; Meiji

Towel (tenugi), 1800s

Cotton; printed

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 05.031

Towels (*tenugi*) were often symbolic objects in themselves. They are hung in temples as decorative and symbolic cloths. The typical colors for temple cloths were blue, white, or copper. *Tenugi* are made of narrow widths of cotton, typically measuring 12 by 18 inches.

The combination of the crane and the subtly suggested pine tree points to the auspicious message of longevity and to the lunar new year, although it could also indicate a particular family whose crest included a pine motif.



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Japanese

Katagami (pattern paper), stencil, probably 1800s

Mulberry paper, persimmon tannin; knife cut

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 05.119

Bamboo possesses many virtues that may be referenced according to the other natural subjects with which it appears. Its resilient strength and flexibility made it a suitable material for fences, baskets, pipes, brooms, and much more. Its strength also represents constancy and honor. When it is depicted along with pine and plum, it becomes one of the "Three Friends of the Winter."



Stencils were utilized for a resist-dyeing technique known as *katazome*, wherein rice paste is applied to block specific areas from taking dye. This results in patterns with large voided areas and precise designs. The stencil concept was adapted by designers in France in the late 19th century and eventually became the prototype of the silkscreen technique.

Japanese; Edo

Textile fragment, probably 1700s

Silk, gold metallic-paper-wrapped thread; compound weave, continuous supplementary weft patterning

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 08.097

Hérons, shown standing in stylized water, were introduced into the Japanese design repertory during the Muromachi period (1338-1573), along with other birds that were at first considered novelties, such as cormorants, swallows, and sparrows.



The stylized linear composition of the water illustrates the traditional Japanese treatment of rivers and ponds, as well as the popular motif of a sandbar. Originally, water imagery was included to convey its power to refresh and enrich.

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Japanese; Edo

Textile fragment, 1700s

Silk; compound weave, continuous supplementary weft patterning

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 08.159.704

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Japanese

Kimono (katabira), early 1800s

Silk, hemp; plain weave, resist dyed, embroidered

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.061

The motifs depicted on this adult woman's kimono signify the plants or grasses of autumn. The large pine tree with bush clover and pinks; an insect cage or bird-scarer for noisemaking insects such as crickets; and a flock of sparrows are key motifs for an early autumn kimono. The sparrow is the subject of a popular Japanese folktale, "The Sparrow with the Cut Tongue." In the story, it exemplifies the virtue of repaying one's obligations. A common virtuous pairing in poetry is the sparrow and bamboo. In this kimono, sprigs of bamboo are embroidered just beneath the birds.



Bush clover is not seen on any other object in the exhibition. Like the cherry blossom, bush clover is a metaphor for the ephemeral nature of life and thus appropriate for the end of summer. Etiquette allowed one to wear summer-weight kimono even during the month of October, because it was not unusual for the weather to be extremely warm in some areas of Japan during autumn.

Japanese

Towel (tenugi), 1800s

Cotton; plain weave, printed

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.081

In Chinese cosmology, the crow lives in the sun. A crow shown flying toward the sun became a favorite in Japan. Crows are believed to be



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messengers and great protectors, and they also suggest filial devotion because it is said that young birds feed their mothers.

Japanese
Towel (tenugi), 1800s
Cotton; plain weave, printed
Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.087

Birds of prey such as falcons, hawks, and eagles (rendered here) became popular motifs during the early 1600s, as they possessed attributes favored by warriors.



Japanese; Edo
Cloth wrapper (fukusa), 1800s
Silk warp, cotton weft; discontinuous weft, tapestry weave
Gift of Miss Ellen D. Sharpe 16.257

The etiquette associated with a *fukusa* was that after unwrapping the gift it covered, the receiver of the gift would return the cloth to the giver.

A lotus flower, depicted here, is a symbol of purity and a relatively rare flower in Japanese art and crest designs; however, the pheasant was held in highest esteem by imperial tradition and remains today a symbol of spring. The pheasant was a subject in Japan's first poetry anthology, the *Man'yōshū* (compiled ca. 760).



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Japanese; Meiji

Fabric length; textile length, 1880-1910

Cotton, indigo; resist dye, stencil

Gift of Pamela Parmal 1987.098

This fragment is probably part of a futon mattress. The chrysanthemum motifs are symbolic of the Emperor and the Flower Festival of Happiness. The flower was so beloved that it was cultivated into 800 varieties and over 250 colors. The 16-petaled flower became the Imperial crest. Although early sumptuary laws forbade anyone other than the Imperial family from using the chrysanthemum image, by the Edo period (1603-1867) chrysanthemum imagery was widespread.



Japanese

Kosode Fragment, 1800s

Silk; yuzen dye

Gift of Mrs. Robert Fairbank and Mrs. Donald Crafts 1988.096.25

The plum tree blooms at the end of winter and heralds the coming of spring. It was a significant flower for the turning of the New Year.



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Japanese

Textile, 1900s

Silk, gold leaf; plain weave, block-print, gilding

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William Pine 1993.056

The combination of the pine bough, plum blossoms, and bamboo sprigs is identified as the Three Friends of Winter, a popular theme in Japanese art.



Japanese

Stencil, 1800s

Mulberry paper, silk, persimmon tannin; knife-cut paper-layering silk threads

Gift of Mrs. Henry D. Sharpe 21.433

The peony flowers during the months of May and June. It is one of the plants of the four seasons and is associated with summer. The peony was introduced into Japan from China in the 8th century and was esteemed not only for its beauty, but also for its medicinal qualities. It was first used as a decorative pattern before being adopted as a family crest. It is also associated with mature women and erotic love, as are climbing flowers, including the clematis.



Japanese; Meiji

Kimono (furisode), late 1800s-early 1900s

Silk; weft-float patterning, embroidery, couched embroidery

Gift of Francis A. Foster 24.004

Flying cranes together with the image of Mt. Fuji make this kimono appropriate for New Year's wear. The sacred crane is Japan's prevalent symbol of longevity, because in both Chinese and Japanese legend, the crane is believed to live for thousands of years. At the bottom of the kimono stands an egret among the golden reeds and water. An egret is a type of heron: these birds are a more recent subject in Japanese textile design.



Furisode is the term for a kimono with very long sleeves that is usually reserved for formal or ceremonial wear, such as for a wedding.

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Japanese; Edo

Kimono (furisode), ca. 1820

Silk, metallic-paper-wrapped thread; weft-float-patterned ground, resist-dyed (shibori), embroidery, couched embroidery

Gift of Dr. Horace Packard in memory of Mary Cooper Packard

25.136

New Year's imagery is found on this wedding kimono. The winter motifs of pine crests symbolize immortality and constancy, as the pine remains green even in snow, while the sacred crane expresses the wish for longevity.



Japanese

Nō theater costume (nuihaku), 1750-1800

Silk, gold leaf; plain weave, hand-painting, embroidery

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.470

Long-tailed birds, possibly pheasants, embroidered onto the gold-leaf diamond grid are often intended to communicate good luck.

A *nuihaku* is a Nō theatrical costume type that bears both embroidery and metallic-leaf stenciling as decoration. The short boxlike sleeves classify the robe as a *kosode* garment. This robe was once in the collection of the Ikeda family of Bishu, a noble family (*daimyo*) during the Edo period.



Japanese; Edo

Nō Theater Costume (Karaori), late 1700s-early 1800s

Silk, gold-leaf gilt paper; twill weave, continuous supplementary weft, discontinuous supplementary-weft patterning

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.474

One of the "four princes" in Japanese art, the chrysanthemum has many superstitions associated with it and was the subject of many sumptuary laws: only royal persons were allowed to wear its image. It is one of the most popular motifs for crests, and after a period of time its use was allowed beyond the imperial family. The chrysanthemum resembles the sun, and the depiction of the flower as sun is an ancient design motif. It is associated with long life and purity, and because of its beauty there was a tradition in Japan of holding chrysanthemum-viewing parties during autumn. Coupled with bamboo as it is here, it becomes a sign of endurance throughout the seasons. The *karaori* was reserved mainly for female roles, but



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could also be worn by sprites and as an underrobe for young courtier-warriors.

Japanese; Edo

Nō theater costume (kariginu), 1800-1850

Silk, gilt paper; lampas, plain and satin weave, gold leaf paper-wrapped wefts

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.494

The roundels here are crests (*mon*), graphic icons sometimes referred to as Japanese heraldry. In this application, they appear on a theatrical costume for the Nō theater rather than a particular family. A *kariginu* is an outer garment for roles of high status. It would be worn by a Nō actor portraying a minister or a god, and also a goblin character. Three motifs have been reduced to their essence, yet still fully communicate their original intent. Ginko, or maidenhair leaf, is a plant that is used extensively in shrines and temples; while the hawk feather represents one of the highest ranked birds, known for its warrior-like qualities; and finally the pine stands for longevity and endurance because it remains green throughout the year, even living triumphantly through the winter snow.



Japanese; Edo

Textile, 1800-1849

Cotton; resist dyed

Gift of William Ely 37.288

Grasses are often associated with autumn; however, with the addition of butterflies, this design may take on a more significant meaning. For example, the different design effects of the grasses may imply some are underwater while others are not, suggesting two different states of consciousness. Butterflies are viewed as possessing the souls of the living and the dead, in addition to symbolizing joy and longevity.



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Japanese; Meiji; Edo

Wrapping cloth (fukusa), ca. 1860

Silk, paint; plain weave, hand painting, embroidery

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.161

Repeated images of the sacred mountain Fuji; the first flowering tree of springtime, the plum blooming in the foreground; and a landscape of pine confirm that this wrapping cloth would have been used during a New Year's celebration.

Why does the mountain have such design and cultural prominence? Japan's major religions, Shintō and Buddhism both revere the mountain, a volcano, as representing the forces of creation. The legend of the Shintō deity of Fuji is of a beautiful goddess who brought forth her children through fire without pain and whose name signifies "radiant-blooming-as-the-flowers-of-the-trees, or causing-the-flowers-to-bloom-brightly. The grand peak of Fuji represents the form of the white bud of the Sacred Flower in Buddhism.



Japanese; Edo

Wrapping cloth (fukusa), ca. 1800

Silk; satin weave, embroidery, couched embroidery

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.173

The hawk/falcon (the two are not differentiated in Japanese art) became an important motif over two millennia ago in China, where falconry was a royal pastime. In Japan during the Heian period (794-1185), the nobility began enjoying the same activity. The sport grew more popular with the rise of the middle class during the Edo period (1603-1867). Eventually, birds of prey became emblems of the Japanese warrior class (samurai) because of the birds' keen eyesight and their predatory nature. This is an example of the metaphoric symbolism in which Japanese society as a whole was so thoroughly versed.



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Japanese; Meiji

Wrapping cloth (fukusa), ca. 1865

Silk, paint, metallic-paper-wrapped threads; satin weave, embroidery, couched embroidery

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.178

This design may be interpreted in several ways. It may be seen as utilizing a type of symbolism that is more like a pun than anything else, a type of metaphor whose subject bears a homophonic resemblance to another unrelated subject. For example, the rooster or cock embroidered on this cloth makes a sound in Japan that is understood as "kokka-koo." The sound of this cry is the same as the spoken words that mean "happiness to our land." Using this interpretation, although at first glance combat appears to be suggested, this scene may be one of peace and happiness rather than of strife.



Japanese

Child's kimono, 1900s

Silk, paint; embroidery

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.182

Mt. Fuji is Japan's most sacred mountain, and to dream of this mountain on New Year's Day, is believed to be an auspicious sign for the coming year. The focal point of the child's kimono combines the image of the mountain set at the head of Suruga Bay wherein sails a ship overflowing with the treasures of the Seven Gods of Good Fortune, escorted by the companions of the gods, which are represented as the flying cranes. The embroidered cranes are not only the chief symbol of longevity and good fortune, but historically they were understood to possess the ability to navigate between heaven and earth.



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Japanese

Court robe (furisode), 1800s

Silk; figured satin (rinzu), damask, resist dye (shibori), embroidery

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.290

This graphically high-contrast design of a flowering plum tree blooming behind a twig fence and bundles of twigs is the result of employing the shibori technique. Shibori is a resist-dyeing technique in which the fabric is tied, stitched, or bound to prevent dye from penetrating parts of the fabric design.



Japanese

Apparel fabric, early 1920s

Silk- and metallic paper-wrapped threads in a compound weave with continuous supplementary weft patterning

Gift of Miss Teiko Sasaki 54.157

Although the crane is one of the most prevalent and conspicuous symbols of traditional Japanese design, it is rendered here in the internationally recognized style of Art Moderne.



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Japanese
Apparel fabric, ca. 1945
Silk; printed
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Winthrop W. Aldrich 58.184.29

Both of these textile lengths were produced as 20th-century kimono fabric and represent the traditional auspicious symbols of spring. Clusters of peonies, called the “King of Flowers” by the Chinese, are a symbol of good fortune and erotic love. Chrysanthemums and cherry blossoms (the most beloved flower of the Japanese and a symbol of the ephemeral) are flowers that typically represent different seasons, indicating that by around mid-century, strict adherence to traditional seasonable representations in dress were relaxed.

The second textile features clusters of peonies and also lilies, which is a flower introduced very late into Japan, and not part of the ancient vocabulary of symbols.



Japanese
Apparel fabric, ca. 1945
Silk; printed
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Winthrop W. Aldrich 58.184.30

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Japanese

Bridal kimono (furusode), ca. 1945

Silk; resist dye, paint, embroidery

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Meyer Saklad 78.126

This robe represents a tour-de-force of auspicious marriage symbols. A myriad of symbols borrowed from Buddhist and earlier traditions are rendered within overlapping fan motifs. The fan itself is as symbol of authority, but also one of the precious treasures which are associated with the Seven Gods of Good Fortune. Rolls of fabric (shown hanging) are symbolic of luxury and splendor, and a favorite ceremonial gift choice. A creative mallet, believed to be filled with gold bringing good fortune is even more appropriate a motif as it incorporates the male and female principles of nature thereby leading to the creation of all things in the universe. Large-scale pawlownia flowers, long believed to be the flower favored by the phoenix, are prominently displayed along the borders of the robe, while images of pines and cranes serve as reminders of endurance and longevity. The crane is also a companion of two of the Seven Gods of Good Fortune.



Japanese; Edo

Kimono (unlined summer kosode), 1750/1850

Asa (likely ramie), metallic-wrapped yarn, silk, ink; plain weave, embroidery, stenciled imitation tie-dying (kata kanoko), freehand painted

Gift of Mrs. Barbara Deering Danielson 82.308.15

The combination of motifs and composition move beyond traditional nature scenes. Iris, wisteria, chrysanthemum, clematis, wave and cloud patterns, and crests containing the Chinese flower symbol are packed into this composition. The different flowers are clearly understood, and the combination of iris and wisteria in and of themselves marks this as a kimono for summer wear.

