

Entertaining Bird Prints

from the Japanese Floating World Era

Golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*)
by Kiyomasu Torii



Introduction

When Japanese military leaders established a new national government in the early 1600s they adopted the Confucian four-class system as the basis for social order. Rulers and government officials were the top class, followed in turn by farmers, craftsmen and merchants. Ironically, those at the bottom of this social hierarchy often had more disposable income than those immediately above and many townsmen (i.e., craftsmen, merchants) used it to pursue a life of pleasure. Art work favored by townsmen was given the name ukiyo-e which means pictures (e) of the floating (i.e., transient) world (ukiyo). Townsmen used the transience of life as an excuse for pursuing a life of sensory pleasure. Printed pictures of beautiful women, sex and theatre entertainers were the most popular but some bird prints were also produced as an inexpensive form of entertainment. These pictures of birds likely appealed to townsmen for four reasons. First, brightly colored birds were a source of sensory pleasure. Second, exotic birds were novel. Third, some native birds were symbolically associated with desirable human traits (e.g., longevity) or human feelings, including pleasure. Fourth, bird pictures were admired by the cultured ruling class and ownership of such pictures implied cultural sophistication.

This virtual exhibition includes prints of ten exotic (i.e., non-native) birds and ten native birds with symbolic associations that were published between the 1730s and 1840s to entertain Japanese townsmen. These examples were chosen from the Reader Collection of Japanese Art which includes about three hundred ukiyo-style bird prints. Ukiyo style is best described as idealistic rather than realistic. Birds are identifiable but their shapes and colors were exaggerated to enhance their visual appeal and entertaining behavior. The common and scientific names of the birds depicted in the twenty prints are given along with their citizenry (i.e., Japanese native or non-native). The non-native birds were imported to be sold as cage-birds or displayed in an aviary. For the native birds symbolically linked with human traits or emotions, these associations are listed. The names of the artists and picture sizes are also included.

Additional Reading

Jenkins, Donald. 1993. *The Floating World Revisited*. University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu.

1 **Domestic fowl** (*Gallus gallus*), imported from Asia, drawn by Hiroshige Utagawa, 175 x 370 mm



2 **Golden pheasant** (*Chrysolophus pictus*), imported from China, drawn by Hiroshige Utagawa, 135 x 385 mm



3 **Green peafowl** (*Pavo muticus*), imported from Asia, drawn by Shigenaga Nishimura, 160 x 340 mm



4 **Blue magpie** (*Urocissa erythrorhyncha*), imported from Asia, drawn by Hiroshige Utagawa, 175 x 395 mm



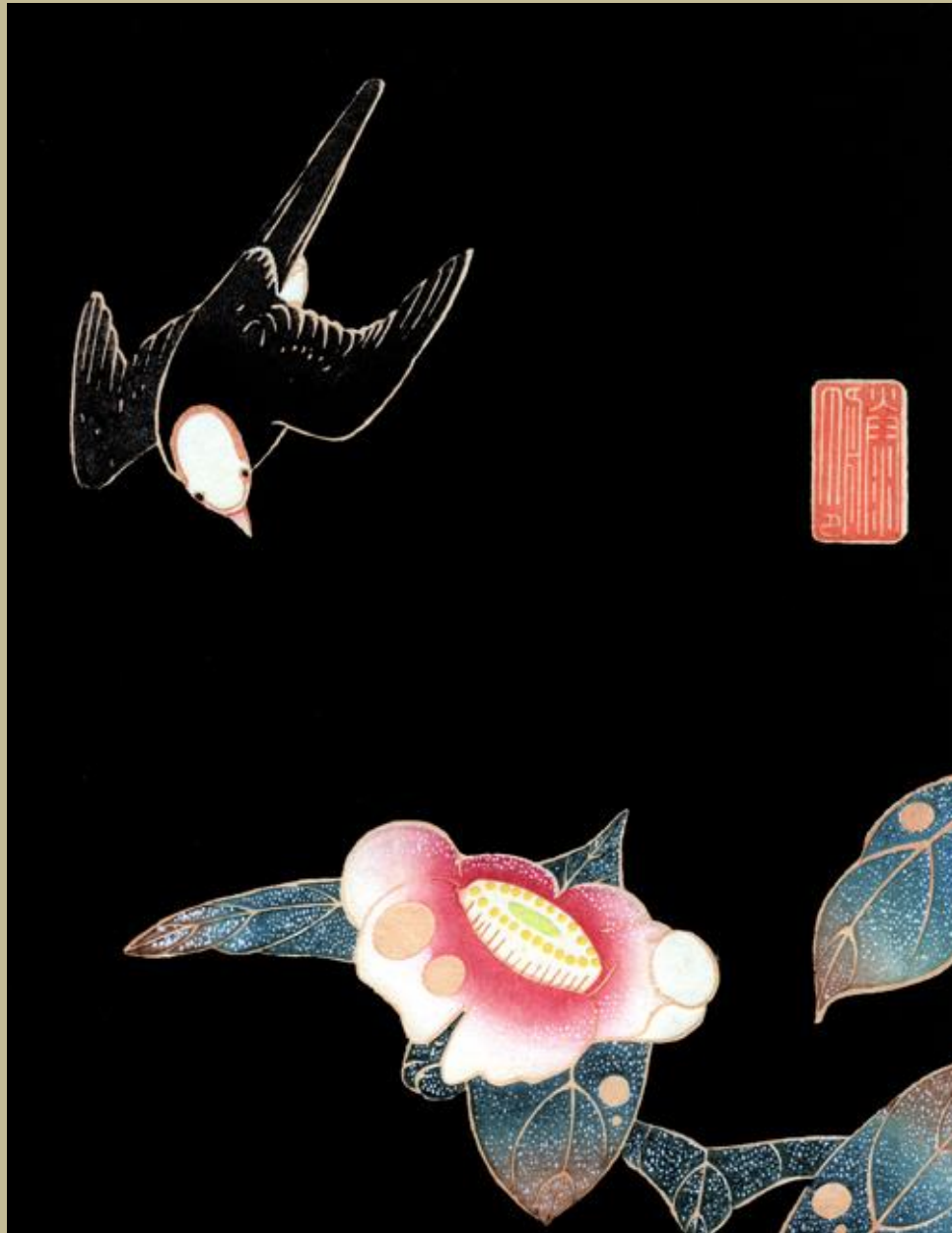
5 **Cockatoo** (*Cacatua* sp.), imported from Southeast Asia, drawn by Toyohiro Utagawa, 165 mm x 220mm



6 **Crimson rosella** (*Platycercus elegans*), imported from Australia, drawn by Hiroshige Utagawa, 195 x 405 mm



7 **Black bulbul** (*Hypsipetes leucocephalus*), imported from China, drawn by Jakuchū Itō, 205 x 230 mm



8 **Light-vented bulbul** (*Pycnonotus sinensis*), imported from Asia, drawn by Hiroshige Utagawa, 105 x 285 mm



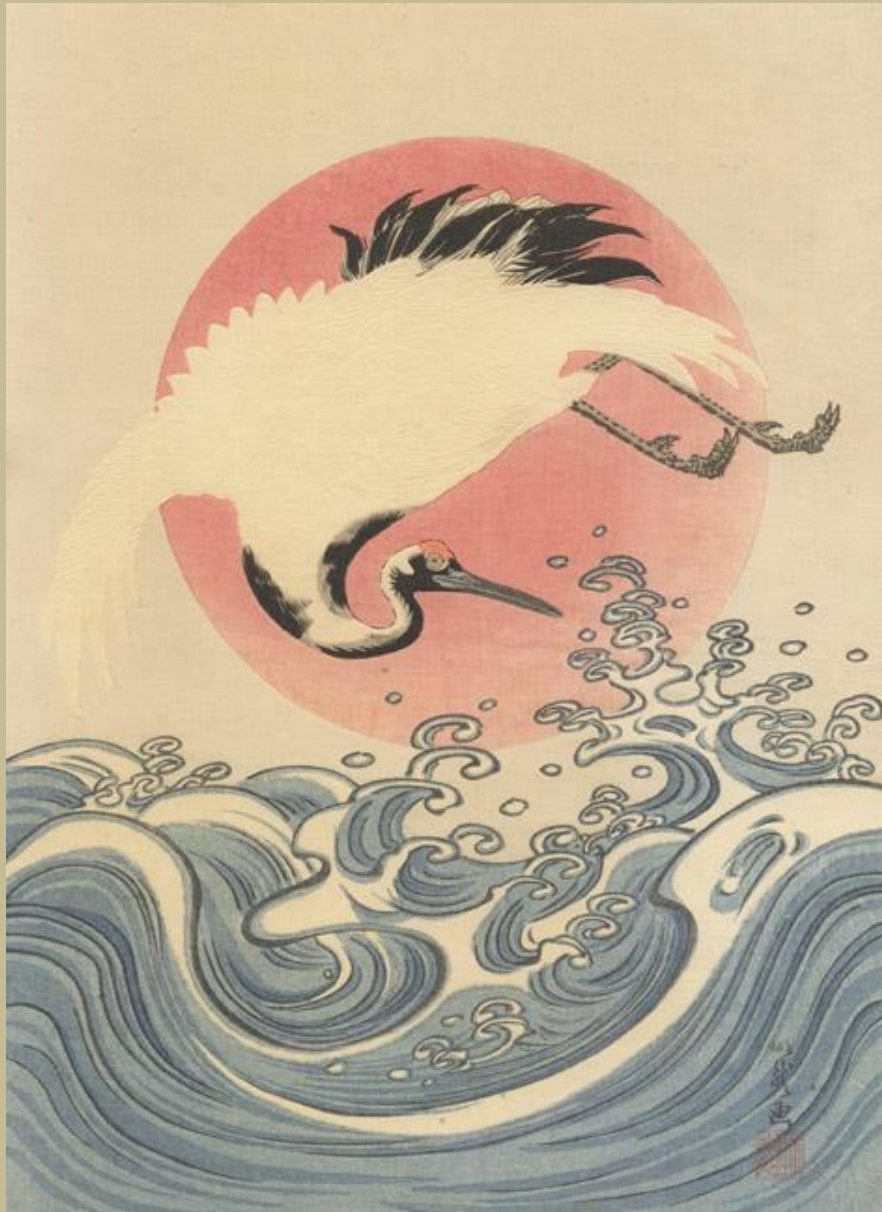
9 **Java sparrow** (*Padda oryzivora*), imported from Southeast Asia, drawn by Hokusai Katsushika, 270 x 405 mm



10 **Canary** (*Serinus canaria*), imported from Europe, drawn by Kunisada II Utagawa, 290 x 225 mm



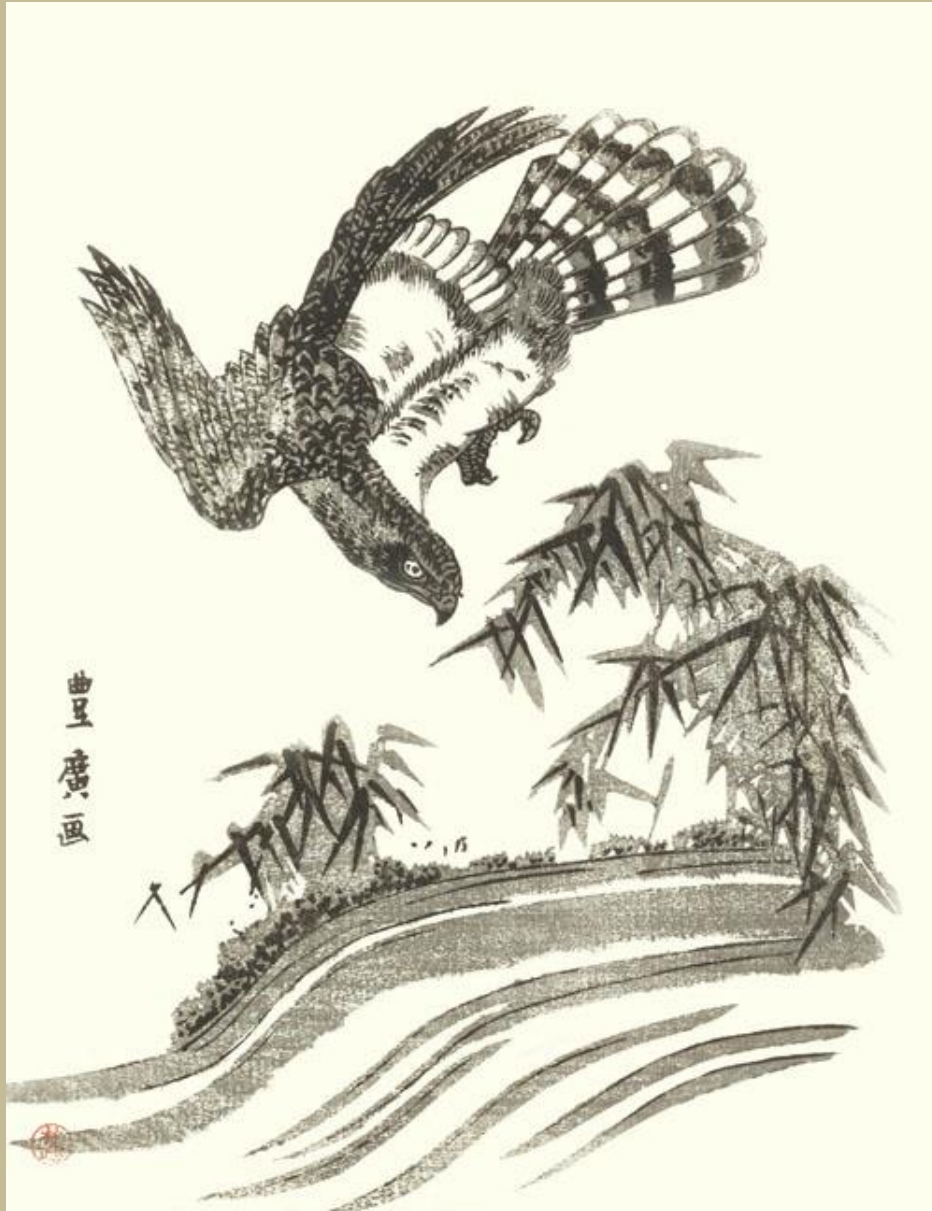
11 **Red-crowned crane** (*Grus japonensis*), Japanese native, symbol of longevity and prosperity, drawn by Koryūsai Isoda, 215 x 290 mm



12 **Little egret** (*Egretta garzetta*), Japanese native, symbol of purity and delicacy, drawn by Hiroshige Utagawa, 180 x 390 mm



13 **Hawk** (*Accipiter* sp.), Japanese native, symbol of boldness and courage, drawn by Toyohiro Utagawa, 180 x 230 mm



14 **Green pheasant** (*Phasianus versicolor*), Japanese native, symbol of beauty and love, drawn by Hiroshige Utagawa, 170 x 380 mm



15 **Mandarin duck** (*Aix galericulata*),
Japanese native, symbol of fidelity and
happiness, drawn by Hiroshige
Utagawa, 100 x 280 mm



16 **Goose** (*Anser* sp.), Japanese native,
symbol of happiness and caution, drawn
by Hiroshige Utagawa, 130 x 380 mm



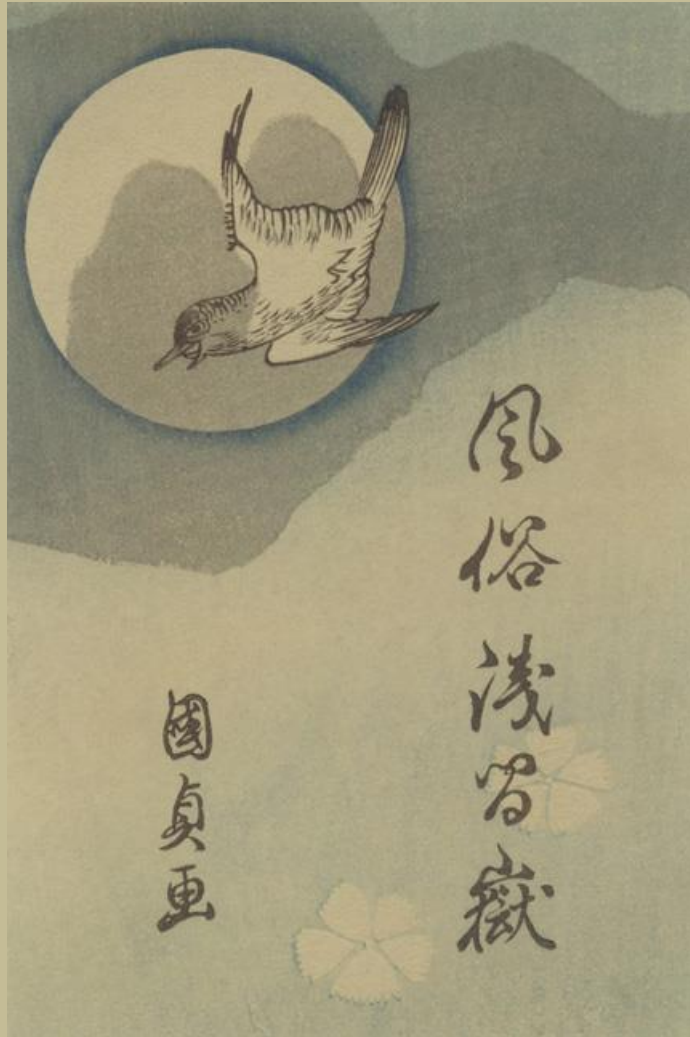
17 **Japanese bush-warbler** (*Cettia diphone*), Japanese native, symbol of sweetness and happiness, drawn by Hiroshige Utagawa, 270 x 410 mm



18 **Eurasian tree sparrow** (*Passer montanus*), Japanese native, symbol of loyalty and kindness, drawn by Masanobu Okumura, 160 x 325 mm



19 **Lesser cuckoo** (*Cuculus poliocephalus*), Japanese native, symbol of unrequited love and past emotions, drawn by Kunisada Utagawa, 110 x 160 mm



20 **Barn swallow** (*Hirundo rustica*), Japanese native, symbol of meekness and elegance, drawn by Kunisada II Utagawa, 290 x 225 mm



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