Symbolism in Japanese Art: plants and birds

Japanese iris (Iris ensata) and mandarin duck (Aix galericulata) by Taito II Katsushika
A symbol is something that stands for or represents something else. Perhaps the most familiar symbol is a word invented by humans to communicate an idea or refer to a particular object. Other types of symbols are included in pictures drawn by artists to communicate with the viewer in a non-verbal way. Plants and birds are often used for this purpose in Japanese art. Certain plants and birds are associated with a particular time of the year (e.g., autumn) based on their appearance or disappearance (e.g., flowering time or seasonal migration). They may also be associated with a certain human emotion (e.g., love) or trait (e.g., beauty) because of their shape, color or behaviour. Knowledge of these symbolic associations allows the viewer to understand the artist’s message. Japanese viewers acquire this knowledge as children during the educational process. Non-Japanese viewers learn about their own culture’s symbols as children and, consequently, may lack the knowledge required to fully appreciate Japanese art featuring plants and birds. To address this knowledge gap, the symbolic associations of plants and birds are explained for forty-five examples of Japanese art in this virtual exhibition. These forty-five examples were chosen from prints in the Reader Collection of Japanese Art to include the plants and birds used symbolically most often by Japanese artists. For each picture the following information is provided: the English name and scientific name of the plants(s) and bird(s) depicted, their symbolic associations and the name of the artist who drew the picture. Pictures are grouped and arranged by the species’ seasonal association (spring, summer, autumn, winter).

Additional information about Japanese plant and bird symbolism is available in the following books:


Plant

Plum (*Prunus mume*)
Symbol of spring, summer, longevity, elegance, happiness, purity, sweetness, prosperity

Bird

Japanese bush-warbler (*Cettia diphone*)
Symbol of spring, beauty, sweetness, love, happiness

Artist

Jō
Plants

1 Peach (*Prunus persica*)
Symbol of spring, summer, meekness, virtue, marriage, health, longevity

2 Field horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*)
Symbol of spring

3 Violet (*Viola* sp.)
Symbol of spring

Bird

Green pheasant (*Phasianus versicolor*)
Symbol of spring, power, love, prosperity, beauty

Artist

Bairei Kōno
Plant

Japanese wisteria (*Wisteria floribunda*)
Symbol of spring, love, youth

Bird

Barn swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)
Symbol of spring, summer, elegance, delicacy, meekness, loyalty, fertility, prosperity, sweetness

Artist

Hokusai Katsushika
**Plants**

1 Hall crabapple (*Malus halliana*)
Symbol of spring

2 Japanese kerria (*Kerria japonica*)
Symbol of spring

**Bird**

Green peafowl (*Pavo muticus*)
Symbol of spring, beauty

**Artist**

Bairei Kōno
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Plant</strong></th>
<th><strong>Bird</strong></th>
<th><strong>Artist</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cherry (<em>Prunus</em> sp.)</td>
<td>Goldcrest (<em>Regulus regulus</em>)</td>
<td>Bunrei Maekawa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Symbol of spring, summer, beauty, delicacy, loyalty, prosperity, ephemerality
Plants

1 Chinese milk-vetch (Astragalus sinicus)
Symbol of spring

2 Dandelion (Taraxacum sp.)
Symbol of spring

Bird

Skylark (Alauda arvensis)
Symbol of spring

Artist

Seisai Itō
Plant

Chinese quince (*Chaenomeles speciosa* or *Chaenomeles laganaria*)
Symbol of spring

Bird

Meadow bunting (*Emberiza cioides*)
Symbol of spring

Artist

Shundei Nakamura
Plant
Weeping forsythia (*Forsythia suspensa*)
Symbol of spring

Bird
Eurasian bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*)
Symbol of spring

Artist
Shizuo Ashikaga
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<th>Plant</th>
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<tr>
<td>Willow (<em>Salix</em> sp.)</td>
<td>Oriental greenfinch (<em>Carduelis sinica</em>)</td>
<td>Mihoko Kasamatsu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Plant

Sacred lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*)
Symbol of summer, purity, immortality

Bird

Little egret (*Egretta garzetta*)
Symbol of purity, longevity, delicacy, mount of the gods

Artist

Rinsai Shiba
Plants

1 Japanese iris (*Iris ensata*)
Symbol of summer, power, boldness, loyalty, courage, victory, eloquence

2 water-lily (*Nuphar japonicum*)
Symbol of summer

Bird

Lesser cuckoo (*Cuculus poliocephalus*)
Symbol of summer, rice-planting time, unrequited love, past emotions, sadness

Publisher

Katsugorō Inoue
Plant

Princess tree (*Paulownia tomentosa*)
Symbol of summer, kindness, power

Bird

Mythical Hō-ō bird
Symbol of longevity, power, wisdom, delicacy, happiness, five virtues of obedience, purity, loyalty, justice and kindness, mount and messenger of immortals

Artist

Ōkyo Maruyama
Plant
Crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*)
Symbol of summer

Bird
Siberian blue robin (*Luscinia cyane*)
Symbol of summer

Artist
Keinen Imao
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<tr>
<td>Japanese rose (<em>Rosa multiflora</em>)</td>
<td>Water rail (<em>Rallus aquaticus</em>)</td>
<td>Kashū Numata</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Plants

1 Showy Japanese lily (*Lilium speciosum*)
Symbol of summer

2 Morning-star lily (*Lilium concolor*)
Symbol of summer

3 China rose (*Rosa chinensis*)
Symbol of summer

Bird

Northern lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*)
Symbol of summer, winter

Artist

Bairei Kōno
Plant
Common garden peony
(*Paeonia lactiflora*)
Symbol of summer

Bird
Great tit (*Parus major*)
Symbol of summer

Artist
Yoshiharu Utagawa
Plant

China rose (*Rosa chinensis*)
Symbol of summer

Bird

Blue-and-white flycatcher
(*Cyanoptila cyanaomelana*)
Symbol of summer

Artist

Hiroshige Utagawa
Plant

Opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*)
Symbol of summer

Bird

Common moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*)
Symbol of summer

Artist

Bairei Kōno
Plant

Bigleaf hydrangea
(*Hydrangea macrophylla*)
Symbol of summer

Bird

Common kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*)
Symbol of summer

Artist

Hiroshige Utagawa
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<tr>
<td>Japanese bindweed (<em>Calystegia japonica</em>)</td>
<td>Dove (<em>Columba livia</em>) Symbol of loyalty, fertility, messenger of the peace god</td>
<td>Köygo Tsukioka</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Lespedeza (<em>Lespedeza sp.</em>)</td>
<td>Japanese quail (<em>Coturnix japonica</em>)</td>
<td>Yūho Tanaka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbol of autumn, beauty, ephemerality</td>
<td>Symbol of autumn, courage, poverty</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Common reed (<em>Phragmites australis</em>)&lt;br&gt;Symbol of autumn, winter</td>
<td>White-fronted goose (<em>Anser albifrons</em>)&lt;br&gt;Symbol of autumn, winter, happiness, caution</td>
<td>Rinsai Shiba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Fringed pink (<em>Dianthus superbus</em>)&lt;br&gt;Symbol of autumn, summer, delicacy, love</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Scabious patrinia (<em>Patrinia scabiosifolia</em>)&lt;br&gt;Symbol of autumn</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Japanese morning glory (<em>Ipomoea nil</em>)&lt;br&gt;Symbol of autumn, love, death</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| 1 Balloon flower  
(*Platycodon grandiflorus*)  
Symbol of autumn                  | Gray wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*)  
Symbol of autumn, winter, happiness, caution | Hiroshige III Utagawa           |
| 2 Fringed pink  
(*Dianthus superbus*)  
Symbol of autumn, summer, delicacy, love |                                   |                               |
**Plants**

1 Eulalia grass (*Miscanthus sinensis*)  
Symbol of autumn, loneliness

2 Kudzu (*Pueraria lobata*)  
Symbol of autumn

3 Porcelain vine  
(*Ampelopsis brevipedunculata*)  
Symbol of autumn

**Bird**

Bull-headed shrike (*Lanius bucephalus*)  
Symbol of autumn

**Artist**

Koson Ohara
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<td>Snake gourd</td>
<td>White-cheeked starling</td>
<td>Seitei Watanabe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Trichosanthes cucumeroides)</em></td>
<td><em>(Sturnus cineraceus)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Symbol of autumn, fertility, longevity</td>
<td>Symbol of autumn</td>
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</table>
Plant
Rice (*Oryza sativa*)
Symbol of autumn, prosperity

Bird
Common snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*)
Symbol of autumn

Artist
Gessō Yoshimoto
Plant
Pomegranate (*Punica granatum*)
Symbol of autumn, fertility

Bird
Eurasian siskin (*Carduelis spinus*)
Symbol of autumn

Artist
Shizuo Ashikaga
Plants

1 Indian chrysanthemum (Chrysanthemum indicum)  
Symbol of autumn

2 Florist’s chrysanthemum (Chrysanthemum grandiflorum)  
Symbol of autumn, power, longevity, delicacy, happiness, courage, honor, purity

Bird

Green-winged teal (Anas crecca)  
Symbol of autumn, winter

Artist

Bairei Kōno
Plant

Heavenly bamboo (*Nandina domestica*)
Symbol of autumn, winter, longevity, better fortune

Bird

Brown-eared bulbul (*Ixos amaurotis*)
Symbol of autumn

Artist

Gorō Imae
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<tr>
<td>Japanese persimmon (<em>Disopyros kaki</em>)&lt;br&gt;Symbol of autumn, victory</td>
<td>Japanese white-eye (<em>Zosterops japonicus</em>)&lt;br&gt;Symbol of autumn, summer</td>
<td>Gakusui Ide</td>
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Plant

Cockscomb (*Celosia cristatus*)
Symbol of autumn

Bird

Long-tailed rosefinch (*Uragus sibericus*)
Symbol of autumn

Artist

Tsunenobu Kanō
Plant

Japanese bittersweet
(*Celastrus orbiculatus*)
Symbol of autumn

Bird

Daurian redstart
(*Phoenicurus auroreus*)
Symbol of autumn

Artist

Bihō Takahashi
Plants

1 Asiatic dayflower
\textit{(Commelina communis)}
Symbol of autumn

2 Aster (\textit{Aster sp.})
Symbol of autumn

Bird

Rustic bunting (\textit{Emberiza rustica})
Symbol of autumn

Artist

Keinen Imao
Plant
Cotton-rose (*Hibiscus mutabilis*)
Symbol of autumn

Bird
Japanese waxwing (*Bombycilla japonica*)
Symbol of autumn

Publisher
Katsugorō Inoue
Plant

Oak (*Quercus serrata*)
Symbol of autumn, victory

Bird

White-backed woodpecker (*Dendrocopos leucotos*)
Symbol of autumn

Artist

Shigemasa Kitao
Plant

Japanese-creeper
(Parthenocissus tricuspidata)
Symbol of autumn

Bird

Dusky thrush (Turdus naumanni)
Symbol of autumn

Artist

Issei Nomura
Plant

Hardy begonia (*Begonia grandis*)
Symbol of autumn

Bird

Golden pheasant (*Chrysolophus pictus*)
Symbol of beauty, power

Artist

Hodō Nishimura
Plant

Chrysanthemum
(*Chrysanthemum makinoi*)
Symbol of autumn

Bird

Domestic fowl (*Gallus gallus*)
Symbol of power, courage, protection, beauty, happiness, herald of morning

Artist

Sōzan Itō
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Sasanqua camellia</td>
<td>Eurasian tree sparrow (<em>Passer montanus</em>)</td>
<td>Chikuseki Yamamoto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(<em>Camellia sasanqua</em>)</td>
<td>Symbol of winter, elegance, sweetness, kindness, loyalty, honor</td>
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*Image of a painting depicting a bird and plant.*
<table>
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<tr>
<td>1 Camellia (<em>Camellia japonica</em>)</td>
<td>Kiyoshi Takizawa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbol of winter, death</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Bunchflower daffodil (<em>Narcissus tazetta</em>)</td>
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<td>Symbol of winter, new year, spring, happiness, prosperity, immortality</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 Mandarin duck (<em>Aix galericulata</em>)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Symbol of winter, love, happiness, loyalty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Little ringed plover (<em>Charadrius dubius</em>)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbol of winter, perseverance, victory, loneliness, strife</td>
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Plant

Pine (*Pinus* sp.)
Symbol of winter, longevity

Bird

Red-crowned crane (*Grus japonensis*)
Symbol of winter, longevity, prosperity, marriage, messenger or mount for the immortals

Artist

Bakufū Ohno
Plant

Bunchflower daffodil (*Narcissus tazetta*)
Symbol of winter, new year, spring, happiness, prosperity, immortality

Birds

1 Northern goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*)
Symbol of winter, boldness, courage, victory, kindness, purity

2 Eurasian tree sparrow (*Passer montanus*)
Symbol of winter, elegance, sweetness, kindness, loyalty, honor

Artist

Hiroshige Utagawa
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<td>Symbol of winter, autumn, prosperity</td>
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Plant

Tree peony (*Paeonia suffruticosa*)
Symbol of winter, spring, fertility, power, happiness, love, prosperity

Bird

Winter wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*)
Symbol of winter

Artist

Sūgakudō Nakayama
Plant

Pine (*Pinus* sp.)
Symbol of winter, longevity

Bird

Scops owl (*Otus* sp.)
Symbol of winter, ingratitude, death

Artist

Hiroshige Utagawa