

**TWO CENTURIES OF  
FLOWER AND BIRD ART  
IN JAPANESE  
WOODBLOCK-PRINTED  
PICTURE BOOKS**



## Introduction

Flowers and birds appear often in Japanese art. Some of this flower-and-bird art was sold in woodblock-printed picture books, starting in the 1720s. To make a woodblock print the picture design was first outlined on the surface of a piece of wood. Areas surrounding this outline were then chiseled away. Next, ink was applied to the outline, followed by a piece of paper, and the back of the paper was rubbed to transfer ink to paper. Black was the only ink color used initially but in the 1760s a method was invented to allow multi-color printing. To create a multi-colored print the piece of paper was placed sequentially on a series of wooden blocks each carved and inked differently to show a particular portion of the design. Woodblock printing was the primary method of making flower-and-bird picture books until the 1920s when photography-based methods of printing were adopted.

Bird-and-flower picture books published between 1720 and 1920 were stylistically diverse. Initially, Japanese artists were influenced by examples of Chinese art imported into Japan. The Chinese philosophy of art was to emphasize the spirit of the subject depicted rather than its actual physical appearance. Shapes were purposely distorted and colors were simplified. Later, starting in the 1770s, imported examples of European art also had an influence on Japanese artists. These European examples were based on the philosophy that art should show the subject's external features as accurately as possible. The contrasting philosophies of European and Chinese art meant that a Japanese artist had to choose which to follow. Most Japanese flower-and-bird artists added only a bit more realism until the 1880s when the realistic style of European art was strongly promoted by government leaders as part of their attempt to modernize (i.e., westernize) Japan.

To illustrate the stylistic diversity of flower and bird art in woodblock-printed picture books during their two hundred year history, this virtual exhibition presents an example from a picture book published in each of the decades between 1720 and 1920. These twenty examples were chosen from picture books in the Reader Collection of Japanese Art. For each example, the picture book's publication date, title and artist are given. Picture size and the identity of each of the flowers and birds depicted are also given.

1727 Ehon Kokoro no Tane (Seeds of the Heart Picture Book) by Tanjirō Nakajima

Left picture – toringa crabapple (*Malus toringo*) and meadow bunting (*Emberiza cioides*)

Right picture – plum (*Prunus mume*) and Japanese bush-warbler (*Cettia diphone*)

370 x 265 mm





1736 Oshie Tekagami (Drawing Models for Oshie) by Michinobu Ōoka

Left picture – corn poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*) and white-cheeked starling (*Sturnus cineraceus*)

Right picture – cherry (*Prunus* sp.) and yellow-throated bunting (*Emberiza elegans*)

370 x 260 mm



1749 Unpitsu Soga (Brush Movements in Coarse Painting) by Morikuni Tachibana

Cherry (*Prunus* sp.) and Japanese paradise-flycatcher (*Terpsiphone atrocaudata*)

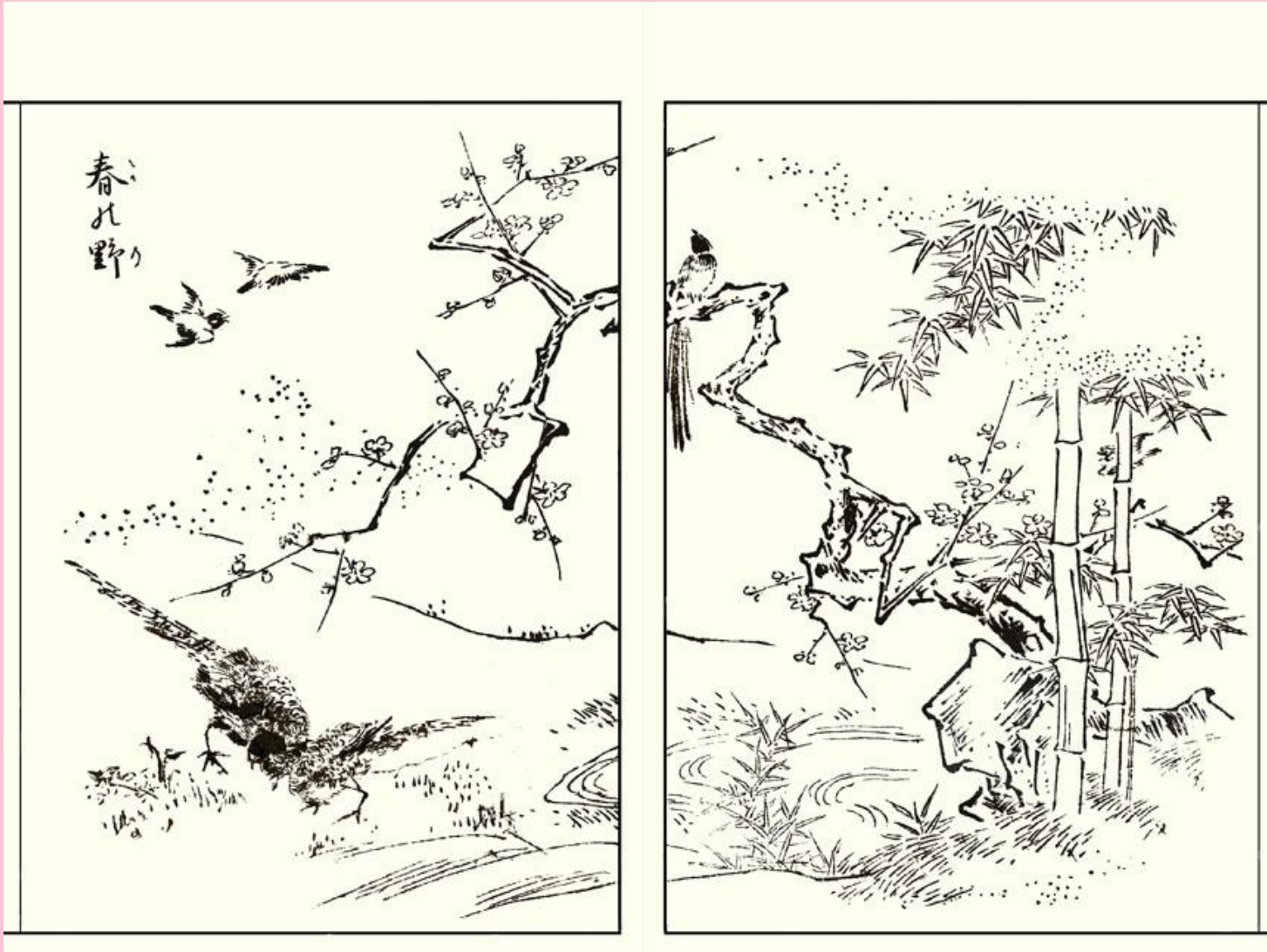
370 x 260 mm



1751 Ehon Shūyō (Gathering of Leaves Picture Book) by Sesshōsai Terai Shigefusa

Plum (*Prunus mume*), blue magpie (*Urocissa erythrorhyncha*), green pheasant (*Phasianus versicolor*) and Eurasian tree sparrow (*Passer montanus*)

360 x 255 mm





1765 Sō Shiseki Gafu (Picture Album by Sō Shiseki) by Shiseki Sō

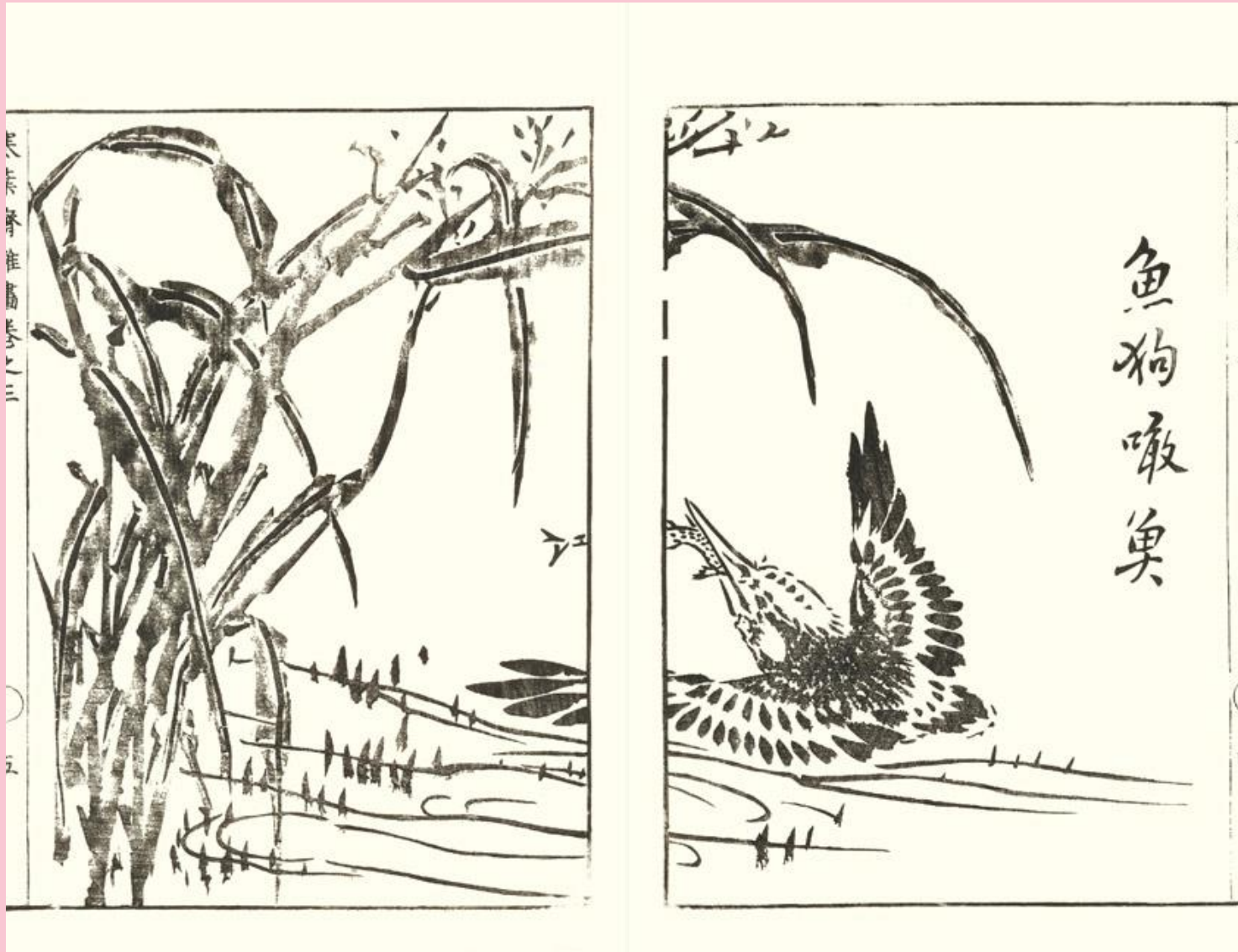
Balsam-apple (*Momordica charantia*) and light-vented bulbul (*Pycnonotus sinensis*)  
360 x 270 mm



1772 Mōkyō Wakan Zatsuga (Miscellaneous Pictures of Japan and China by Mōkyō) by Ryōtai Tatebe

Common reed (*Phragmites australis*) and common kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*)

390 x 265 mm

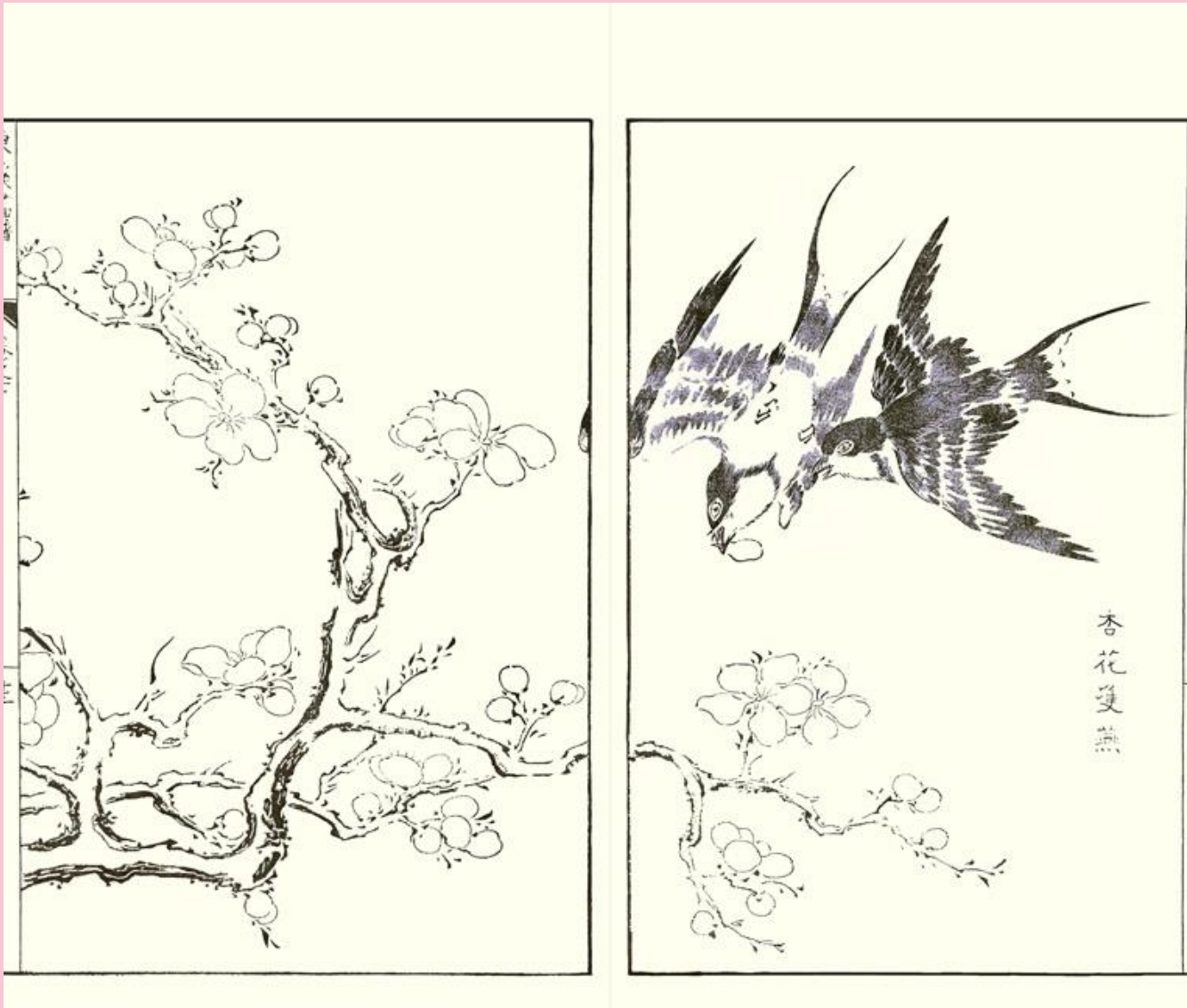




1787 Tōkei Gafu (Picture Album by Tōkei) by Tōkei Ogura

Cherry (*Prunus* sp.) and barn swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)

360 x 270 mm



1799 Gahō Hikketsu (Brushwork as a Principle of Painting) by an anonymous artist

China rose (*Rosa chinensis*) and yellow-throated bunting (*Emberiza elegans*)

350 x 260 mm



1805-27 Shashin Kachō Zue (Naturalistic Pictures of Flowers and Birds) by Shigemasa Kitao

Plantain lily (*Hosta* sp.) and Ryūkyū robin (*Erithacus komadori*)

310 x 220 mm





1814 Fukuzensai Gafu (Picture Album by Fukuzensai) by Kagen Niwa

Cotton-rose (*Hibiscus mutabilis*) and silver pheasant (*Lophura nycthemera*)

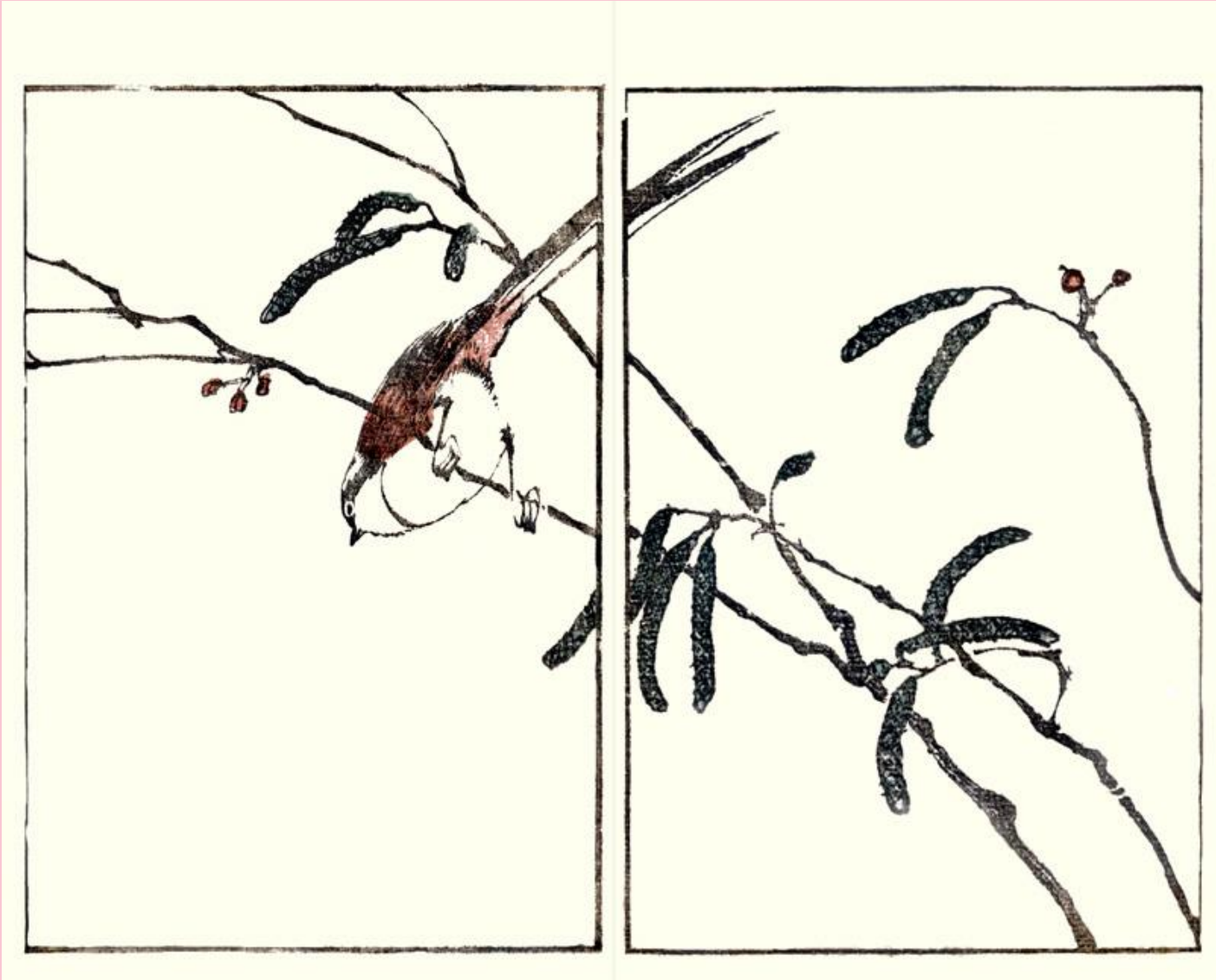
310 x 265 mm



1827 Kihō Gafu (Picture Album by Kihō) by Kihō Kawamura

Alder (*Alnus* sp.) and long-tailed tit (*Aegithalos caudatus*)

340 x 250 mm



1832 Kachō Gafu (Picture Album of Flowers and Birds) by Koji Shōsō

Blackberry-lily (*Belamcanda chinensis*) and Java sparrow (*Padda oryzivora*)

310 x 230 mm





1845 Kanrin Gafu (Picture Album by Kanrin) by Kanrin Okada

Sweet osmanthus (*Osmanthus fragrans*) and black bulbul (*Hypsipetes leucocephalus*)  
370 x 270 mm



1856 Yanagawa Gafu Kachō Bu (Picture Album by Yanagawa Flower and Bird Part) by Shigenobu Yanagawa

Cherry (*Prunus* sp.) and golden pheasant (*Chrysolophus pictus*)

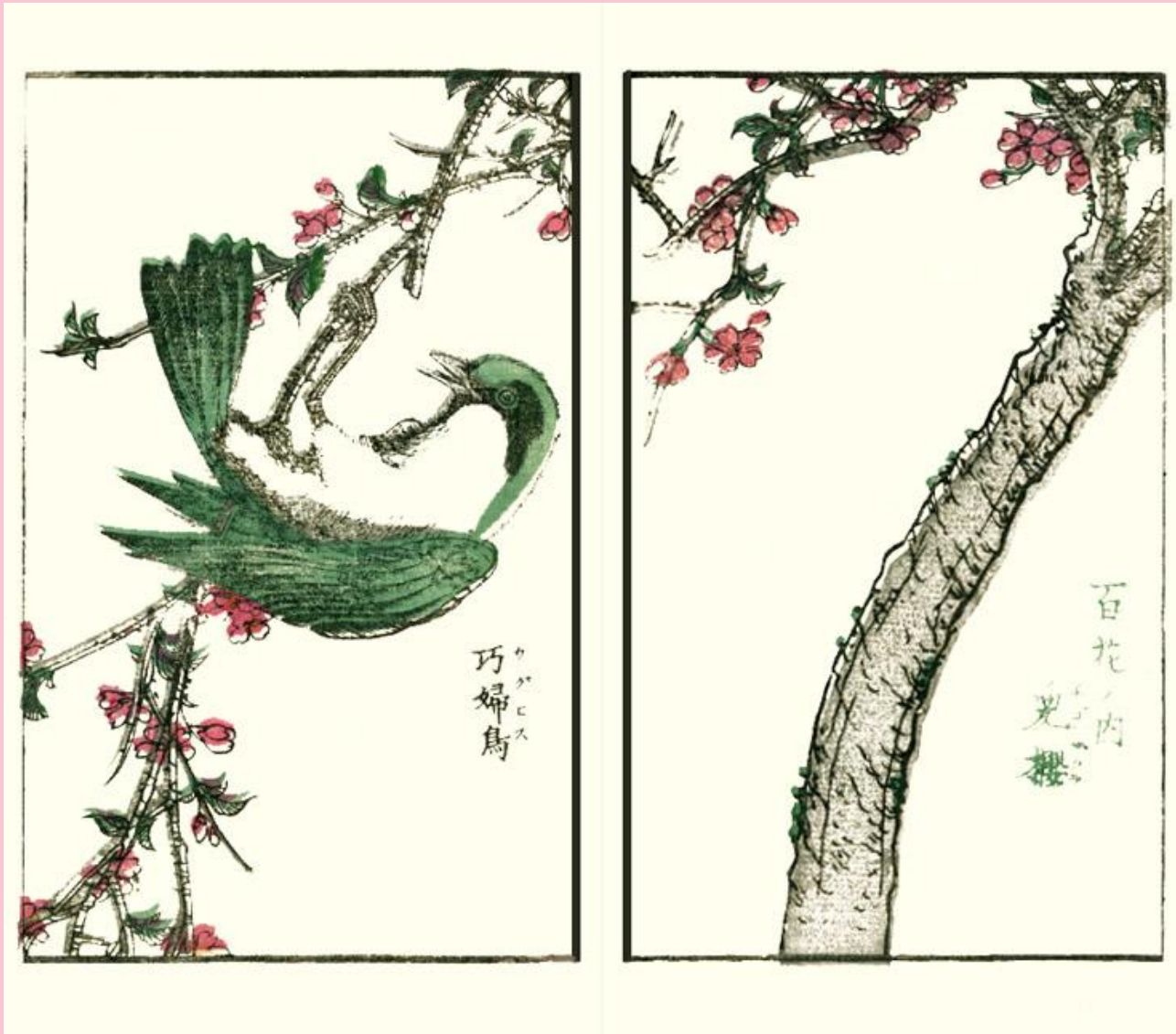
250 x 180 mm



1864 Banshō Shashin Zufu (Varieties of Natural Phenomena) by Sadahide Utagawa

Cherry (*Prunus* sp.) and Japanese bush-warbler (*Cettia diphone*)

240 x 180 mm



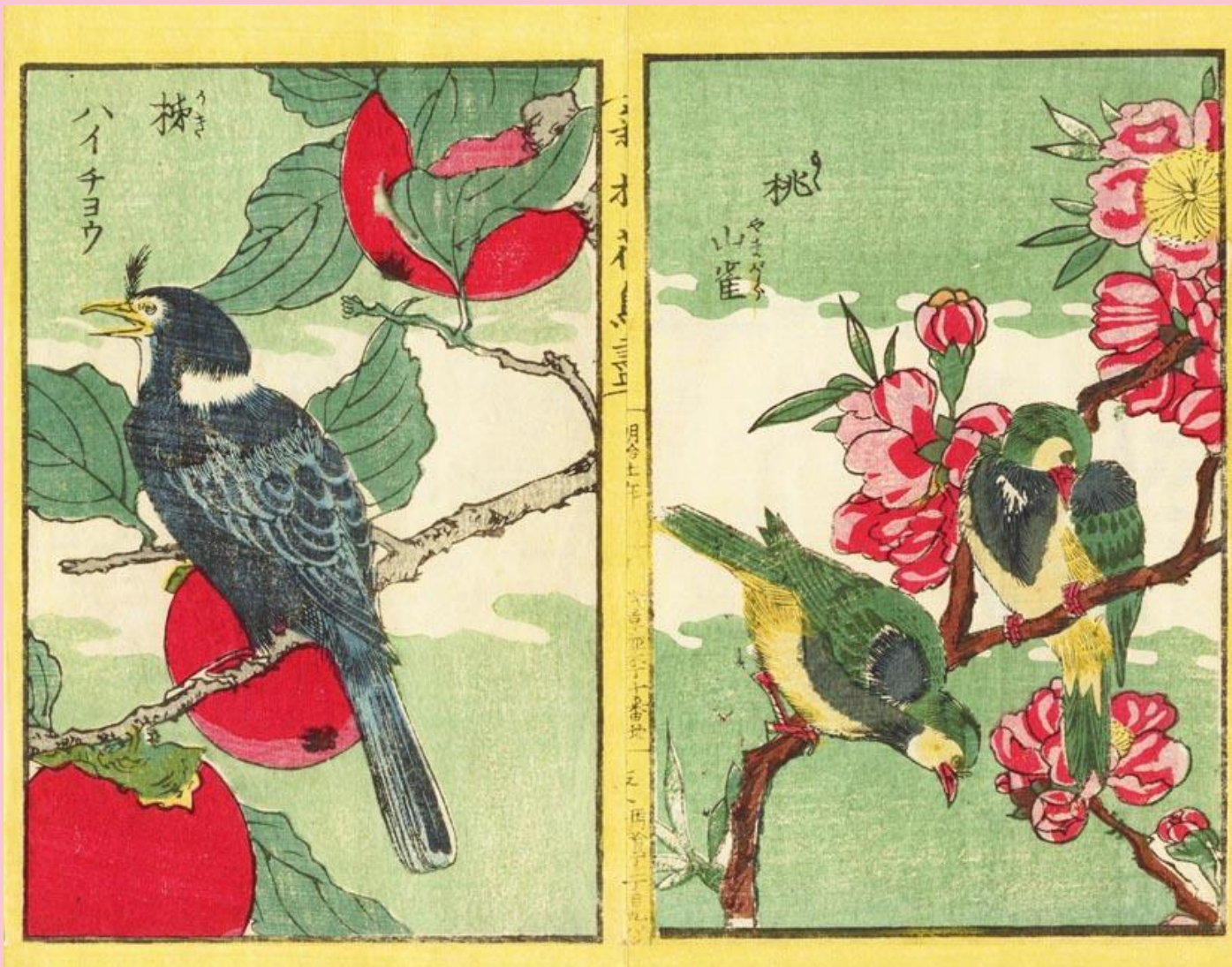


1878 Shinsen Kachō Zue (Collection of Newly Selected Pictures of Flowers and Birds) by Yoshiharu Utagawa

Left picture – Japanese persimmon (*Diospyros kaki*) and crested myna (*Acridotheres cristatellus*)

Right picture – peach (*Prunus persica*) and varied tit (*Sittiparus varius*)

230 x 180 mm



1886 Kan'ei Gafu (Picture Album by Kan'ei) by Kan'ei Nishiyama

Wintersweet (*Chimonanthus praecox*) and varied tit (*Sittiparus varius*)

370 x 285 mm





1891-2 Keinen Kachō Gafu (Picture Album of Flowers and Birds by Keinen) by Keinen Imao

Left panel – soybean (*Glycine max*), fringed pink (*Dianthus superbus*) and Japanese white-eye (*Zosterops japonicus*)

Right panel – Japanese bindweed (*Calystegia japonica*) and bull-headed shrike (*Lanius bucephalus*)

520 x 370 mm

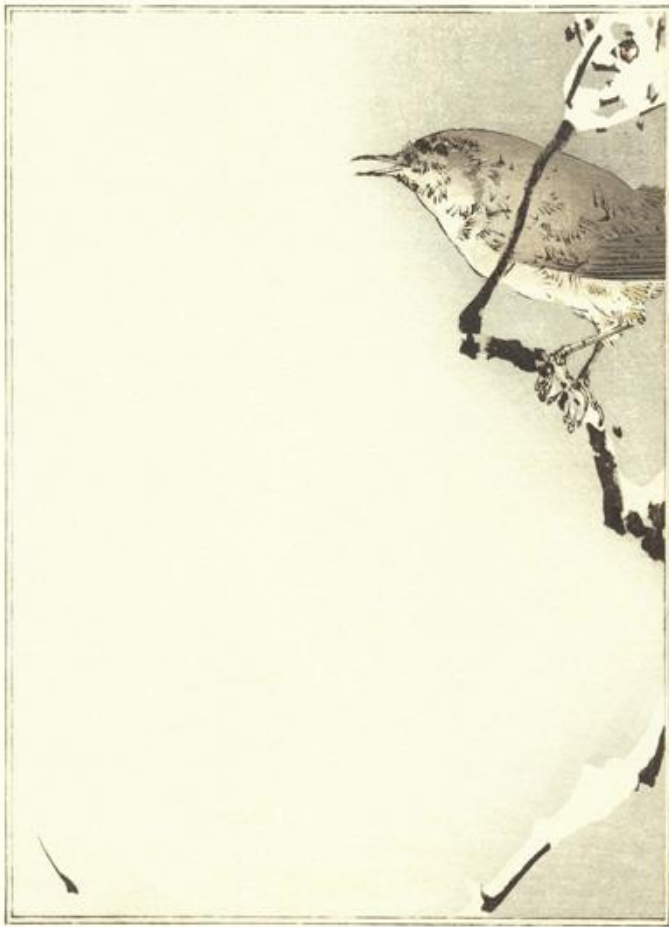




**1903** Kachō Gafu (Picture Album of Flowers and Birds) by Seitei Watanabe

Plum (*Prunus mume*) and Japanese bush-warbler (*Cettia diphone*)

350 x 255 mm



1914 Kajō Shūgajō (Album of Picture Lessons by Kajō) by Kajō Matsuda

Sweet osmanthus (*Osmanthus fragrans*) and light-vented bulbul (*Pycnonotus sinensis*)  
370 x 250 mm



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