

Masterpieces Depicting Cranes

Since ancient times, the crane, traditionally associated with good fortune, has been frequently depicted in Japanese art due to its graceful appearance. Here, we highlight two representative masterpieces, introducing their charms. Both are pieces held in the collection of the Kyoto National Museum. (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)



The collaborative work of two prominent artists representing Japan's early modern period, Hon'ami Koetsu¹ and Tawaraya Sotatsu², titled "Anthology with Cranes Design," is an illustrated handscroll measuring approximately 34 cm in height and spanning about 13.6 meters in length. Sotatsu painted the design, over which Koetsu has added the calligraphy for the *waka* poetry.

Fukushi Yuya, curator of Early Modern Japanese Painting at the Kyoto National Museum, provides an explanation of the charm of the artwork: "The depicted motif is limited exclusively to cranes. Unfolding from the beginning of the lengthy scroll is a spectacular depiction of a flock of over 100 cranes, uniformly and vividly portrayed with gold and silver clay³. While depicted with seemingly simple brushstrokes, the beauty of the cranes' soaring and resting postures is unparalleled, particularly in the elegance of their silhouettes."

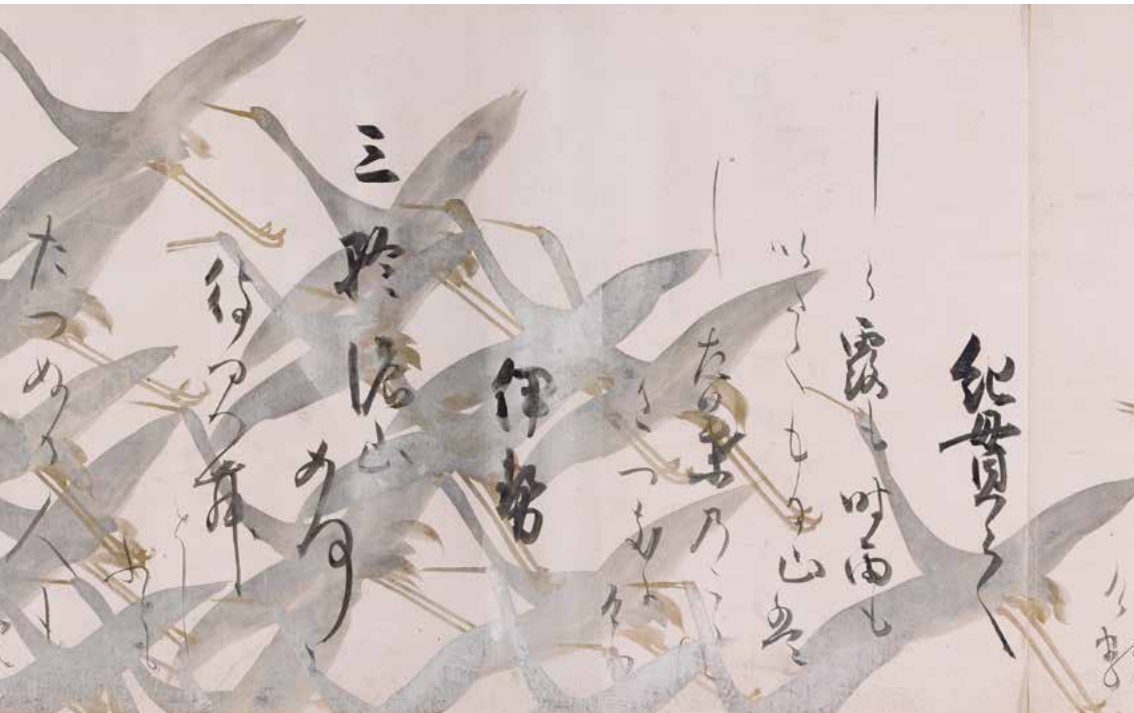
The elegantly portrayed and vibrant flock of cranes evokes the scenery of Izumi in Kagoshima Prefec-

ture (see page 7), where approximately 10,000 cranes migrate and winter each year.

Additionally, the calligraphy by Koetsu, inscribed over the artwork, features *waka* poetry, the traditional Japanese poetic form, from 36 famous poets spanning ancient times to around the 10th century⁴. The verses reveal a vibrant and ornamented yet dynamic brushwork. With the combination of the painting and calligraphy, the artwork offers a rich and inviting experience, as if the cranes themselves are guiding the viewer into the profound world of *waka* poetry.

The other artwork featuring cranes is "Birds and Flowers of the Four Seasons," a pair of folding screens painted by Sesshu⁵ in the 15th century. The crane was depicted on the right screen, illustrating the seasons from winter and spring to summer. The winding trunk and roots of the pine tree on the right side, coupled with the elegant posture of a crane standing beneath the branches on the left, leave a striking impression. Drawn in almost life-size proportions, the artwork exudes considerable impact when viewed up close.


“Birds and Flowers of the Four Seasons” (right screen), an Important Cultural Property by Sesshu, ink and color on paper, pair of six-panel folding screens, 151.0 cm (H) × 351.8 cm (W), collection of Kyoto National Museum



Part of “Anthology with Cranes Design,” an Important Cultural property by Tawaraya Sotatsu, Calligraphy by Hon’ami Koetsu, Gold and silver paint on paper, 34.1 cm (H) × 1,356 cm (W), collection of the Kyoto National Museum

Sesshu (born in 1420 and passing away around 1506) is a great painter in the history of Japanese art, having had a significant influence on later generations of artists. Mori Michihiko, an Associate Curator of Japanese Medieval Painting at Kyoto National Museum, comments, “There are several flower and bird paintings attributed to Sesshu, but most of them are works by his disciples or from a later period. Among them, this folding screen stands out as the only one with a high likelihood of being personally painted by Sesshu. The screen is framed by a mighty and intricately shaped giant tree resembling a dragon, and the peculiar dynamism and three-dimensional arrangement of such trees and rocks can be described as unique to

Sesshu, who had experience in China. Furthermore, in contrast to such dynamic and powerful expressions, allowing quietly playing birds of modest fields and mountains rather than flashy exotic birds is likely a reflection of his identity as a Buddhist monk-painter.”

The Kyoto National Museum, which houses these two works, attracts a significant number of international tourists. Part of the exhibit explanations and pamphlets are available in English, Chinese, and Korean. While in the historic city of Kyoto, consider not only exploring artworks featuring cranes but also immersing yourself in various Japanese paintings in the Museum. It’s a wonderful opportunity to encounter the diverse world of Japanese art. 

1. Born in Kyoto in 1558 and passing away in 1637, Koetsu played a prominent role as a leader in the art and craft industry in the early modern period. He was also renowned as a representative calligrapher of his time. Crossing various fields such as ceramics and lacquerware in addition to calligraphy, he left behind a multitude of works.
2. Exact birth and death years unknown, Sotatsu was a painter believed to have been active in Kyoto during the first half of the 17th century. One of his renowned masterpieces is the famous national treasure “Wind God and Thunder God.”
3. Material used in painting: Metal finely crushed into a powder like pigment, and kneaded into a clay-like substance using animal collagen as an adhesive.

4. Poems featured in “Thirty-Six Immortals of Poetry,” a collection selected by the poet Fujiwara no Kintō (966-1041), who was active from the late 10th century to the 11th century. The collection includes waka poems by 36 representative poets from the 7th to the 10th centuries.
5. Born in 1420 and passing away around 1506, Sesshu was a great master who was active in 15th-century Japan and perfected Japanese ink painting. His prominence was established through the study of ink painting techniques during a two-year stay in the Ming Dynasty of China, which he skillfully incorporated into his own distinctive style.