

Flower of Wealth and Honor

By Nobuo Tsuji



Kaki-zu by Kaiho Yusho, part of a six-fold screen, Kenninji Temple in Kyoto.



Botan-zu attrib. to Qian Xuan, part of a pair of hanging silk scrolls, 150cm. long, Kotoin Temple in Kyoto.

The peony comes into its full glory from late spring to early summer. In Japan, temple gardens and parks swarm with visitors at this time of year who have come to feast their eyes on the splendid flowers. Though many Japanese assume so, the peony is not native to Japan but was introduced from China sometime in the Heian period (794–1185).

In China, the peony has long been considered the king of flowers, a symbol of wealth and honor. The poet Bai Juyi (772–846) describes the care and dedication with which the Chinese nobility of the Tang capital of Zhangan (present-day Xian) cultivated their peonies. In the Xian Beilin, a museum of Tang-period (618–c.907) monuments and tomb inscriptions, there is a monument dated 736 dedicated to a great Zen master on one side of which is an elegant, imaginative carving of peonies, heavy multi-

petaled blossoms at the end of long undulating stems.

The Chinese near-obsession with peonies continued into the following Sung period (960–1279), when highly realistic depictions of peonies were a popular choice of motif on ceramic ware. In fact, peonies were a popular motif in all branches of the applied arts. Vibrantly colored peonies almost seem to burst out of a pair of hanging silk scrolls (the right-hand scroll is shown here). The pair of paintings are attributed to Qian Xuan (c.1235–after 1301), a famous painter active at the end of the Sung period and the beginning of the Yuan period, and are believed to have been brought to Japan in the 14th century. The military ruler Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) is said to have displayed the pair of scrolls at the great outdoor tea ceremony held in 1587 at Kitano Shrine in Kyoto.

The Momoyama period (c.1573–

c.1615), often referred to as Japan's cultural renaissance, witnessed a wonderful upsurge of artistic and cultural endeavor. In artistic presentation, seasonal motifs taken from nature were favored over human subjects, and even great weathered pines seemed to flower with the sensitive brushstrokes of the Momoyama-period artist.

The peony was a favorite among Momoyama period artists. Part of an elegant mausoleum built for Hideyoshi after his death was moved to Chikubushima Island on Lake Biwa, and it can still be seen today. The visitor to this edifice is certain to be entranced by the powerful yet elegant openwork of an arabesque design incorporating peonies carved in wood that once probably adorned a hallway in the mausoleum. The paint has long since peeled off the carving, but the vigorous movement of the swirling lines and the occasional bursts of peony blossoms seem all the more forceful for the lack of color.

The second illustration of peonies shown here is part of a six-fold screen painted by Kaiho Yusho (1533–1615), a master painter of the Momoyama period. Yusho was the only survivor of a samurai family wiped out in 1573. Though his life had been spared because he had been apprenticed as a novice to a major Zen temple in Kyoto, Yusho chose to become a painter rather than a cleric.

Yusho's black-and-white ink paintings reflect the otherworldly and aesthetic training of his days in the Zen temple, but his samurai background nevertheless permeates his works in color, which are vigorous and full of life. The colorful peonies on a gold background depicted here reflect a realistic technique borrowed from the Chinese paintings of peonies, but their decorative arrangement is purely Japanese. The same taste for brightly colored decoration can be seen in the finely crafted armor, helmets and battle jackets worn by the fierce warriors of the Momoyama period.

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