

Exhibition: *Every Living Thing: Animals in Japanese Art*

On View: September 22–December 8, 2019

Location: Resnick Pavilion



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(Los Angeles—July 31, 2019) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Every Living Thing: Animals in Japanese Art*, the first U.S. exhibition to bring together artistic representations of animals in all media across Japanese history from the 5th century to the present. Underpinned by Japan’s unique spiritual heritage of Shintō and Buddhism, the Japanese reverence for nature—and the place of animals within that realm—is expressed in sculpture, painting, lacquerware, ceramics, metalwork, cloisonné, and woodblock prints. Lions, dogs, horses, oxen, cats, fish, insects, birds, dragons, and phoenixes are meticulously and beautifully rendered in a vast variety of artworks. Featuring nearly 200 objects, the exhibition draws heavily from LACMA’s permanent collection and includes other masterpieces from Japanese and American public and private collections, some of which are on view for the first time.

Every Living Thing is co-organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, The Japan Foundation, and LACMA, with special cooperation from the Tokyo National Museum. Prior to the presentation at LACMA, the exhibition was on view at the National Gallery of Art Washington (June 2–August 18, 2019).

“Animals play an unparalleled role in Japanese art and culture,” says Robert T. Singer, department head and curator of Japanese art at LACMA. “Any visitor to Japan will quickly notice their pervasiveness: from high art and low, in religion and popular culture, in objects made for the tea ceremony and even as symbols for the times of day. These creatures, real and mythical, have long inspired Japan’s creative imagination and continue to do so.”

“LACMA is very pleased to partner with the National Gallery of Art, The Japan Foundation, and the Tokyo National Museum in bringing together many treasures for this exhibition, which explores the vital role of animals in Japanese art spanning 16 centuries,” says Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director.

Exhibition Organization

Every Living Thing celebrates one of the most distinctive and compelling aspects of Japanese art: the ubiquitous depiction of animals. With works ranging from ancient tomb sculptures to contemporary digital displays, the exhibition reveals the various roles animals have played in Japanese culture through thematic sections including: the Japanese zodiac, leisure and pastimes, myth and folklore, religion, the natural world, the world of the samurai, and foreign and exotic animals.

The first section explores the animals of the Japanese zodiac. By the 6th century, Japan had adopted the Chinese zodiac, a set of 12 calendar symbols that correspond to times of the day, points on a compass, and 12 years in a repeating cycle. Each of the 12 years is associated with an animal, beginning with the rat and followed by the ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat or sheep, monkey, rooster or chicken, dog, and wild boar. The zodiac evolved distinctive Japanese features after it arrived from China. Auspicious meanings assigned to zodiac animals make them symbols of good fortune and popular subjects for works of art. Images of the fertile rabbit, for example, are used in prayers for healthy children, while the white rat, messenger of the god of wealth, signaled a good harvest. Throughout the exhibition, zodiac animals are portrayed in various roles—sometimes taking on human form in playful parodies, or as protectors of the home, or as companions of Buddhist and Shintō deities.

A playful spirit runs through Japanese art and is nowhere more evident than in the arts of leisure and pastimes. Here, animals take on entertaining roles in theatrical productions, storytelling scrolls, poems, parodies, and satires. A favorite theme, dating back to the 12th century, is depicting animals behaving like humans for comic effect. Utagawa Kuniyoshi, an artist who worked in the 19th century, produced numerous comic and satiric woodcuts (*giga*) featuring animals of various kinds. Among the most popular were prints based on a scene in a popular Kabuki play, in which a wide-eyed tiger, a pointy-nosed fox, and a toad-snake creature with pronounced lips are dressed like people and engage in *ken*, a spirited game resembling rock-paper-scissors. Kuniyoshi also created a whimsical series of prints that depicted goldfish endowed with human traits.

The next section presents animals in Japanese myth and folklore. The mythical dragon and phoenix have both captured artists' imaginations since antiquity, when the Japanese adopted these cosmic creatures from China and Korea. In Japanese folklore, some real animals also possess supernatural qualities. The crane is said to live for one thousand years and the turtle for ten thousand; carp swim up waterfalls and possess phenomenal strength; mischievous raccoon dogs and foxes change their shapes to trick people; and monstrous spiders entrap humans in their demonic realm. Other animals appear in moralizing tales with the monkey often embodying foolishness while the rabbit in the moon exemplifies selflessness. Folkloric creatures continue to influence artists in modern times, as seen through the art collective teamLab's 2017 single-channel digital work, *Sunflower Phoenix; Chrysanthemum Tiger; Peony Peacock; Lotus Elephant* (2017) from the series *Fleeting Flowers*.

The exhibition next examines animals as represented in religious imagery including Shintō, Buddhism, Zen, and Daoism. Shintō is the ancient Japanese belief in *kami*—the spirits, deities, or forces that inhabit all things in nature, including animals, mountains, rivers, rocks, and plants. Animals serve as messengers to *kami*, linking humans with the divine, or are worshiped as the incarnation of the *kami* themselves. Originally, *kami* and their messengers were not portrayed graphically, becoming subjects of the visual arts only after the arrival of Buddhism in the 6th century. The two faiths gradually influenced each other: Buddhist gods acting in Japan were believed to take the form of Shintō *kami*, and sometimes merged with them to create new hybrid deities. In this section, for example, a sculpture depicts Dakiniten, a Buddhist deity who merged with the Shintō god Inari, the god of farming and rice cultivation in Japan. Dakiniten is shown with giant feathered wings while riding a white fox, the messenger of Inari. Further, an elephant head emerges from her left temple and a Bodhisattva emerges from her right temple. This diminutive sculpture was likely used for personal devotion and kept in its original shrine. Zen also became an important aspect of Japanese Buddhism in the 12th century. Practitioners seek to understand the nature of existence through intuitive, spontaneous insight rather than through logical thought. Many Zen paintings are made by quick brushstrokes in ink, reflecting the practice's appreciation of spontaneity. Animals appear frequently in these works as companions of sages or metaphors for stages in the path toward enlightenment. Monkeys can stand for the unenlightened mind, for example, while oxen or bulls may represent the burden of worldly desires for wealth or power, which must be overcome for enlightenment to occur. Daoism (Taoism) is a religion-philosophical tradition that teaches living in harmony with the Dao (Way), that is, with the rhythms of the universe. With its roots in ancient China, it spread to Japan by the

Heian period (794–1185). In later Daoism, human immortals with magical powers are depicted riding animals—both real (cranes) and mythical (dragons)—through the air.

Other works explore the natural world including creatures on land and of the rivers, lakes, and seas. Creatures on land primarily include the twelve animals of the zodiac, which are depicted in this section along with other land animals in paintings, prints, and photographs as well as functional objects such as hand-warmers, incense burners, and women's kimono. Japan is surrounded by water, and in the premodern era its primary source of protein were the innumerable fish that filled its seas, lakes, and rivers. In this section, water creatures populate artworks in which highly realistic depictions, often injected with strong dashes of humor, dominate works of beauty and function. Octopi, in particular, with their multiple tentacles and suckers, are a favored subject, occasionally with erotic overtones. The lobster is a New Year's delicacy, imbued with felicitous meaning with hopes for a prosperous and happy coming year.

Animals also frequently appear in the world of the samurai. From 1185 to 1868, the emperor was relegated to figurehead status as the samurai (warrior) class ruled Japan under the leadership of a shogun. Whereas the court aristocracy favored art featuring graceful, elegant creatures such as cranes and deer, the samurai preferred animals that expressed power and might. They adorned their castles with paintings of hawks, tigers, and other predators to proclaim the warriors' allegiance to a code demanding strength and fearlessness. Throughout the 16th century, Japan experienced a civil war with samurai lords vying with one another to expand their domains. Lavishly decorated armor glorified and distinguished individual warriors. This section presents a suit of armor representing a mythical mountain-dwelling creature known as a *karasu tengu*—a fierce half-man, half-crow with a simultaneously protective and deviant nature. The helmet has a pronounced crow-like beak and gleaming golden eyes. Attached to the back is an object that closely resembles a feather fan, believed to have the power to conjure violent winds. The undulating iron plates composing the chest armor, sleeves, and shin guards were skillfully wrought to imitate human musculature.

The final section explores foreign and exotic animals. In 1543, shipwrecked Portuguese sailors were the first Europeans to reach the coast of Japan. Portuguese merchant ships followed, and by 1600 their cargoes included exotic animals. The arrival of elephants, camels, peacocks, and other species from Portuguese colonies in Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America caused a craze in Japan for spectacles featuring creatures from faraway regions. Artists met the demand for such exotica in

works ranging from opulent folding screens to popular woodblock prints. Shoguns and high officials collected wondrous beasts and birds, which they selected from realistic illustrations in handscrolls and albums that showed the animals arriving at Nagasaki, the only port open to Europeans. Foreign creatures also served as diplomatic gifts from Portuguese (and later Dutch) merchants eager to ingratiate themselves with the shogunate and perpetuate their lucrative trade. This section presents Tani Bunchō's *Tiger Family and Magpies*. Here a pair of magpies serenades a tiger father playing with his cubs, two males and one female. Since magpies mate for life, they are a symbol of marital happiness. Because tigers are not native to Japan, artists turned to examples by Chinese artists, used domestic cats as a reference, or simply relied on their imaginations. It was thought that the leopard was a female tiger—hence the female cub is shown here with leopard spots.

Exhibition Catalogue

The Life of Animals in Japanese Art

Edited by Robert T. Singer and Kawai Masatomo with contributions by Barbara R. Ambros, Tom Hare, Federico Marcon, et al.

Available in hardcover and softcover

9 x 12 inches, 343 pages, 475 color illustrations

Related Programming

Artist Talk: teamLab

Sunday, September 22, 2019

7 pm | BCAM, Level 1

Free, tickets required

teamLab is an art collective, interdisciplinary group of ultratechnologists whose collaborative practice seeks to navigate the confluence of art, science, technology, design and the natural world. Various specialists such as artists, programmers, engineers, CG animators, mathematicians and architects form teamLab. Kazumasa Nonaka, Catalyst at teamLab, will explain the key concepts and creative processes behind teamLab and discuss current projects and exhibitions, including teamLab Borderless and teamLab Planets in Tokyo, as well as *teamLab: A Forest Where Gods Live*, an outdoor exhibition in Kyushu, Japan.

Credit

This exhibition is co-organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and The Japan Foundation, with special cooperation from the Tokyo National Museum.

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This exhibition is part of *Japan 2019*, an initiative to promote Japanese culture in the United States.

About LACMA

Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of nearly 140,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of artistic expression across the globe. Committed to showcasing a multitude of art histories, LACMA exhibits and interprets works of art from new and unexpected points of view that are informed by the region's rich cultural heritage and diverse population. LACMA's spirit of experimentation is reflected in its work with artists, technologists, and thought leaders as well as in its regional, national, and global partnerships to share collections and programs, create pioneering initiatives, and engage new audiences.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90036. lacma.org

Image captions: *Pair of Inari Foxes*, Kamakura–Nanbokuchō periods, 13th–14th century, Kiyama Jinja; Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, *Shirafuji Genta Watching Kappa Wrestle*, 1865, 2nd month, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Herbert R. Cole Collection; *Octopus Form Box*, late 19th century, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Allan and Maxine Kurtzman, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

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