



6778      A two-fold paper screen painted in ink and colour on a gold ground with four tsuru (cranes) in flight above waves. Mist hangs over the water, obscuring all but the branch of a matsu (pine tree) on the near shore and the gentle slope of land meeting the water on the far shore.

Japan late 18th / early 19th Edo period

Dimensions: H. 65¾" x W. 70½" (166.5cm x 179cm)

One of the cranes depicted on this screen is the white-naped crane, which migrates yearly to its wintering grounds in Southern Japan. Alongside it are three red-crowned, or Japanese, cranes which are said to live for 1,000 years.

Tsuru (cranes) are among the premier symbols of longevity and good fortune in East Asia. For at least two millennia, the Chinese have viewed them as living to a great age and as being able to navigate between heaven and earth. In turn, these attributes have made them logical companions of sennin, the Taoist Immortals. Ancient Taoist alchemists believed that imbibing beverages made with crane eggs or tortoise shells would increase one's vital energies.

In Japan, the crane is the animal most frequently seen in the fine and applied arts. Although a common subject of painting, it is most closely associated with the New Year and with marriage ceremonies. In earlier times, when the Japanese still used circular brass mirrors and presented them on the occasion of a marriage, the crane was a favoured decorative theme due to its association with fidelity. In recent centuries, the crane has appeared on elaborately embroidered wedding kimono and among the mizuhiki (cord made from twisted paper) decorations presented at the time of betrothal.

The matsu (pine tree) holds a prominent role in Japanese art, largely due to its auspicious associations which were originally adopted from Chinese traditions. This evergreen has long been seen as a symbol of longevity, steadfastness and good fortune due to its ability to remain green and fresh even during the fiercest of winters. Furthermore, in Japan the pine has always been prized for its practical uses, and its attractive appearance lends itself to being creatively represented in both painting and design. Along with the plum and bamboo, the pine is also one of the shōchikubai (pine-bamboo-plum) or saikansanyū (three friends of winter) which is a popular theme in Japanese art.