

# TAKING WING AROUND KYOTO

*If you spot the vibrant flutter of a butterfly here, you aren't merely encountering an insect—you're beholding a cultural icon that's been on the ascent for a millennium.*

By Adam H. Graham



Courtesy World History Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

**above:** Edo-period artist Katsushika Hokusai's *Philosopher Watching a Pair of Butterflies*, from *The Picture Book of Realistic Paintings of Hokusai*, c. 1814

ONE OF JAPAN'S MOST beloved haiku, by 18th-century Kyoto poet Yosa Buson, reads: *Butterfly / sleeping / on the temple bell*.

The haiku's translation by poet Robert Hass may be spartan, but its clean imagery is poignant. The delicate butterfly on a large, heavy bell offers an elegant picture of stillness, a vision that feels both specific and timeless.

Indeed, the image has appeared in artistic incarnations from long-ago times to the present. Both the butterfly—or *chouchou*—and the temple bell are weighty symbols in Japan, with the gossamer-winged butterfly finding itself at the centre of Japanese fine arts, performing arts and literature. The insect became a popular motif in kabuki and Noh theatre, while ancient Japanese poets named themselves *Butterfly Dream* and *Solitary Butterfly*.

Experts say the adoration of butterflies originally came from China. But the Japanese raised the sentiment to new heights, where it informed everything from cuisine (butterfly-style cutting) to furniture design (Sori Yanagi's transformational 1954 butterfly stool) to traditional crafts such as Kyoto Damascene, the thousand-year-old art of metal inlay using gold, silver and sometimes mother-of-pearl to capture the iridescence of a wing.

The butterfly is ubiquitous in Japanese fashion, appearing in kimono patterns, *obi* (kimono sash) knots and women's elaborate *kanzashi*, hair accessories made of tortoiseshell, jade, coral, pearls and other gemstones. "The butterfly motif has been used in fabric patterns for aristocrats for more than 1,000 years," says Seiji Hatta, executive director of Kyoto's Museum of Traditional

## BELLWETHER FRIENDS

“Butterflies can be very important indicators for overall environmental assessment,” says **Masaya Yago of the Lepidopterological Society of Japan.** “Their bright colours give them visibility, so it is easy to identify them.” Observers can use this information to track the ecological impact of factors like land development, agricultural practices, climate change and invasive species.

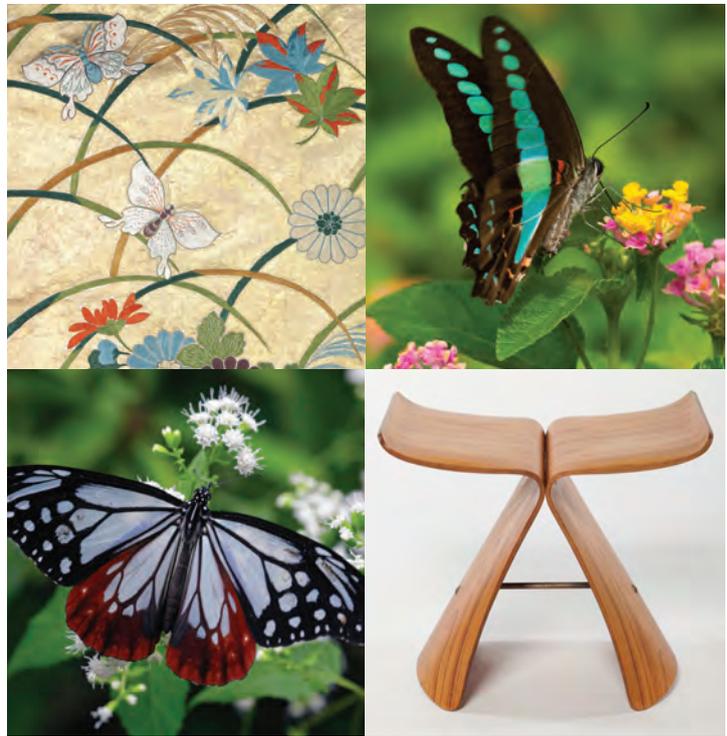
Crafts. “The swallowtail butterfly was the favourite of the Heike family, one of the famous ancient warrior clans, who used it in their crest, emblazoned on ox carriages, furniture and even armour.” Why such close identification with an insect? “We Japanese admire the creature’s unique growing process from caterpillar to pupa to butterfly, which represents progress, positivity and auspiciousness,” Hatta says. “And we envy its ability to float.”

Metaphysically, butterflies in Japan represent everything from recently departed spirits to sustained happiness in marriage, best expressed in folded paper butterflies—the earliest form of representational origami (dating at least to the 17th century) and still used in traditional Shinto weddings today. Edo-period Japanese emperors and empresses let butterflies choose their loves for them. At court parties, caged butterflies were set free, and those they landed on first would receive royal favour. Even the everyday home was affected by their presence: When butterflies entered a house, it was regarded as a good omen and a sign that someone was coming to visit.

For travellers today, it’s relatively easy to spot various butterfly species around Kyoto, as I have during multiple visits over the past few years. I’ve encountered gently floating brush-foots amid the 120 types of moss at the Kokedera Moss Temple, spotted butter-coloured cloudless sulphurs during a stroll along Kyoto’s tranquil Philosopher’s Walk, and spied turquoise blue-bottles, so vivid and fluorescent they could have been lifted from anime celluloid, flitting in the mysterious bamboo stalks of Arashiyama. Because flower gardens are hidden everywhere in Kyoto, it’s not only possible to see insects like these in the heart of the city; it’s downright likely.

Japan is home to 327 species of butterflies, four of them endangered. Numbers are decreasing for the small, black-and-yellow-striped Gifu swallowtail (*Luehdorfia japonica*), which feeds on the *katakuri* plant (*Erythronium japonicum*) in the *satoyama* forests of Kyoto, especially along the mountain bases of Oharano southwest of the city. Multiple species have benefited from local farmers’ and clean agriculture advocates’ work to foster such plants, helping to create butterfly-friendly areas across the Kansai region.

Another beloved, and rare, species in Kyoto is the chestnut tiger (*Parantica sita*), known in Japan as *Asagi madara*, or “travelling butterfly.” These baby-blue, white, red and black beauties migrate more than 1,000 kilometres (621 miles) to lay their eggs. Like the Gifu, they’re also found at Oharano, attracted by the region’s sprays of pink *fujibakama* (thoroughwort) flowers, which bloom each fall with sweet nectar that replenishes the butterflies after the long and perilous journey. The flowers, already popular by the 11th-century Heian era, are enjoying a recent uptick as home gardeners plant them to help attract and feed chestnut tigers.



Numerous Kyoto shrines, temples, gardens and parks help visitors encounter butterflies, which are in their flight season here from April to September. Kyoto Botanical Garden, on the Kamo River’s east bank, is one of the best spots to see them. The spacious complex has extensive cherry-tree groves, beds of Japanese perennials and annuals, tropical greenhouses of rare flora, and open fields where visitors can picnic among fluttering cabbage whites (*Pieris rapae*), small coppers (*Lycaena phlaeas*), *Potanthus* skippers, yellows and beautiful eye-patterned ringlets. And if one of these wondrous creatures happens to alight on you? That’s a sign of good luck in just about every culture.

**clockwise from top left:** Detail of 18th-century silk Noh robe; turquoise blue-bottle; Sori Yanagi butterfly stool; chestnut tiger butterfly on thoroughwort plant

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## NATURAL INSPIRATIONS



Renowned tea master **Toru Ota**, who leads tea ceremonies at **Four Seasons Hotel Kyoto** and at venues around the world, is the fourth-generation owner of Kyoto confectionery Oimatsu. The shop specializes in *wagashi*, traditional sweets that evoke the seasons and landscape of Japan through their ingredients and through forms “**inspired by the beauties of nature**,” says Ota. “Being able to see the mountains’ subtle changes in colour is what

Kyoto’s natural beauty is to me.” Ota’s favourite celebration of nature here is the mid-May **Aoi Matsuri**, or Hollyhock Festival, which began in AD 587 as an appeal to the deities for **a bountiful harvest**. Two ox-carts, four cows, 36 horses and 500-plus people, led by an imperial messenger, process from the Kyoto Imperial Palace to the Shimogamo and Kamigamo shrines. In particular, Ota loves the riverside purification ceremony at the Kamigamo shrine, a Shinto ritual that “**showcases Japanese perspectives toward nature**” and resembles the one held before entering the Hotel’s tea house.