

# Masterpieces of Japanese Painting Depicting Cherry Blossoms from Ancient Times in Japan

There are numerous Japanese paintings depicting cherry blossoms. Here, we will introduce two works that particularly highlight the beauty of cherry blossoms from ancient times in Japan. We spoke with the directors of the museums where the paintings are held to learn about the characteristics and charm of these paintings. (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)

The first work is *Konohana-Sakuyahime* by Domoto Insho<sup>2</sup>. Miwa Akihisa, the director of Kyoto Prefectural Insho-Domoto Museum of Fine Arts, where it is held, describes the charm of this painting as follows.

“The figure depicted in this painting portrays a goddess as beautiful as the cherry blossoms, who appears in Japanese mythology<sup>3</sup>. *Konohana* (flower of the tree) refers to cherry blossoms in old Japanese. The model for the painting is said to be the youngest sister of Insho. Set against the background of fully bloomed Yama-zakura and Yae-zakura cherry blossoms,

beloved by the Japanese since ancient times, the ground is adorned with flowers like violets and dandelions, symbolizing the arrival of spring,” explains Miwa. “The gently flushed cheeks and eyes along with the supple limbs bring about modest sensuality with a sense of mystique, making it one of Insho’s most popular works. “By depicting a beautiful



Photo: PIXTA

The eye-catching exterior of the Insho-Domoto Museum of Fine Arts, it was established as a museum to exhibit Domoto Insho's own works.



*Konohana-Sakuyahime*, a Japanese painting by Domoto Insho, 1929, silk, pigments, 170.0×238.0cm, folding-screen. Collection of Kyoto Prefectural Insho-Domoto Museum of Fine Arts



*Yoshino*, by Okumura Togyu, 1977, ink and color on paper, framed (1 piece), 108.6×184.4cm. Collection of Yamatane Museum of Art

goddess seated beneath the fully bloomed cherry blossom tree, this painting encompasses elements that resonate deeply with the Japanese heart.”

The second piece is *Yoshino* by Okumura Togyu<sup>4</sup>. This painting depicts Mount Yoshino in Nara Prefecture, renowned since ancient times as a famous cherry blossom viewing spot and also considered a place of worship. Mount Yoshino is known for being the place where En no Gyoja<sup>5</sup>, the founder of Shugendo spiritual practice, carved the image of Kongo Zao Gongen<sup>6</sup> into a Yama-zakura tree in the late 7th century and enshrined it.

As a testament to this faith, believers have continued to plant primarily Shiroyama-zakura trees, creating a unique landscape with approximately 30,000 trees planted. Regarding the artwork depicting this mountain, according to Yamazaki Taeko, director of the Yamatane Art Museum, where it is held, “It was a long-awaited dream come true when Okumura Togyu first visited Mount Yoshino at the age of 83. He completed the painting when he visited again. In describing Mount Yoshino, Togyu expressed that he perceived the mountain as possessing a sense of saintliness and proud independence rather than splendor. He shared that while working on the painting, he was deeply

moved, feeling as if he was capturing a historic scene. The painting may have been created while feeling the weight of Mount Yoshino’s history. Togyu’s work features a distinctive warm, magnificent style created by layering thin layers of paint, resulting in soft tones. I hope as many people as possible have the chance to see the actual piece when it’s exhibited at the museum.”

It is definitely worth taking the time to admire these masterpieces featuring cherry blossoms while enjoying the arrival of spring. 🌸



Photo: PIXTA

Yama-zakura in full bloom in Yoshino. Yoshino’s unique feature lies in its varied elevation, terrain, and soil conditions across different regions, leading to staggered blooming periods, allowing for about a month-long enjoyment of cherry blossoms.

1. One of the goddesses featured in Japanese mythology. Her name is said to symbolize the beauty of cherry blossoms.  
 2. Born in 1891 and died in 1975, Domoto Insho was a Japanese painter from Kyoto active in the Kyoto art scene. He left behind a diverse body of work that transcended the boundaries between Japan and the West, as well as between figurative and abstract art. He designed the Insho-Domoto Museum of Fine Arts himself while he was still alive.  
 3. Stories surrounding gods and goddesses that have been passed down in various parts of Japan since ancient times. The *Kojiki*, compiled at the beginning of the 8th century, is Japan’s oldest book containing Japanese mythology.

4. Okumura Togyu (1889-1990) was a late-blooming Japanese painter who entered his first public exhibition for Japanese painting at the age of 37 but continued his artistic production throughout his life. He is considered one of the leading Japanese painters of the 20th century.  
 5. The founder of Shugendo, who was active in Nara Prefecture from the 7th to 8th centuries. Shugendo is a native Japanese religion that originated from ancient mountain worship, blending influences from Buddhism and esoteric practices. It is characterized by ascetic practices performed in mountainous regions. It represents a unique form of faith and spiritual practice in Japan.  
 6. Kongo Zao Gongen is revered as a Bodhisattva, representing the highest object for worship in Shugendo.