



What Characterizes Japanese Kites?

We know that kites have flown in the skies over Japan for a very long time. They are first mentioned in a Japanese manuscript about 1300 years ago—and probably arrived from China even earlier than that. The Japanese believed that flying a kite could bring good luck or give thanks on a happy occasion. A priest might bless a stalk of rice and attach it to a kite to thank the gods for a good crop. A family might fly kites to honor the birth, or the birthday, of a child. For example, the birthday of Prince Yoshihiro was celebrated in 1558 by flying kites at Hikuma Castle. A *shogun's* skill at flying a kite could symbolize his ability to govern. If his kite flew well, his subjects' confidence in his leadership increased. If his kite crashed, his subjects might doubt his prowess. Kites still fly today, especially during Japanese festivals and celebrations, such as Boy's Day (now Children's Day) on May 5th and New Year, Japan's most important holiday.

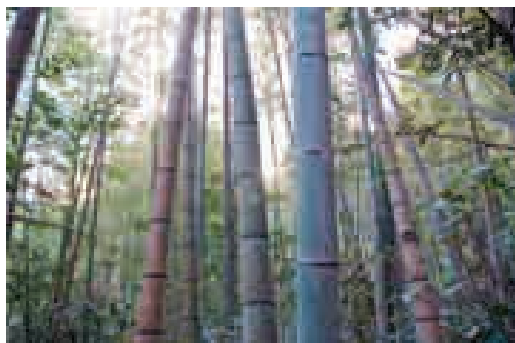


New Year celebration

Skinner Collection

What characteristics define Japanese kites? These three traits distinguish the Japanese kite tradition and make the country's kites readily recognizable around the world.

Uniform materials—bamboo and *washi*



Traditional Japanese kites from all around the country are made of the same materials—bamboo for the kite spars (bones) and *washi*, Japanese paper, for the kite sail (skin). At one time deep-rooted bamboo grew all over Japan. It was prized for its ability to survive earthquakes in a country prone to them. Bamboo is said to have at least 1400 uses in Japan, from flutes, fans, and tea whisks to baskets, brooms, and placemats. Kite



makers still value bamboo for its combination of strength and flexibility, which enables bamboo spars both to withstand the wind and bend to it. Particularly when it is made by hand with a *su* (as shown here), *washi* is appreciated for the same

combination of qualities. Long fibers from the mulberry plant (*kozo*) ensure a paper that is not just strong and flexible but also lightweight, resistant to tearing, and able to be beautifully painted or dyed.



Regional variety—different kite shapes associated with different regions



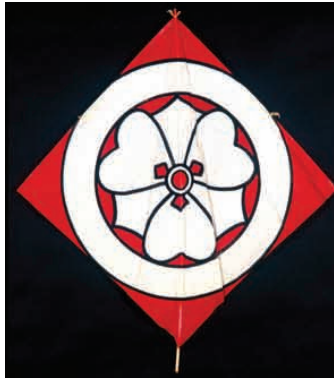
Although kite makers all over Japan may use the same materials, they have, over time, developed shapes best suited to the conditions in different regions, areas or villages in which each kite will be flown.

Why so much variety?

Japan is a large, long country—larger than either Italy or Great Britain. In each of the four main islands that make up Japan, temperature, humidity, and winds are affected differently by high pressure in mainland China during the winter and high pressure in the Pacific Ocean during the summer. Japan is also very mountainous. Mountains and hills—about eighty percent of Japan's terrain—create localized climates with different winds. The mountains also isolated villages from each other, encouraging each village to maintain its local traditions. When a distinctive kite well suited to its local, seasonal winds emerged, its characteristic shape and sparring pattern was preserved and handed down from generation to generation.

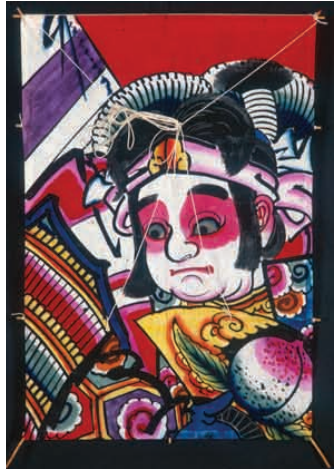


Art of the highest quality—the kite sail as canvas



Kite makers from other cultures may spend little time decorating their kite sails. By contrast, most Japanese kite sails are exquisitely painted or printed with characteristic motifs, such as a family crest, *kanji*, or an image from Japanese folklore, history, or theater. The director of a kite museum in Shirone testifies to this preference for elaborately detailed kite sails. He

says, “In Europe and America, people admire the kites that fly the highest and stay up the longest. But in Japan, we admire the ones with the best pictures.”



Photos of bamboo and papermaking courtesy of Daniela Zitzmann; image of New Year celebration from the Skinner Collection. All other images © The Drachen Foundation.