

Chapter III

Fan Paintings

Not Just for Fanning, and with Special Shapes

It is believed that the *ougi* (a folding fan) originated in Japan, in contrast to the *uchiwa* (a round fan), which was introduced to Japan from China. Japanese people in the past used folding fans in various contexts, not only for cooling down by fanning. People used folding fans to carry small items, like a tray; to write a poem on, like a letter to express their feelings; and to hide their faces with. Folding fans were strongly connected to gestures in daily life. They were essential tools for traditional performing arts, including Noh and Kabuki.

Folding fans are consumable goods, making them ideal gifts. Since the Muromachi period, many fan shops have existed in cities like Kyoto, and many fans were distributed. These fans could be carried in a kimono sleeve to be shown to others, so they were referred to as “portable artwork” that could be held in the palm of your hands. (i)

The shape of a folding fan also held special meanings in mystical scenes. For example, buried folding fan relics and folding-fan-shaped mirrors represented Shinto and Buddhist elements, and the Lotus Sutra was written on folding fans. On the battlefield, fans were used by military commanders. Turning a fan over symbolized the passage of time and change from good to bad luck or vice versa, and fanning towards oneself was believed to bring victory. Some people worshiped by kneeling and placing a folding fan in front of their knees at a shrine or a temple.

Moreover, many kimonos and crafts feature folding fan-shaped patterns, and these designs are very popular. Folding fans are not only tools but also special, familiar shapes for the Japanese people.

i. “Smaller is Better”, O-Young Lee (1982)