Sakura Hanami: Cherry Blossom Viewing

Sakura Hanami (□ □□, cherry blossom viewing), an age-old tradition in Japan, derived from the Chinese practice of enjoying wine and poetry beneath plum blossoms. In Japan cherry trees were more common and by the Heian period (794–1185) Japanese emperors held *sakura hanami* parties for the court. The custom soon spread to the samurai, and later to the common people. In the early 18th Century, the shogun Tokugawa Yoshimune planted cherry trees in Asukayama park in the northern reaches of Tokyo, and opened up the park to its citizens. Nowadays thousands of people visit this and other parks to enjoy the blossoms, drink sake and feast on dumplings and cakes. In many places, temporary paper lanterns are hung to allow *yozakura* (□□, night sakura).

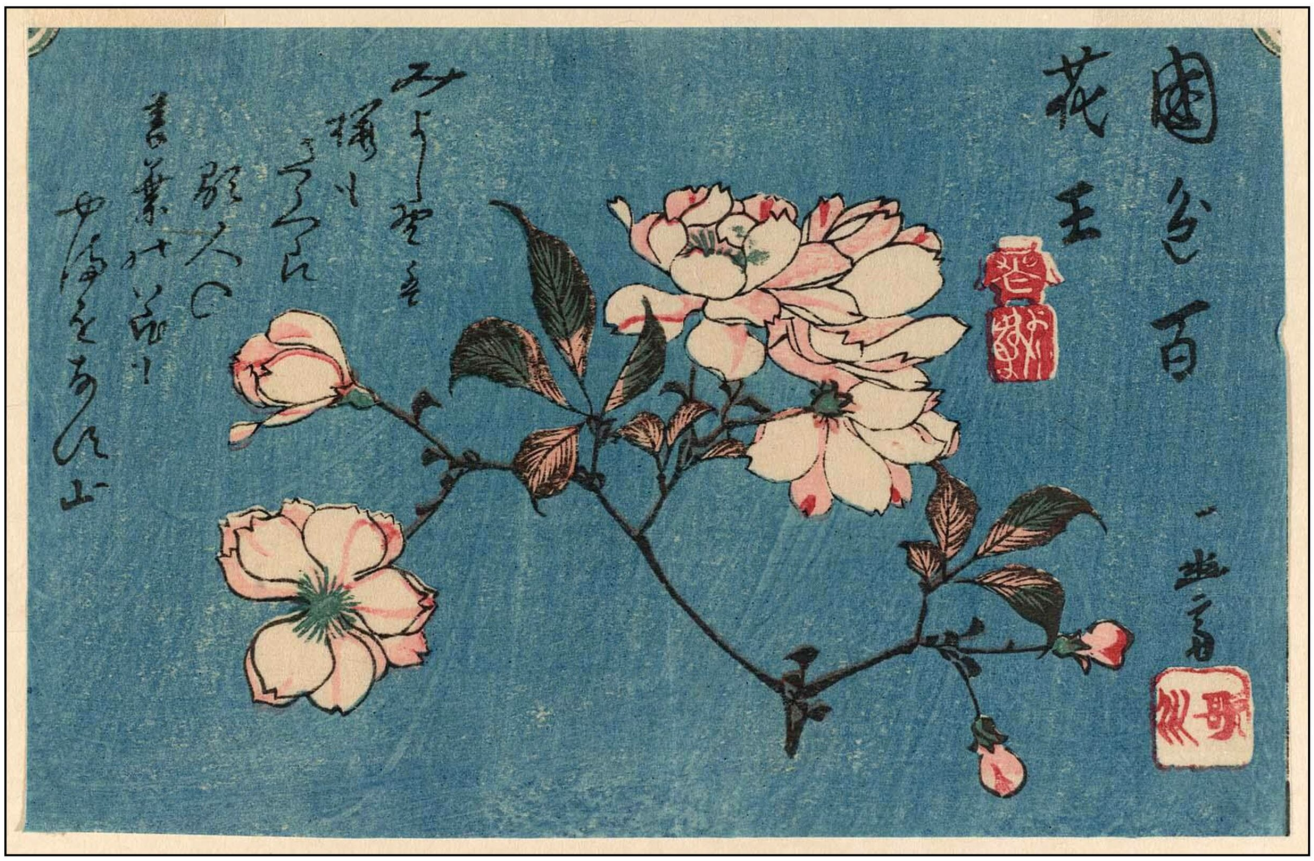
Japanese Cherry

Japanese cherry trees are members of the genus *Prunus* (plums, peaches, almonds, cherries, apricots, etc.), subgenus *Cerasus.* The trees of this genus have been widely cultivated either for their fruit or for their spring flowers. Most *Prunus* trees blossom before the leaves emerge, a phenomenon that facilitates wind pollination.

The most common species of ornamental cherry in Japan *are Prunus serrulata* (Japanese cherry), *Prunus jamazakura* (mountain cherry), and *Prunus speciosa* (Oshima cherry). The trees bloom in early springtime with the blossoms lasting between 1 and 2 weeks. The blossoming begins in January in Okinawa and reaches Kyoto and Tokyo by late March or early April. The flowers, with five petals and multiple stamens, typically arise in umbels (clusters arising from a single point like the ribs of an umbrella). The petals are white with a variable shading of pink. The blossoms have a mild fragrance

of vanilla, related to the coumarin that they contain. The Japanese word *sakura* (□) can mean either the tree or the blossom.

The following illustrations show the blossoms in a woodblock print by Utagawa Hiroshige from the 1830s and a modern photograph. Blue – be it silk or sky – is the preferred background for *sakura*.



The Floating World

Sakura blossoms provide clear evidence of spring's new life. However, their brevity tells of its transience and bring to mind *mono no aware* (□□□□, the pathos of things, equivalent to the Latin *lacrimae rerum*). Cherry blossoms became a frequent topic of *haiku* poems and a common subject for woodblock printing: *ukiyo-e* (□□□, pictures of the floating world, Harris, 2011; Newland & Uhlenbeck, 1990). The term for *ukiyo* (□□, floating world) is homophonous with the Buddhist term *ukiyo* (□□□world of sorrow and grief). However, the stylishness, eroticism and beauty of *ukiyo-e* run counter to this allusion. The following is a *ukiyo-e* print of Utagawa Hiroshige from about 1840 showing *sakura hanami* in the park at Asukayama:

The following illustration shows three more of Utagawa Hiroshige’s *ukiyo-e* prints depicting *sakura hanami* in different parts of Tokyo. The one on the left shows Asukayama (1860), the middle is from the embankment of the Sumida River in Tokyo (1858) and the right is from Suijin Temple, now known as Sumidagawa Shrine (1856).

The middle print shows elegantly dressed geisha out to view the blossoms. Not to be outdone by the trees, they are arrayed in their most beautiful kimonos. The triptych prints below are by Utagawa Kunisada. They depict beauties amid the blossoms at daytime (1840) and at night during *yozakura* (1848):

In modern times there are almost as many visitors to Asukayama in spring as there are blossoms on the trees. An 1819 haiku by Kobayashi Issa remarks on the conviviality of *sakura hanami*:

花の陰赤の他人はなかりけり

hana no kage aka no tanin wa nakari keri

cherry blossom shade –
no one an utter
stranger
(translation David Lanoue)

under cherry tree
blossoms no one can ever
be total strangers
(translation White and Sato)

A second haiku by Issa reminds us that love and beauty go together:

君なくて誠に多太の桜哉

kimi nakute makoto ni tada no sakura kana

without you –
the cherry blossoms
just blossoms
(translation David Lanoue)

without you
they really are just
cherry blossoms
(translation Paul Atkins)

Sakura Sakura

As well as food and sake, *sakura hanami* is often accompanied by music. A famous folksong from the early Edo period (1603-1868) describes blossoms as far as the eye can see.

桜　桜	*sakura sakura*	Cherry blossoms, cherry blossoms,
弥生の空は	*yayoi no sora wa*	Across the spring sky,
見渡す限り	*mi-watasu kagiri*	As far as the eye can see.
霞か雲か	*kasumi ka kumo ka*	Is it mist, or clouds?
匂いぞ　出ずる	*nioi zo izuru*	Fragrant in the air.
いざや　いざや	*izaya izaya*	Come now, come now,
見に行かん	*mini yukan*	Let's go and see them.

The following is a performance of the song by Aiko Shimada accompanied by Elizabeth Falconer on koto;

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/sakura-sakura-aiko-shimada.mp3

Temple Bells

Buddhist monks planted cherry trees near their temples. The transience of the blossoms illustrated the impermanence of worldly things. Over the years an association has grown between the fleeting of the cherry blossoms and the tolling of the temple bells. Both resonate with our sense of beauty. The following is a haiku from 1688 by Matsuo Basho:

鐘消て花の香は撞夕哉

kane kiete hana no ka wa tsuku yūbe kana

the temple bell dies away the scent of flowers in the evening is still tolling the bell (translation R. H. Blyth)	fading temple bell the fragrance of flowers strikes at evening (translation Jane Reichhold)

And a woodblock print of *Chionin Temple Gate* (Kyoto) from *Eight Scenes of Cherry Blossoms* (1935) by Hiroshi Yoshida. Yoshida was a leading artist of the *shin hanga* (new prints) movement, which combined the techniques of *ukiyo-e* with a

sensitivity to light and color that derived from French Impressionism:

Another haiku about the cherry trees on the temple grounds is by Yosa Buson (1769):

花ちりて木間の寺と成にけり

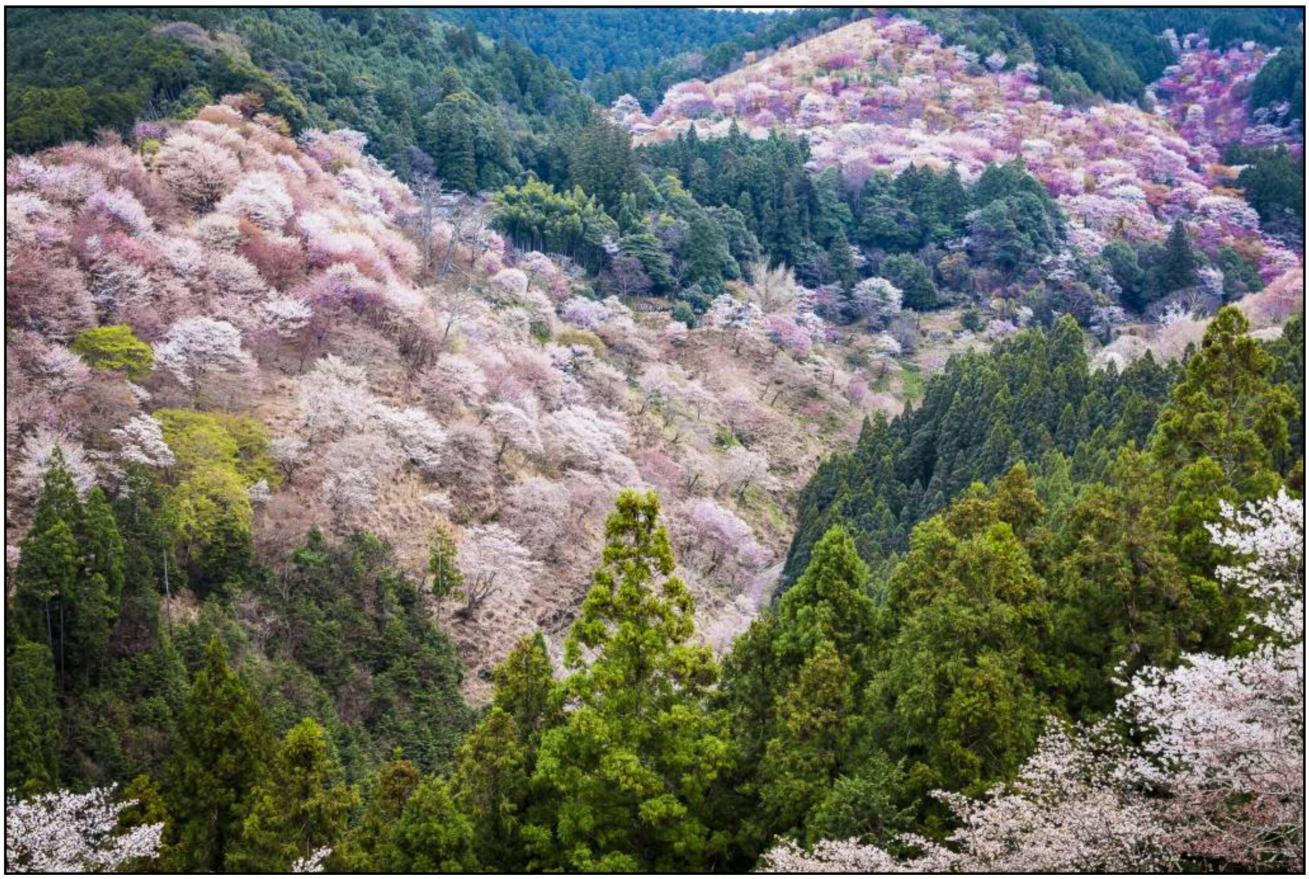
hana chirite ko no ma no tera to nari ni keri

the cherry-blossoms having fallen,
the temple belongs
to the branches.
(translation R. H. Blyth)

cherry blossoms gone –
the temple, its former self.
among the trees
(translation Saito & Nelson)

Mountain Cherry Trees

Mount Yoshino is located in Nara Prefecture about 70 km south of Kyoto. Buddhist monks planted cherry trees on the mountain in the early Heian period. Most of the trees are *Prunus jamazakura* (mountain cherry) In spring the mountain is covered with blossoms:



The following illustration shows a ukiyo-e print of the village of Yoshino by Katsushika Hokusai (1833). As in the song *Sakura, Sakura*, it is difficult to distinguish the blossoms from mist.

The following is a haiku from Santoka Taneda (1882-1940) about the mountain cherry. Santoka composed haiku that did not exactly follow the syllabic conventions of earlier poets.

水にうつりて散ってゐるのは山ざくら

mizu ni utsurite chitte iru no wa yama zakura

reflected on the water
and scattering its petals
a mountain cherry tree
(translation Miyashita and Watsky)

reflected on the water
among its scattered petals
mountain cherry
(translation tp)

Envoi

Nothing is more peaceful than to stare up into blue sky through a screen of cherry blossoms:

This experience is best accompanied by a little sake, and some cello music by Julian Lloyd Webber with Jason Kouchak accompanying on piano:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/sakura-sakura-julian-lloyd-webber.mp3

And a haiku about blossoms passing by Onitsura Uejima (1661-1738), an early haiku poet who stressed the importance of *makato* (truth, sincerity) in his poetry (Crowley, 1995):

咲くからに見るからに花のちるからに

saku karani miru kirani nan no chiru kirani

the cherry blossoms bloom
we gaze at them
they fall, and …
(translation R. H. Blyth)

the blossoms bloom
we look at them
the blossoms fall
(translation Michael Haldane)

References

Blyth, R. H. (1949, republished 1981). *Haiku*. *Volume I. Eastern Culture.* Heian International.

Blyth, R. H. (1950, republished 1981). *Haiku*. *Volume II. Spring*. Heian International.

Blyth, R. H. (1963). *A history of haiku. Volume I From the beginnings up to Issa*. Hokuseido Press.

Blyth, R. H. (1964). *A history of haiku. Volume II From Issa up to the present*. Hokuseido Press.

Crowley, C. (1995). Putting makoto into practice. Onitsura's Hitorigoto. *Monumenta Nipponica*, 50(1), 1–46.

Haldane, M. (2006). Haiku. (website)

Harris, F. (2011). *Ukiyo-e: the art of the Japanese print*. Tuttle.

Lanoue, D. G. (2019). *A taste of Issa: Haiku*. David Lanoue. (also website)

Miyashita, E. & Watsky, P. (with photographs by H. Inoue, 2006). *Santoka: a translation with photographic images*. PIE Books,

Newland, A., & Uhlenbeck, C. (1990). *Ukiyo-e to Shin Hanga: the art of Japanese prints*. Brompton Books.

Reichhold, J. (2013). *Basho: the complete haiku*. Kodansha USA.

Resig, J. (2025). Ukiyo-e Search (website)

Saito, T. & Nelson, W. R. (2006). *1020 Haiku in Translation: The Heart of Basho, Buson and Issa.* BookSurge

Trotter, E. (2022). *Haiku master Onitsura*. Peach Blossom Press.

Shirane, H. (2015). The rise of haikai: Matsuo Bashō, Yosa Buson, and Kobayashi Issa. In H.Shirane, T. Suzuki & D. Lurie (Eds.) *The Cambridge History of Japanese Literature*. (pp. 403–414). Cambridge University Press.

White, J., & Sato, K. T. (2019a). *5-7-5: the haiku of Buson.* The Buddhist Society Trust

White, J., & Sato, K. T. (2019b). *5-7-5: the haiku of Issa*. The Buddhist Society Trust.