

“Old gold: An enduring love of a humble fish in Japanese art”

Derek Cal / 28 October 2019



**From prestigious pet to revered object of art, the humble goldfish has been considered a symbol of beauty in Japanese art for hundreds of years.**

20 years ago, Riusuke Fukahori had left art college and was feeling restless and uninspired. Sat in his room at Nagoya, he contemplated giving up his artistic career. But suddenly a revelation came to him from the unlikeliest of sources: his goldfish.

“I looked at my pet goldfish and realised that the beauty that I have been seeking was right there in front of me this whole time,” says Fukahori. So he picked up a brush and drew. And then he drew some more.

He calls this inspirational moment his “Kingyo Sukui,” or “Goldfish Salvation,” a play on the words for the traditional Japanese game of goldfish scooping. Both words sound similar when spoken.

Today Fukahori’s name is synonymous with goldfish because of his distinct style of three-dimensional goldfish art. He’s famous both in Japan and overseas, even though after he first left art school, he had no interest in goldfish at all.

His creations can take upwards of two months to complete. Layer upon layer of clear resin cover three-dimensional figures of goldfish painted in piecemeal on to the acrylics. The result is a natural shadow as if cast by the painting of the goldfish, which shimmers under the surface, almost like they are alive and swimming.



## A prestigious pet

Chinese traders first brought goldfish to Japan in 1502, and sold them to the samurai and nobility as highly prized pets. Like China, the goldfish serves as a symbol of wealth, fortune, and good luck.

“The ideal colour was a vermillion with a goldish glint, and in Japan this colour combination was doubly lucky: the gold represented wealth, and the colour red was used to dispel illness or misfortune,” says Kathryn Tanaka, an associate professor in the department of Cultural and Historical Studies at Otemae University in Japan.

By the mid-Edo Period, between 1603-1868, goldfish had become popular pets, but their allure was reserved only for aristocrats. By the 19th Century, the Edo military government was brought to an end, ushering in the Meiji period, an overture to modern Japan.

Since then, goldfish have been a fan favourite among the people of Japan. Different varieties are cultivated almost all over the country, but most extensively in Tokyo, and Yamatokoriyama in Nara Prefecture.

Every year, in the heat of August, summer festivals pop up across most cities and kingyo-sukui – a traditional game, dating from the Edo period that challenges players to scoop up live goldfish with a paper ladle – are still a common sight at summer festivals now.

“Coincidentally, my pet goldfish that saved me from quitting as an artist was also from these goldfish-scooping booths,” says Fukahori.



The popularity of the goldfish is so big that batches of them are brought over from Tokyo to Hokkaido at the beginning of every summer. It's difficult for the fish to survive the intense winter in the northernmost of Japan's main islands.

In the Muromachi period in the 1500s, when China first introduced goldfish to Japan, trade between the two nations also boomed. During this time, as a love for culture prospered, the goldfish found its way into Japanese art - particularly in a genre known as ukiyo-e. Ukiyo could mean either 'floating world' or 'sad and troubled world,' and describes the urban lifestyle of Japan's Edo period. It included woodblock prints that usually depicted the cities' pleasure districts during that time. Goldfish were bred in Japan to have long, elegant fins to reflect the Edo-period's floating aesthetic.

Perhaps the most famous goldfish art in the world of woodblock printings is Kingyo Zukushi by Utagawa Kuniyoshi, a famous sketch artist of the era.

The collection consists of nine art pieces that humorously portray goldfish as people in situations such as fending off enemies, enjoying drinking parties, and holding umbrellas in the rain. Most of the artworks are stored in the Royal Museum of Art and History in Belgium, but there are also some exhibited in Japan.

According to Fukahori, who is also a visiting professor at Yokohama College of Art and Design, Japanese art has incorporated animals moving and dressing like humans since ancient times. But Utagawa Kuniyoshi's art, he says, explored a world beyond traditions, and that's why it's so popular.

“In Kuniyoshi’s art, (the goldfish) are freed from their water world, and looks as if they have even captured their freedom. I believe that Kuniyoshi’s ‘out-of-the-box’ thinking and extraordinary talent is expressed in full-scale in many of his works,” says Fukahori.

Today, goldfish remain a central element in popular culture and art in modern Japan. And Fukahori’s art is testament to the favour goldfish receive in Japanese culture.

“Originally, the Japanese people [had] a special attraction towards goldfish, different from tropical fish. But many of these Japanese people may not even realise that. They may not realise the beauty of the goldfish because their existence is so close to our daily lives,” Fukahori says.

“I never look at photos of real goldfish when I paint. I use my imagination and memory. Goldfish were mainly bred by humans. I feel like I am doing the same in my mind, creating new and different breeds of goldfish.

“It doesn’t exist, but it’s there. It may seem like they exist, but not really. The goldfish I create are like ghosts, or spirits,” says Fukahori.

Fukahori works out of his art studio Kingyo Yougajyou, in Yokohama, just a little south of Tokyo. His artwork is created so that you view it from the top – perhaps a tribute to how the Japanese people traditionally enjoyed watching these creatures.

Elsewhere, locals and tourists alike flock to an annual exhibition called Art Aquarium held in Japan, which features goldfish swimming around in globes, spheres, and other tanks in assorted geometric shapes. Neon lights filter through the dark walls of the usually dimly-lit venue, as steady trance music fills the space.

The exhibition producer, Hidetomo Kimura spent several years selling aquarium fish to stores across Japan as an ornamental fish expert, but his love of art and design pushed him towards a creative alternative career. His showcases often feature other aquatic creatures as well, but his goldfish series is one of the most popular ones, and has upwards of 8.1 million visitors.

Nowadays, the ubiquitous goldfish prints are found on daily items including fans, towels, bowls, and even candies, and “people hardly ever notice it anymore,” according to Professor Tanaka.

“This may be part of broader trends, where mass production makes people less impressed by the goods available to them, simply because they aren’t as unusual,” she says.

“I think [the allure of the goldfish] has changed. People aren’t aware of the history, but its association with summer, grace, and beauty still persists.”