From the late 1880s the world of Chinese-inflected arts in Japan was in decline, the result of calls to develop a distinctively Japanese type of art and of ambivalence towards the Chinese empire itself. Many individuals continued to produce calligraphy and literati-style painting as a private occupation, but for public exhibitions and imperial commissions the monochrome ink paintings and idealized landscapes characteristic of bunjinga were not acceptable. In this context, bird-and-flower paintings—a genre in which Katei excelled—emerged as an ideal vehicle for symbolic messages and displays of artistic technique.

This shift can be traced through Katei’s career, as the informal paintings in ink on paper disappeared, along with his frequent contributions to literati publications. The subjects for his public works of the 1890s were exclusively birds, animals, flowers, and other plants. Intensely coloured, meticulously rendered, and on silk, they incorporated elements of the Shen Nanpin style and sketching from life. The type of commission was also transformed, moving from works for private patrons to paintings produced in the service of the nation for display at home and abroad. The palace decorative programme and presentations for the imperial institution, prestigious international exposition submissions, and commissions from prominent industrialists: these dominated Katei’s production during his final decade and made it by far his most prolific. Public work of this kind required him to develop powerful motifs to convey appropriate messages as well as a strong visual approach suitable for large venues.

In his biography of 1906 Murayama Shungo confirmed that Katei’s style altered significantly after the age of fifty (1880), and that people who knew only the densely coloured, detailed paintings of the 1890s assumed this was all he did. However, in the last part of the chapter it will be shown that Katei maintained a different, older style for some private patrons, perpetuating the landscapes, figure paintings, and Chinese themes that had disappeared from his public work.

BIRDS AND FLOWERS AS SYMBOL OF JAPAN

During the 1890s the genre of bird-and-flower painting was reconceived as an “invented tradition,” one that could present something identifiably “Japanese” to both domestic viewers and foreign audiences, and that was suitably eye-catching for the new, public display spaces. This form changed from relatively small hanging scrolls for private enjoyment into large-scale, framed works employing thick pigments and dense compositions. Within Japan bird and flower themes were used extensively in works for the imperial household, in particular the decorative programme for the palace. Here, the natural world was used to symbolize harmony in...