

Botanical identification and symbolism of plants

in the *Nanban* table decorations from the Wilanów collection

Jacek Kuśmierski, Damian Makowski

Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów, Garden Department
 jkusmierski@muzeum-wilanow.pl; dmakowski@muzeum-wilanow.pl

INTRODUCTION

The conservation of the seventeenth-century *Nanban* table from the Wilanów collection, has contributed to interdisciplinary scientific research aimed at deepening knowledge about this unique object. The inlaid and painted decoration, densely covering all parts of the table, contains richness and variety of plant motifs that have not been recognized yet. Identification of the plants on the *Nanban* table was quite a challenge because of their naturalist or stylised representation, characterised by simplified presentation of the elements of external structure (morphological and anatomical modifications). The first such thorough botanical analysis of the table was aimed at the identification of individual species and their interpretation in a cultural context. The new, botanical approach not only deepened the knowledge about this unique monument, but also made it possible to decode the message hidden in the symbolic language of plants.

RESULTS

A total of 37 plant taxa were identified in the *Nanban* table decorations. 31 of them were recognized, including 25 species. Due to the bad condition of some parts of the decoration, 6 taxa remain undefined. A total of over 900 specimens of plants decorate the legs and tabletop.

Winter plants

Camelia japonica / Japanese camellia / tsubaki [ツバキ]
Cryptomeria japonica / Japanese cedar / sugi [スギ]
Indocalamus sp. / broadleaf indocalamus / take [タケ]
Paeonia suffruticosa / cold peony (winter peony) / kan-botan [ボタン]
Pinus thunbergii / Japanese black pine / kuromatsu [クロマツ]
Prunus mume / chinese plum (Japanese apricot) / ume [ウメ]
Sasa palmata / broadleaf bamboo / sasa [ササ]

Spring plants

Cymbidium goeringii / noble orchid / shunran [シュンラン]
Gentiana acaulis / gentiana / rindō [リンドウ]
Hosta sp. / hosta / giboushi [ギボウシ]
Iris sp. / iris / ayame [アヤメ]
Paulownia tomentosa / paulownia (princess tree) / kiri [キリ]
Prunus cerasus / Japanese cherry / sakura [サクラ]
Wisteria floribunda / Japanese wisteria / fuji [フジ]

Scientific name / common name / Japanese name



METHODS

Recognition of the plant species in the table decorations began with the identification of the ways in which they were represented in Japanese art of the Azuchi-Momoyama period. For this purpose, literature on the subject and comparable objects in the *Nanban* style were used, whose high-resolution illustrations were available online. A total of 30 objects of various types (tables, trunks, boxes, cabinets, reading desk, shrines) from auction houses and museums, including Kyoto National Museum, Kobe City Museum, Museum of the Orient in Lisbon, National Museum of Decorative Arts in Madrid, Rijksmuseum and Metropolitan Museum of Art, were used. Next, the role of plants in Japanese culture, both in tradition and in gardening, was discussed. Initial recognition of plants was deepened by analysis of morphological features such as plant habit, leaf shape and types of flowers or fruits. Due to the great detail of the landscapes in the cartouches on the tabletop, it was decided they would be drawn schematically (posters no. 2 and 3).

31 plant taxa of the *Nanban* table

Summer plants

Cleyera sakaki / sakaki / sakaki [サカキ]
Hibiscus syriacus / syrian ketmia / mukuge [ムクゲ]

Autumn plants

Acer japonicum / amur maple / hauchiwakaede [ハウチワカエデ]
Acer palmatum / palmate maple / irohanomiji [イロハノミジ]
Chrysanthemum japonense / chrysanthemum / noji-giku [ノジギク]
Chrysanthemum morifolium / florist's daisy / kiku [キク]
Citrus tachibana / tachibana orange / tachibana [タチバナ]
Dendranthema indica / yellow chrysanthemum / kiku [キク]
Dianthus japonicus / dianthus / nadeshiko [ナadeshiko]
Eupatorium japonicum / thoroughwort / fujibakama [フジバカマ]
Ginkgo biloba / ginkgo / ichō [イチヨウ]
Ipomea sp. / morning glory / asagao [アサガオ]
Lespedeza sp. / bush clover / hagi [ハギ]
Platycodon grandiflorus / chinese bellflower / kikyō [キキョウ]
Pueraria montana / Japanese arrowroot / kuzu [クズ]
Salix babylonica / weeping willow / shidareyanagi [シダレヤナギ]

Scientific name / common name / Japanese name

CONCLUSION

The plant species identified in the table decoration are characteristic of Japan's nature, and are a frequent motif in Japanese art. A similar botanical composition can be found in other *Nanban* works of art, but the table from the Wilanów collection is distinguished by much greater richness and diversity. In combination with animals, mythological creatures and architectural elements, they create a miniaturised natural and cultural landscape of Japan.

The analysis of the botanical composition in the decoration of the *Nanban* table made it possible to decode the symbolic language of plants, conveying an unusual tale of the power of nature and its changeability in the rhythm of the seasons. The subtle seasonal attributes of the plants indicate the motif of the four seasons. The decoration of the *Nanban* table is an expression of Japanese aesthetics, which appreciates plants not only because of their form or colour, but also because they are indicators of the seasons.

Landscapes on the tabletop are an excellent example of the characteristic Japanese art convention of depicting a single setting passing from spring to winter in one picture (theme of vivid contrasts of the seasons). Nature appears here as a changing phenomenon and seasonal variability is treated as an integral aspect of its beauty.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Joanna Koryciarz-Kitamikado, Anna Guzowska and Karolina Alkemade for entrusting us with this project and for substantive support, which allowed us to better get to know the *Nanban* table.

REFERENCES

- Ekielska, A. *The Far East in Wilanów*. Warsaw 2013
- Goto, S. & Naka, T. *Japanese Gardens: Symbolism and Design*. London 2016
- Guzowska, A. Koryciarz-Kitamikado, J. & Flisowska, Z. *Conservation of a unique Nanban table from the Wilanów collection*. Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów. Acces: 08.07.2019; www.wilanow-palac.pl/conservation_of_a_unique_nanban_table_from_the_wilanow_collection.html
- Hamada, N. *Traditional Japanese Patterns and Motifs*. Tokyo 2013
- Shirane, H. *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature, and the Arts*. New York 2013
- Shōno-Sládek, M. *The Splendour of Urushi. The Lacquer Art Collection at the Museum of East Asian Art, Cologne. Catalogue with Reflexions on Cultural History*. Cologne 1994
- Wołodźko, M. *Ogrody w kulturze dawnej Japonii (Gardens in the culture of ancient Japan)*. Warsaw-Toruń 2013

Botanical identification and symbolism of plants

in the Nanban table decorations from the Wilanów collection

Jacek Kuśmierski, Damian Makowski

Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów, Garden Department
 jkusmierski@muzeum-wilanow.pl; dmakowski@muzeum-wilanow.pl

BOTANICAL ANALYSIS OF THE NANBAN TABLETOP LANDSCAPES

The majority of the landscape presents autumn, represented by discolouring maples, fruiting tachibana oranges and flowering chrysanthemums. The lower part of the landscape, around the chicken family, there is a gentian symbolizing spring. The lower right part, with a bamboo fence (*sukashi-gaki*) refers to winter. We can find there winter peonies, which bloom at that time of the year, and broadleaf bamboo, one of the Three Friends of Winter (*Sho Chiku Bai*). Above it, around the chicken coop, there is a Syrian ketmia, symbolising summer. The landscape is complemented by long-tailed roosters (*onagadori*), swallowtail butterflies (*ageha-chō*) and birds.

symbol / Scientific name / common name / Japanese name

Winter plants

- 1 *Paeonia suffruticosa* / cold peony (winter peony) / kan-botan [ポタン]
- 2 *Sasa palmata* / broadleaf bamboo / sasa [ササ]

Spring plants

- 3 *Gentiana acaulis* / gentiana / sindō [リンドウ]

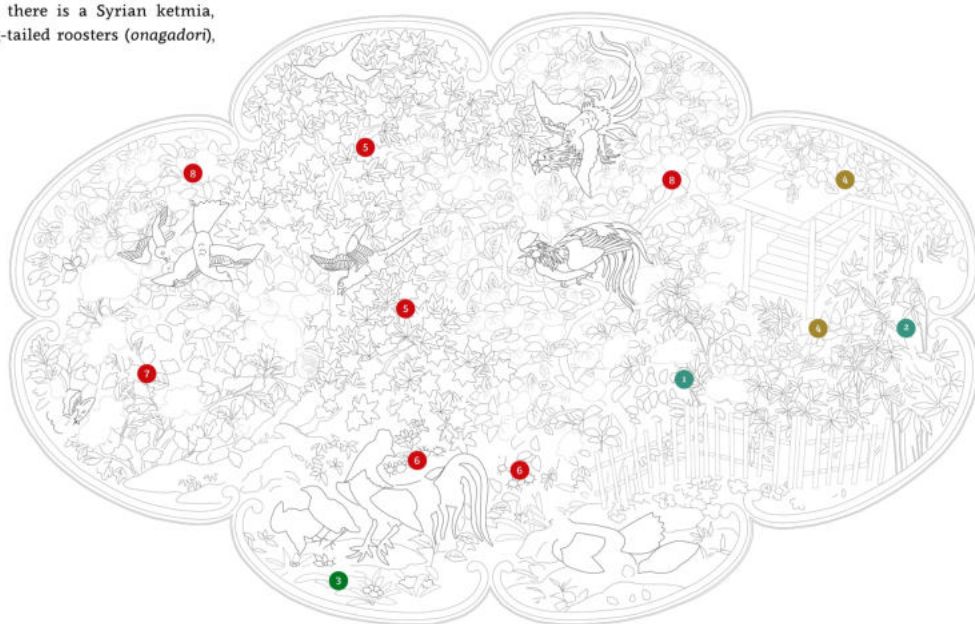
Summer plants

- 4 *Hibiscus syriacus* / syrian ketmia / mukuge [ムクゲ]

Autumn plants

- 5 *Acer japonicum* / amur maple / hauchiwakaede [ハチワカエデ]
- 6 *Chrysanthemum japonense* / chrysanthemum / noji-giku [ノジギク]
- 7 *Chrysanthemum morifolium* / florist's daisy / kiku [キク]
- 8 *Citrus tachibana* / tachibana orange / tachibana [タチバナ]

✕ unidentified plant species



Above two mythological kirins there is a winter landscape, where we can find blooming Japanese camellias and the evergreen broadleaf bamboo, one of the Three Friends of Winter (*Sho Chiku Bai*). In the upper left part, spring is symbolised by the flowering Paulownia. Between the kirins, there are fields of dianthus, one of the Seven Flowers of Autumn (*Aki-no Nanakusa*).

symbol / Scientific name / common name / Japanese name

Winter plants

- 1 *Camellia japonica* / Japanese camellia / tsubaki [ツバキ]
- 2 *Sasa palmata* / broadleaf bamboo / sasa [ササ]

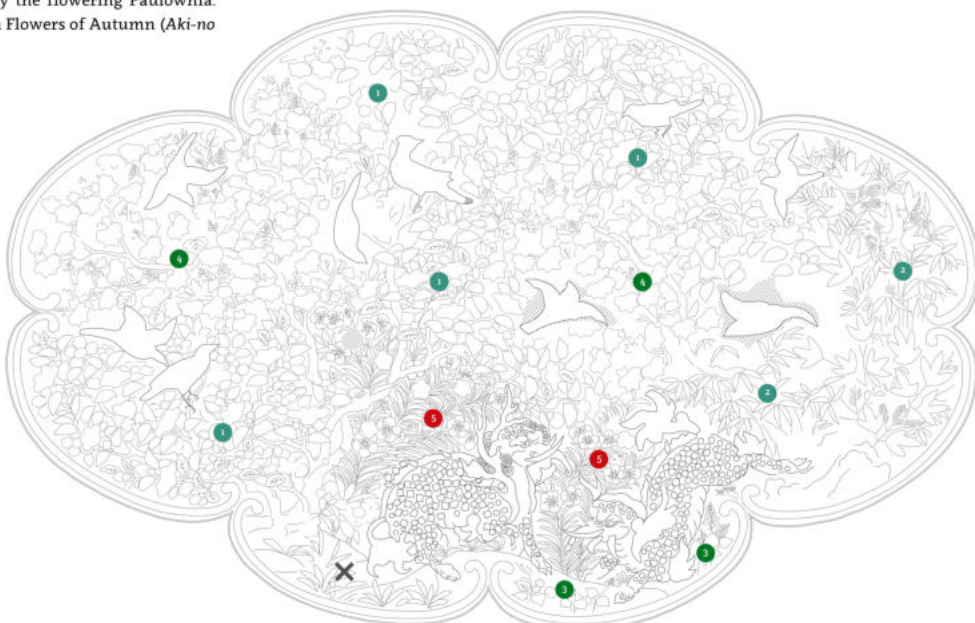
Spring plants

- 3 *Hosta* sp. / hosta / giboushi [ギボウシ]
- 4 *Paulownia tomentosa* / paulownia (princess tree) / kiri [キリ]

Autumn plants

- 5 *Dianthus japonicus* / dianthus / nadeshiko [ナadeshiko]

✕ unidentified plant species



Botanical identification and symbolism of plants in the Nanban tabletop decorations from the Wilanów collection

Jacek Kuśmierski, Damian Makowski

Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów, Garden Department
jkusmierski@muzeum-wilanow.pl; dmakowski@muzeum-wilanow.pl

BOTANICAL ANALYSIS OF THE NANBAN TABLETOP LANDSCAPES

Between two traditional garden pavilions (*azumaya*) there is an autumn-winter spectacle. In the lower part of the landscape, the herbs of autumn bloom: Chinese bellflowers, thoroughworts and chrysanthemums. In the upper part, winter is symbolised by its Three Friends (*Sho Chiku Bai*): Japanese black pine, blooming Japanese apricot and broadleaf indocalamus. On the left, above the evergreen Japanese cedars, is the waxing crescent moon. A breath of spring is introduced by the Japanese wisteria growing on the pine, while summer is referenced by the sasaki shrub. The landscape is complemented by rabbits (*usagi*), quails (*yōroppa uzura*) and birds.

symbol / Scientific name / common name / Japanese name

Winter plants

- 1 *Cryptomeria japonica* / Japanese cedar / sugi [スギ]
- 2 *Indocalamus* sp. / broadleaf indocalamus / take [タケ]
- 3 *Pinus thunbergii* / Japanese black pine / kurumatsu [クロマツ]
- 4 *Prunus mume* / chinese plum (Japanese apricot) / ume [ウメ]

Spring plants

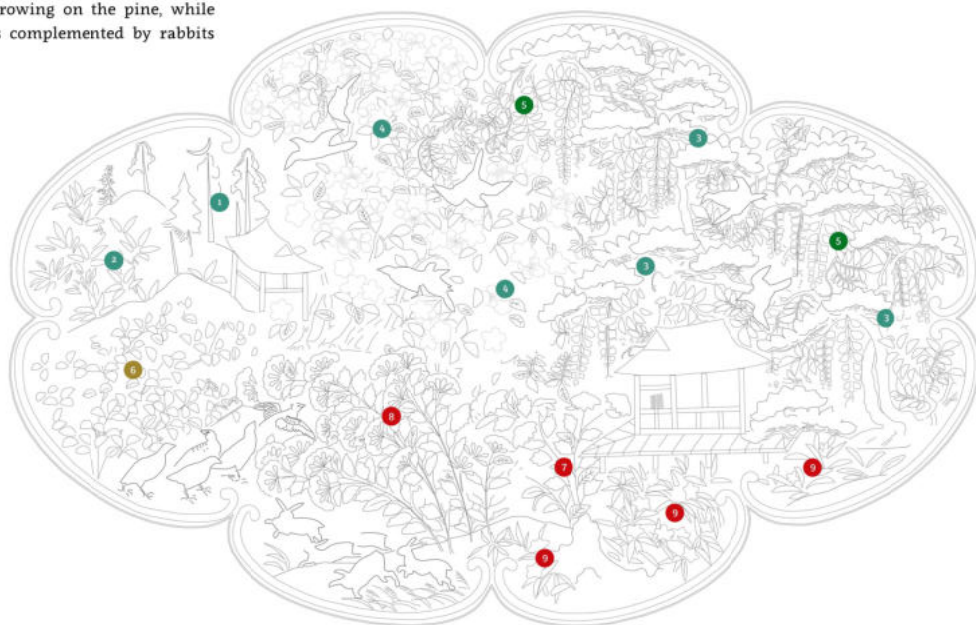
- 5 *Wisteria floribunda* / Japanese wisteria / fuji [フジ]

Summer plants

- 6 *Cleyera sakaki* / sakaki / sakaki [サカキ]

Autumn plants

- 7 *Dendrathera indica* / yellow chrysanthemum / kiku [キク]
- 8 *Eupatorium japonicum* / thoroughwort / fuji bakama [フジバカマ]
- 9 *Platycodon grandiflorus* / chinese bellflower / kikyō [キキョウ]



Around two riskshaws (*jinrikisha*), there is a meeting between spring and autumn. The lower left part of the landscape belongs to the former. The branches of the blooming Japanese cherry, under which irises and orchids grow, dominate here. On the other side is the kingdom of autumn with Chinese bellflowers, chrysanthemums and bush clover, one of the Seven Flowers of Autumn (*Aki-no Nanakusa*). Weeping willow twigs hang between the Japanese cherry trees. Sika deer (*nihon-jika*), swallowtail butterflies (*ageha-chō*), pheasants (*kiji*) and red-billed blue magpie (*sanjaku*) can be found among the plants.

symbol / Scientific name / common name / Japanese name

Spring plants

- 1 *Cymbidium goeringii* / noble orchid / shunran [シュンラン]
- 2 *Hosta* sp. / hosta / giboushi [ギボウシ]
- 3 *Prunus cerasus* / Japanese cherry / sakura [サクラ]

Autumn plants

- 4 *Dendrathera indica* / yellow chrysanthemum / kiku [キク]
- 5 *Lespedeza* sp. / bush clover / hagi [ハギ]
- 6 *Platycodon grandiflorus* / chinese bellflower / kikyō [キキョウ]
- 7 *Salix babylonica* / weeping willow / shidareyanagi [シダレヤナギ]

✕ unidentified plant species

