

# Bamboo

## the Essence of Japanese Aesthetics

January 5 (Tue.) - 31 (Sun.), 2021 at Hosa Library Exhibition Room



### 1 *Shō-chiku-bai* – The Three Friends of Winter and Mount Penglai

In Japan, *shō-chiku-bai*—the combination of pine, bamboo, and plum—is considered a symbol of happiness in New Year’s celebrations as well as auspicious ceremonies and occasions. This combination originally came from China, where these “Three Friends of Winter” have been appreciated as symbols of nobility, since the pine and bamboo remain green even in the coldest months and the plum tree blooms in spite of the cold.

While the connection with being “friends of winter” diminished over time in Japan, the *shō-chiku-bai* grouping has come to be associated with celebratory imagery and has become intertwined with the pairing of cranes and turtles, which are said to live 1,000 and 10,000 years, respectively. Eventually, *shō-chiku-bai* further developed a direct association with the mythical island of Mount Penglai, which is the home of the Daoist immortals.

### 2 Graceful Bamboo

Bamboo grows straight and maintains its green color throughout all the four seasons and its leaves make a pleasing sound when they flutter in the wind. Because of these features and its vigorous vitality, bamboo has become a symbol of purity and prosperity.

Bamboo has functioned as an important element in many myths and literary works, such as *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* (“*Taketori monogatari*”). Bamboo was even planted in the *Seiryō-den*, the Emperor’s private living quarters at the imperial palace.

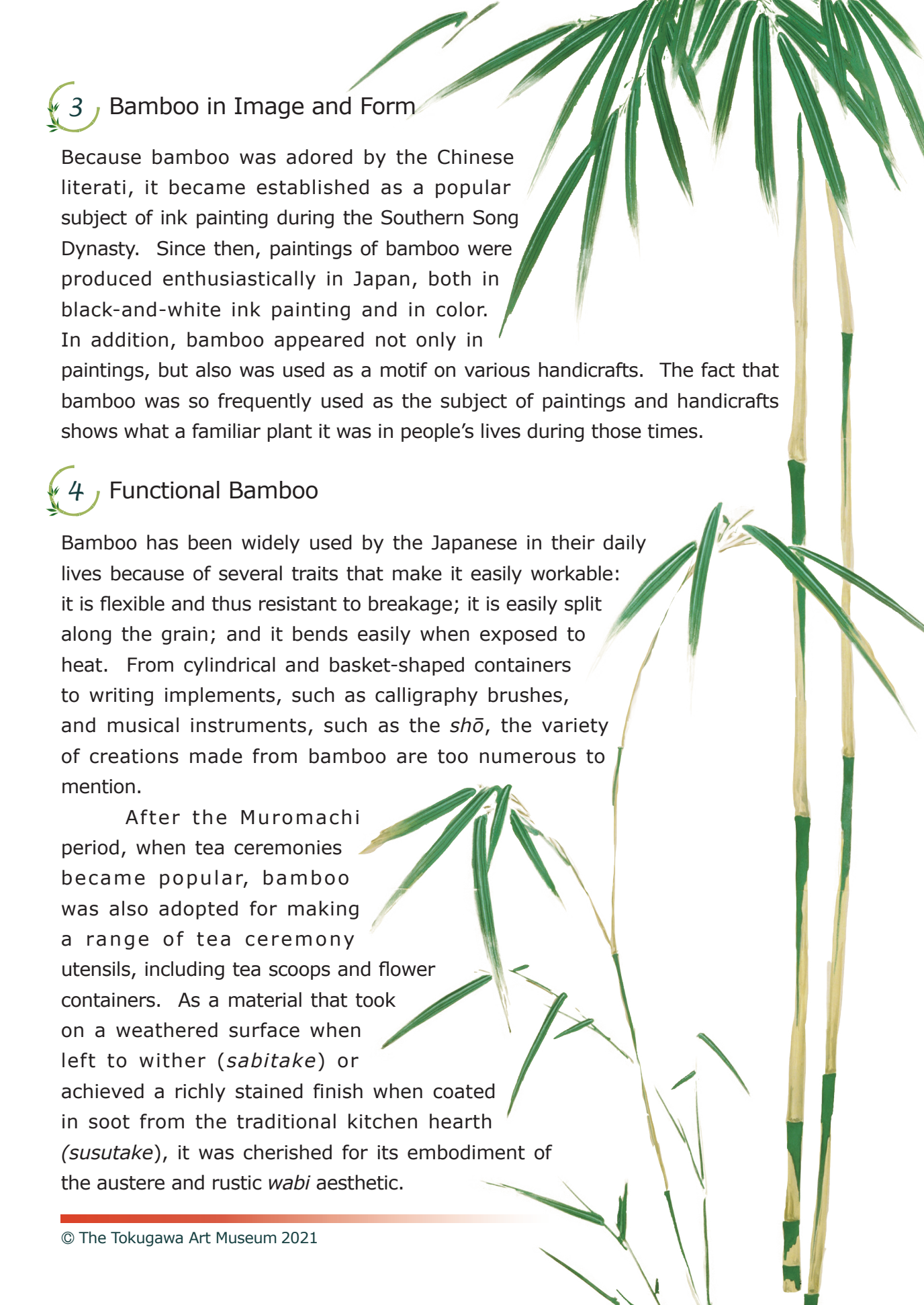
On the other hand, in China, bamboo was considered to be a symbol of the ideal spirit that doesn’t yield even in extreme weather conditions, such as strong wind or heavy snow. It was adored especially by the literati, as exemplified by the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, who disliked the defilements of common everyday life.



企画展

竹

日本の美



### 3 Bamboo in Image and Form

Because bamboo was adored by the Chinese literati, it became established as a popular subject of ink painting during the Southern Song Dynasty. Since then, paintings of bamboo were produced enthusiastically in Japan, both in black-and-white ink painting and in color. In addition, bamboo appeared not only in paintings, but also was used as a motif on various handicrafts. The fact that bamboo was so frequently used as the subject of paintings and handicrafts shows what a familiar plant it was in people's lives during those times.

### 4 Functional Bamboo

Bamboo has been widely used by the Japanese in their daily lives because of several traits that make it easily workable: it is flexible and thus resistant to breakage; it is easily split along the grain; and it bends easily when exposed to heat. From cylindrical and basket-shaped containers to writing implements, such as calligraphy brushes, and musical instruments, such as the *shō*, the variety of creations made from bamboo are too numerous to mention.

After the Muromachi period, when tea ceremonies became popular, bamboo was also adopted for making a range of tea ceremony utensils, including tea scoops and flower containers. As a material that took on a weathered surface when left to wither (*sabitate*) or achieved a richly stained finish when coated in soot from the traditional kitchen hearth (*susutake*), it was cherished for its embodiment of the austere and rustic *wabi* aesthetic.