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In New Major Exhibition at Mingei International Museum, Over 100 Japanese Hand-Painted Prayer Plaques Reveal Centuries of Personal Wishes for Love, Health, and Luck

- *Spanning from the 17th century to the present, these wooden votive plates, or ema, depict deities, animals, and symbolic imagery illustrating prayers*
- *“Painted Prayers” is the first museum exhibition in the U.S. to present an extensive and varied display of ema*

June 24, 2026, SAN DIEGO, CA — From October 17, 2026 – April 4, 2027, Mingei International Museum will present over 100 hand-painted, wooden votive plaques, or *ema*, in the major exhibition ***Painted Prayers: The Japanese Folk Art Tradition of Ema***. Curated by Japanese art historian Meher McArthur, *Painted Prayers* is the first museum exhibition in the U.S. to present an extensive and varied display of *ema*, both large (*ō-ema*) and small (*ko-ema* or simply *ema*), ranging from the 17th century to the present day. The exhibition showcases *ema* at a variety of scales, from hand-sized plaques to works measuring nearly four feet wide.

The presentation was organized at Mingei by Ariana Torres, Assistant Curator.

Ema are wooden votive plaques offered as prayers in Japan’s Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. They traditionally feature hand-painted imagery of deities, animals, or objects, representing wishes as general as good fortune for the coming year or as specific as the removal of warts. Some examples of *ema* on view include:

- Large *Ema* of a black horse, an offering in thanks for the fulfillment of prayers
- *Ema* of heart lock to swear off drinking sake
- *Ema* of an octopus, a prayer to cure illnesses, including calluses and warts

“*Ema* are at the heart of mingei traditions, where objects of daily life reflect both beauty and lived meaning,” said **Jessica Hanson York, Executive Director and CEO**. “It is a privilege to present *Painted Prayers: The Japanese Folk Art Tradition of Ema* at Mingei International Museum, building on the Museum’s commitment to global folk art. This major exhibition brings together works spanning centuries and collections, which reflect how people have long expressed hopes for health, prosperity, and connection through hand-painted form.”

Featured works are drawn from the collections of Mingei International Museum, USC Pacific Asia Museum, and the Fowler Museum at UCLA.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalog of the same name, featuring essays by McArthur and contributing scholar Dr. Hilary K. Snow, and a visual guide to *ema*, the first of its kind in the English language.

History of *Ema*

Ema are wooden votive plaques offered as prayers in Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples, a tradition going back at least 1,000 years. The term *ema* means “picture horse” as horses were believed to carry messages

to the Shinto gods. Patrons presented them to shrines as prayers to cure illness or ensure military success.

For centuries, large *ema* were commissioned as donations to shrines and temples and hung in *emadō*, or *ema* halls. However, around the Edo Period (1603-1868), small *ema* became more widespread, as shrines produced these smaller plaques for sale to visitors. Typically made of wood or paper, they are painted in a bold and cartoon-like style, often full of wit and whimsy. Often, they feature representations of a particular prayer, like foxes as prayers for an abundant harvest (since the fox was considered a messenger of the harvest god), or feature visual puns, such as the centipede as a prayer for increased foot traffic, or many customers.

Today, visitors to Japan's Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples still buy small *ema* to hang on stands with hundreds of others as prayers for health, happiness, and success in college entrance exams. Even in these hi-tech, digital times, these colorful painted and hand-written prayers remain an important part of Japanese spiritual life.

Wishes and Everyday Hopes

For centuries, *ema* have offered a revealing glimpse into the private hopes, anxieties, and everyday lives of people in Japan. These hand-painted wooden prayer plaques express wishes both universal and deeply personal, including prayers for peace, prosperity, good health, marriage, children, relief from illness, and financial stability.

Many also reflect everyday struggles, from relationship troubles to physical ailments and addiction. *Ema* illuminate the humanity behind these painted prayers and the ways that generations of people sought comfort, healing, and hope through art.

About Japanese Art Historian Meher McArthur

Meher McArthur is an Asian art historian specializing in Japanese art. She worked as Curator of East Asian Art at Pacific Asia Museum (now USC Pacific Asia Museum) and Creative Director for the Storrier Stearns Japanese Garden, both in Pasadena, and was Academic Curator for Scripps College in Claremont and Art and Cultural Director for JAPAN HOUSE Los Angeles. She curates traveling exhibitions for International Arts & Artists (IA&A), recently *Washi Transformed: New Expressions in Japanese Paper* and currently *KIMONO: Garment, Canvas, and Artistic Muse*. Her publications include *Gods and Goblins: Folk Paintings from Otsu* (PAM, 1999), *Reading Buddhist Art* (Thames & Hudson, 2002) and *The Arts of Asia* (Thames & Hudson, 2005), *An ABC of What Art Can Be* (Getty Museum, 2010), *New Expressions in Origami Art* (Tuttle, 2017), and *Washi Transformed: New Expressions in Japanese Paper* (IA&A, 2021), and her memoir *A Japanese Art Journey* (Tuttle, 2025), as well as numerous articles about Asian art. She lives in Pasadena, CA.

Additional quotes

"I've been wanting to curate an *ema* exhibition for many years and feel fortunate to work with Mingei to organize such an extensive exhibition thanks to three outstanding *ema* collections in Southern California - Mingei International Museum, The Fowler Museum at UCLA, and USC Pacific Asia Museum," **said Meher McArthur, Japanese art historian and exhibition curator.** "*Ema* represent the hopes and wishes of the ordinary people of Japan over many centuries. Despite their religious function as prayers offered to the gods, the colorful images painted on them are often full of wit, warmth, and humanity that makes them very relatable to people today."

"Locals and visitors alike will find shared desires, anxieties, and humor in the variety of *ema* featured in the exhibition here at Mingei," **said Ariana Torres, assistant curator at Mingei International Museum.** "Art

builds meaning through social connections and this show is just another reminder of how intertwined we are across both time and physical space."

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ABOUT MINGEI INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM

Mingei International Museum, located in San Diego's Balboa Park Cultural District, celebrates human creativity through multicultural works of folk art, craft, and design. Inspired by the Japanese mingei (art of the people) movement, Mingei cares deeply about design functionality, handmade craft, and bringing out the creativity that lives in all of us. In addition to rotating gallery exhibitions and event programming, Mingei's gift shop, theater, education center, restaurant, and café are backdrops for finding inspiration and connecting with the community. As the presenter of San Diego Design Week and a partner to over 50 local artists and art and cultural organizations, Mingei puts celebrating creativity at the core of its mission through workshops, film festivals, lectures, and more. Mingei is a nonprofit institution funded by admissions, individuals, and institutional support.

ABOUT THE BALBOA PARK CULTURAL DISTRICT

Located in the heart of San Diego, the Balboa Park Cultural District is home to a variety of arts and culture offerings. The 1,200 acre public park has been a hub for art, science, history, and culture since the 1915 Panama-California Exposition. The Cultural District includes Balboa Park's central mesa, particularly 17 museums, performing arts centers, gardens, and of course, the world famous San Diego Zoo. Thanks to organizations like the City of San Diego, Forever Balboa Park, the Balboa Park Cultural Partnership, and staff members of various institutions, the Balboa Park Cultural District is a major tourist destination.

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