

Maneki Neko –Lucky Cat

By Brad Kollus

Cats have been popular around the world and throughout time. Nothing demonstrates this better than when the cat becomes part of a country's culture, history and mythology. Maneki Neko, the beckoning cat of Japan, which brings good luck and fortune is a perfect example of this.

Maneki Neko is a white, tricolor or tortishelle cat statue or figurine with its paw raised often found in Japanese businesses and homes. Many experts consider it to be a Japanese Bobtail. It is popular throughout the country and has important meaning for people. "Japanese culture is one where objects hold meaning for absolutely everything. The smallest charms or folk sculpture are not just decorative but infused with various meaning," said Alan Pate, author of *The Art of the Japanese Doll*, and forthcoming *Collecting Japanese Dolls*. In addition, he is the owner and curator of the Akanezumiya Japanese art gallery in St. Ignatius, Montana.

Maneki Neko's paw is raised to beckon or welcome. If the left paw is raised it usually means to beckon in customers and bring good fortune or money to businesses, but also can mean to bring good luck. If the right paw is raised it usually means to beckon or bring good luck and is found in people's homes, but additionally can mean to bring money and good fortune to people. Maneki Neko figures have been created for centuries and come in many sizes, colors, materials and often carry various lucky charms. "Many of them are holding a gold coin called a koban worth ten million ryo, which is a lot of money, and is about them bringing good fortune to the owner, many of them also wear bibs and a bell which is modeled after the elaborate collars which cats wore in Japan long ago," said Donald Hargrove, Maneki Neko collector and contributor to the book *Moore Mews on Collecting Maneki Neko: Japan's Good Luck Cat*.

Sometimes Maneki Neko statues will be holding a mallet, and a fish. "The money mallet comes from the buddhist diety Daikoku who is very popular. The mallet is a symbol of money wish fulfilling. When you hit it, money pops out or your dreams come true. The fish represents the God Abisu, and the fish is Tai fish. Abisu is the God of daily provision and helps in getting your daily food needs met," said Mr. Pate.

The Legend of Maneki Neko

There are a few different legends of the origins of Maneki Neko. The most popular comes from documents at the Gotoku-ji Buddhist temple, still standing today, located in the Setagaya ward near Tokyo. In 1615, during the Edo period, the temple then was named the Kotoku Monastery and was very poor with few people visiting the temple to worship. Although the temple had very little money the chief monk at the temple still made sure the temple cat Tama was taken care of. One day the monk said to Tama "Kitty, I can't blame you for not helping. If you were but a man you might do something to help us." One day, during a large storm, a group of Samurai were coming back from a great victory at the siege of the Osaka castle. The Samurai leader was Ii Neotaka, owner of the Hikone castle.

The Temple of Maneki Neko Today

The Gotoku-ji temple where the Maneki Neko legend is said to have begun and where the cat Tama is buried is still an active temple today in Japan. "The temple itself would at one stage been a small village," said Dr. Tabor who has visited the Buddhist Gotoku-ji temple in Japan repeatedly. The cat is integral to the temple's activities. "They have little prayer sheets which are given to visitors. On these prayer sheets are a drawing of the Buddha sitting on a lotus, sitting above a cat who is in a hollow of a tree trunk," continued Dr. Tabor. Buddhist monks worship at a shrine in the temple which include a large Maneki Neko and shelves with many different smaller Maneki Nekos in the center of the shrine. While they are not directly worshipping the Maneki Neko, the beckoning cat plays an important role in the spirituality of the temple. Do cats live at the temple today? Absolutely, "Each time I have visited the temple, cats are living there who are very friendly and the monks fully accept them as part of the temple," said Dr. Tabor.



While passing the monastery Ii saw a cat beckoning for them to come to the monastery and seek shelter. Just as Ii stepped toward Tama, a lightning bolt struck right where the Samurai had been standing. Ii credited the cat for saving his life. The Samurai leader was extremely impressed by the monk and seeing how poor the temple was, decided to make it his family's temple, bringing the temple great riches and fortune which continues to this day. The temple was renamed Gotoku-ji. The monk was extremely grateful to Tama for beckoning to the Samurai and changing the temple's fortune. When Tama died he was buried in the Temple's cemetery's with full honors. Thus began the legend of Maneki Neko, the beckoning cat who brings good luck and fortune.

The Cat in Japan

The legend of Maneki Neko is a reflection of the popularity and importance the cat has played in the history of Japan. "During the sixth century in Japan the emperor made his cat a noble. In this period there was a strong association with the nobility and the cat," said Dr. Roger Tabor, cat biologist and author of *The Rise of the Cat and 100 Ways to Understand Your Cat*. The average person in Japan did not own cats. "The nobles had their cats on leashes in the Heian period," continued Dr. Tabor. Cats were kept in the nobles' palaces at this time and not allowed to run free. "In 1603 the Shogun took over in Japan and part of what he did was to take away the symbols of the aristocracy such as the cat. Only aristocrats could have cats before then," said Dr. Tabor. After this time cats became accessible to the general public.

"At around the same time in 1602, a disaster hit the Japanese economy, which had been built up around the aristocracy who had a huge appetite for silk robes. The silk robes were made by the silk worm which had been hit by an epidemic of rats and so part of an imperial decree was that all the cats had to be set free," said Dr. Tabor. This was done so the cats could kill the rats and save the silk worms which were so important to the Japanese economy.

Today, cats are extremely popular pets in Japan. "Dogs, because they cannot clean themselves are seen as unclean and are never allowed into the house. Cats are clean. So for along time cats have been allowed into houses where dogs are not allowed for hygiene reasons. Even in art from very early images you see cats within houses. That would not happen with any other animal," said Mr. Pate.

Maneki Neko really represents all our pet cats. As every cat owner knows, their cat beckoned them to take them home and has brought them the good luck and fortune by providing them with love and companionship.



YEOWWW! ORGANIC CATNIP - Feel it! Smell it! Touch it!

Experience the Difference

Yeowww! Catnip Products offers the ultimate sensory experience for your cat. Made in the USA, these quality products can withstand even the toughest love and should last up to a year. Ask your local pet shop to show you the Yeowww! difference. Your cat will love you for it.

For a full list of Yeowww! stockists please go to our website at: www.petsfirstchoice.com.au