

Makoto Azuma, a Modern Kadōka

Ikebana is the traditional Japanese art of flower arrangement. Those who follow this art form are called kadōkas. This artistic technique derives from Japanese symbolism placed on many different types of flora. Makoto Azuma is a modern kadōka, famously known for his deep, emotional connection to botanicals. His 2014 piece *In Bloom #1EXOBOTANICA I-BOTANICAL SPACE FLIGHT* combines traditional Japanese art styles and modern innovation through its spectacular use of space travel. The 13-pound floral arrangement is suspended 30,000 meters above the surface of the Earth and photographed. This “living art”, as Azuma coined it, contains a hauntingly beautiful and even bizarre mood. This arrangement contains primarily red lilies, representing the heavens, and pink orchids, which were historically kept in temples. The meaning behind the flowers is very important to the piece, by adding the religious aspect and it connects the dots for why Azuma decided to send the arrangement into the space, which is often connected to religious ideas of heaven.

The deep, symbolic meanings behind flora and other wildlife connect to all areas of Japanese culture and are used as ornamentation in many different forms of art. *Robe with Cherry Blossoms and Cypress Fence* utilizes cherry blossoms as a form of ornamentation, which is a famous symbol of vitality and life in Japan. *Birds and Flowers of the Four Seasons* is a folding screen that shows the Japanese association of different seasons and which wildlife they believe represents them. Plants are most commonly used as ornamentation because Japanese culture values the human connection with nature. These beliefs are influenced by religious systems, mainly Zen Buddhism and Shintoism, both of which emphasize a simple, nature-based life.

Azuma and many other modern artists are breathing new air into this traditional art style and keeping it alive. By placing botanicals in new, previously unthought-of, environments, he adds new meaning to the already symbolic flowers. Beauty is one of Azuma’s work’s main motifs. He wants to challenge what he sees as beautiful, mainly being flowers and botanicals. He challenges their beauty with the help of technological innovation. Azuma’s work is very bold in its juxtaposition between modern and traditional. His work has a way of grabbing the viewers’ attention with his great attention to detail and traditional, familiar forms, and then subverting and challenging expectations. He freezes, dries, lights on fire, and sends into space these beautiful floral arrangements. His work all follows the theme of “*mono no aware*”, which seeks to highlight the impermanence of things. His destruction of these works of art challenges the viewer to consider what truly makes them beautiful. Ikebana is highly focused on the meaning and symbolism of the flowers, and Azuma’s art emphasizes this. He utilizes traditional forms of Japanese art to subvert expectations and provoke rational thought. His work challenges human superficiality through modern innovation and *EXOBOTANICA* does this by combining religious aspects with modern space technology.



Makoto Azuma, *In Bloom #1EXOBOTANICA 1- BOTANICAL SPACE FLIGHT*, 2014, Photo by Shiinoki Shunsuke, <https://azumamakoto.com/1107/>



Birds and Flowers of the Four Seasons, late 16th century, Momoyama period, folding screens



Robe (Kosode) with Cherry Blossoms and Cypress Fence, 17th century