

# SYMBOLISM

## in Korean Art

Recommended for  
Elementary School

This lesson presents students with stories, primary source documents, and museum objects that demonstrate how symbolism was used during the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) in Korea.

This work song from the Joseon dynasty was sung by women while sewing and embroidering.

*I plant a rootless tree  
in the sea off Taech'on seashore.  
The sun grows on a branch  
The moon grows on still another branch  
I pluck the sun to make the exterior of the bag  
I pluck the moon to line the inside of the bag  
I pluck stars to embroider the bag  
I use rainbow as tying strings  
I hang the completed bag on Seoul's Namdae-mun gate  
I let officials returning from province see it  
I let officials going to province see it  
I have no intention to give the bag to anybody  
Because I made it for my love*

From "Daily Living Articles in the Late 19th Century Korea" by Dong-keon Im in *Korean Collection from the Peabody Essex Museum* (National Museum of Korea, 1994), p. 218.

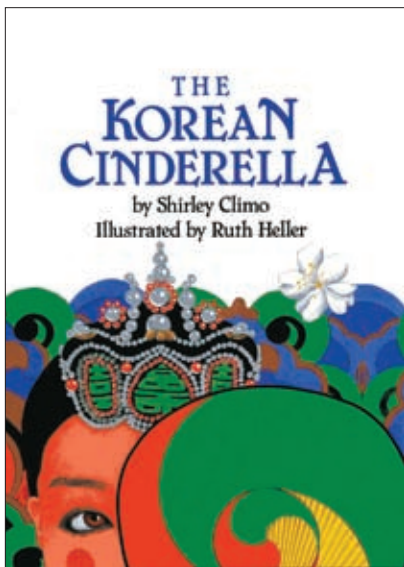
### *Understanding Motive*

The artist says that she is making a bag with the sun, moon, stars, and a rainbow. What do you think she is actually making the bag with? What is this artist's feeling about the bag she is making?

### INTRODUCTION

### HISTORICAL PRIMARY SOURCE MATERIAL

**LITERATURE**  
***The Korean Cinderella***  
**by Shirley Climo,**  
**Illustrated by Ruth Heller**



***Making Comparisons***

The sun, the moon, stars, and rainbows have important cultural meanings in Joseon dynasty Korea. What is their meaning in America? What other symbols have important cultural meanings in America today? What symbols are important to you?

*Like the tree planted to honor her birth, Pear Blossom is beautiful, and the pride of her elderly mother and father. But her mother dies, and her father remarries.*

*Pear Blossom's stepmother resents her new daughter's beauty. Out of jealousy, she makes Pear Blossom perform impossible chores while her own daughter, Peony, watches idly. But fortunately, Pear Blossom is not alone. With the help of magical creatures—togkabis—she is able to accomplish each task, and triumph over her stepmother's cruelty.*

*Here is an enchanting cultural variation of a favorite fairy tale.*

From *The Korean Cinderella* by Shirley Climo, illustrated by Ruth Heller, (Harper Collins, 1993), cover.

***Finding Evidence***

“Both the tree and the child grew lovelier with each passing season” (p. 5). How does the illustrator indicate the passing of the seasons on pages 4 and 5? The Visual Lexicon tells us that pear blossoms are symbols of spring. Use the Visual Lexicon to find five other examples of symbols in the illustrations. Discuss whether the use of the symbols fits the story line.

***Making Inferences***

Notice the illustrations on pages 10 and 11 of the book. What can you tell about Korean culture from the fact that they dry wheat and corn husks to make baskets and straw crafts? (*Hint: Joseon Korea was a rural society.*)

ARTscape™ takes accessibility of PEM's collections to new heights through an intuitive interface that suggests relationships between objects and ideas. An extensive keywording system, which is applied to all content, incorporates both concrete and abstract criteria with a "fuzzy logic" approach to connecting works of art. Rather than generating a limited set of search results, such as those typically made through static, linked databases, ARTscape™ helps forge experiences as unique and personalized as each individual's imagination. Ask students to find art objects that display some of the symbols they have studied.

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### ***Object-to-Text Questions***

Select a PEM Art Card. Describe the object that you see, and use the Visual Lexicon to determine the meaning of the symbols. Imagine the process that the artist went through when he or she was creating this object. What materials were used? Who was it created for? What were the circumstances? Why did the artist choose these symbols? How would the object be used?

### ***Object-to-Object Questions***

Look at a work of art on display in PEM's Korean gallery, then look at the object to its left or right. What connections can you see between objects? What do the labels tell you? Can you find the same symbol on more than one object? Does the symbol always look the same? Compare and contrast two or more versions of the same symbol.

### ***Object-to-World Connections***

Look at the *hyungbae* (embroidered rank badges) on display in the Korean gallery. Civil and military officials of the Joseon dynasty wore these *hyungbae* on the front and back of their official robes to signify their exact status out of the nine possible ranks. The badge with the insignia of a tiger was worn by a military official, while the badge with the insignia of a crane was worn by a civil official. Why do you think the tiger and the crane were chosen as symbols for the military and civil service, respectively? What are some characteristics of each animal? Back in the classroom, look up the particular meanings of these symbols in the Visual Lexicon.

## **MEDIA COMPONENT**

**ARTscape™ Web Site**

## **ART DISCUSSION**

**with PEM ART CARDS**

## **MUSEUM VISIT LESSONS**



*Ssanghak hyungbae* (double crane rank badge)  
19th century  
Silk, paper, gold thread  
Gift of Gustavus Goward, E9785

## ART ACTIVITY

### Making Buchae

#### Korean Fans



Taegeukseon (fan with yin yang symbol)

19th century

Paper, wood, lacquer

13 ¾ x 9 in.

and

Miseon (tail shaped fan)

ca. 1880

Chun-Ila Province

Paper, lacquer, bamboo

14 ¾ x 9 7/8 in.

Art Card K6

In late Joseon dynasty Korea, fans were often exchanged as gifts and symbolized good fortune and well wishes to the receiver. Make a fan decorated with some of the symbols from the visual lexicon. As you work on your gift, think about the person you are making the fan for and the good will you wish for him or her. Explain what the symbols mean when you deliver the gift.

Korean fans were made out of strong *hanji* (mulberry paper), and the handles were made out of wood or bone. There are two kinds of fans: flat and folding. Flat fans come in many forms taken from nature. This art activity allows you to let's you select from several examples to make a double-sided fan.

#### Materials

- ◆ fan templates
- ◆ scissors
- ◆ wooden popsicle sticks or tongue depressors
- ◆ colored paper
- ◆ markers, pencils, and crayons
- ◆ glue sticks
- ◆ masking tape

#### Instructions

1. Pick a shape of fan you would like to make from the available templates.
2. Cut out the two sides of your fan. Line them up, and decide which sides will be on the outside.
3. Decorate the two “outsides” of the fan with markers or a collage. Think about what colors, shapes, and symbols you would like to use. Do you want the two sides to be the same or different?
4. Tape a wooden stick to the inside of one of the pieces. This will be the handle.
5. Using a glue stick, attach the second piece.

If you have more time, make a fan that represents good fortune to give to a teacher, parent, or friend. Besides thinking about shapes and colors, add one of the symbols from the visual lexicon to create a symbol or scene that conveys your good wishes. Think about these wishes as you work carefully on your gift. Explain what the symbols mean when you deliver the fan.

Send a fan or a group collage to the gallery teacher who guided your visit. In a short letter, explain why each of the symbols was selected.

English Language Arts Standards: 1, 2, 8, 16, 17, 26

Foreign Language Curriculum Standards: 4

Social Studies Standards: 1.6, 1.7, 1.9, 4.5, 4.7

2nd Grade Concepts and Skills: 2, 7, 8, 9

3rd Grade Concepts and Skills: 2, 9

Visual Arts Learning Standards: 1, 2, 6, 7, 10

Climo, Shirley, and Ruth Heller. *The Korean Cinderella*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993.

Im, Dong-keon. "Daily Living Articles in the Late 19th Century Korea." *Korean Collection from the Peabody Essex Museum*. Seoul: National Museum of Korea, 1994.

Loudon, Sarah et al. *A Curriculum Resource for Teachers to Accompany the Exhibition Explore Korea: A Visit to Grandfather's House*. 2000. Seattle Art Museum. 20 October 2004. [www.seattleartmuseum.org/Exhibit/Archive/grandfathershouse/lessons/download/GFmaterials.doc](http://www.seattleartmuseum.org/Exhibit/Archive/grandfathershouse/lessons/download/GFmaterials.doc).

ARTscape™ June, 2003. Peabody Essex Museum [www.pem.org/artscape/](http://www.pem.org/artscape/). Design by Second Story Inc.

## FOLLOW UP ACTIVITY

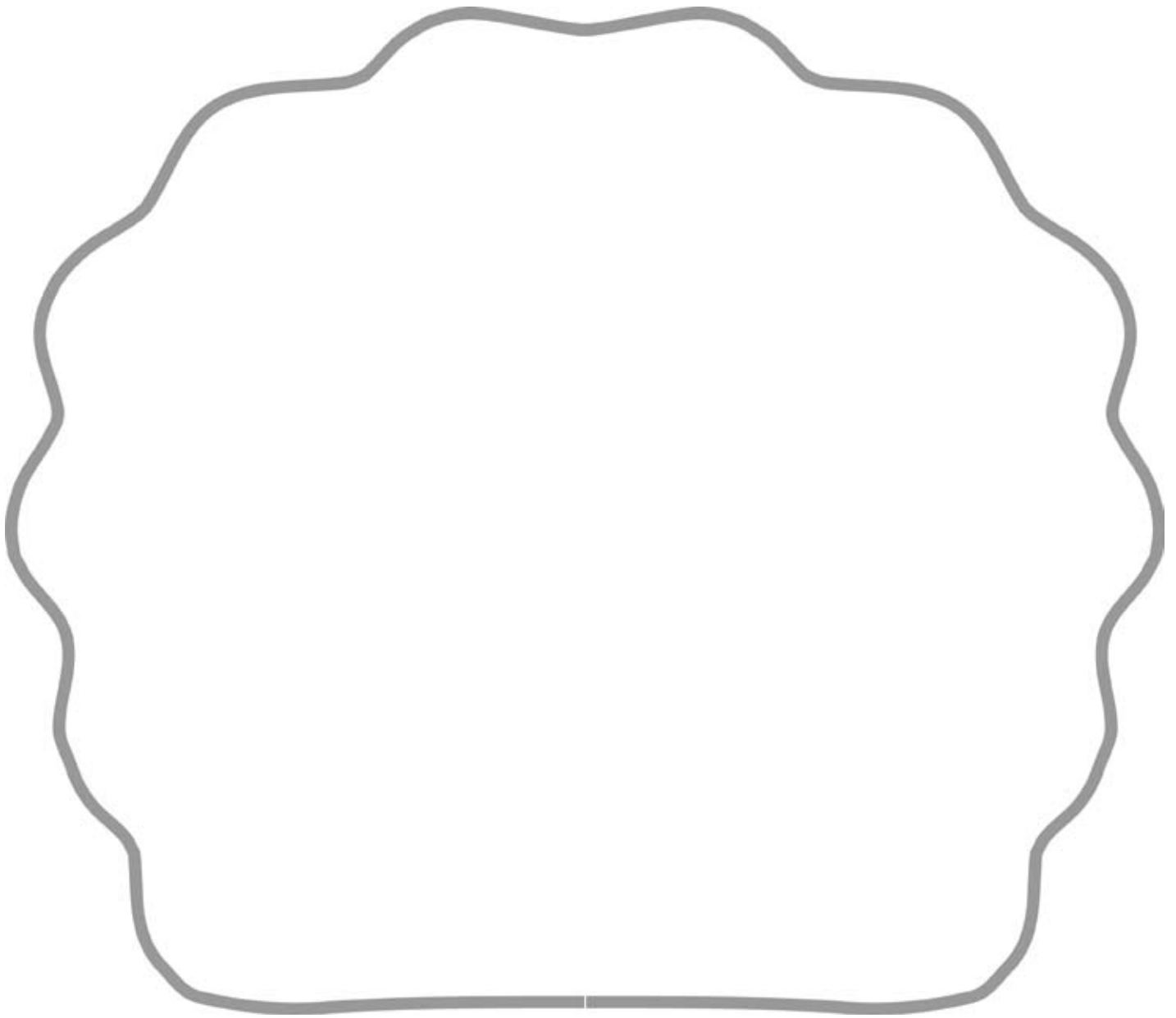
## MASSACHUSETTS FRAMEWORKS

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

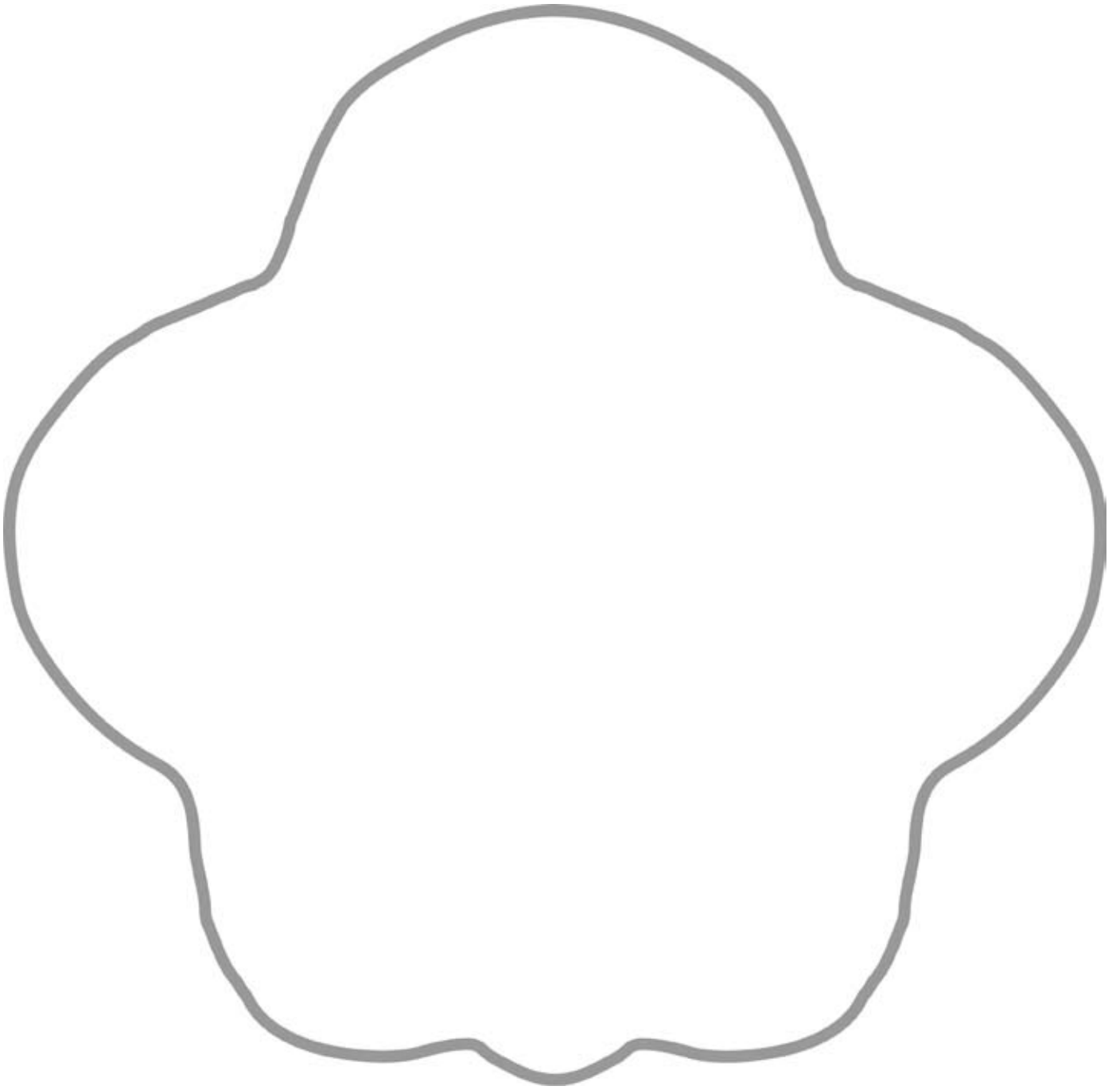


Archer's accessory  
19th century  
Antler, silk, embroidered wool, metal  
Gift of Frank W. Benson  
EI61000

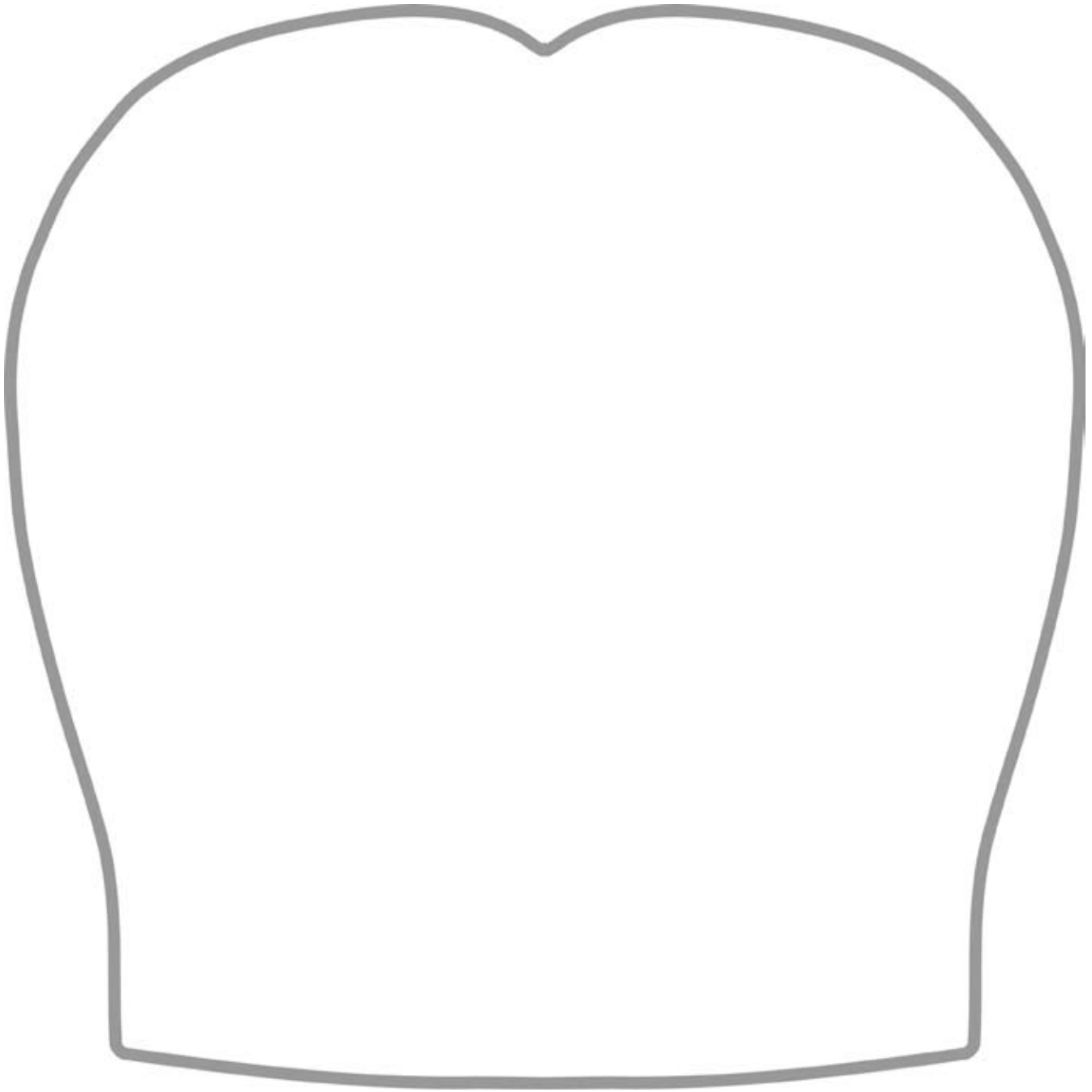
FAN TEMPLATE I



FAN TEMPLATE II



FAN TEMPLATE III





IMAGE

MEANING

plum blossom

winter, survival of hardships, endurance, and perseverance



crane

longevity, bird of the immortals, nobility, spirituality



dragon

a powerful, protective being that brings rain for crops

fish

diligence, fertility, abundance

peony

spring, honor, riches, fertility, marital bliss



pine tree

longevity, integrity, endurance

grapes

fertility, many children

tiger

courage, protection, chases away malevolent spirits



“double happiness” (Korean *huy*, Chinese *shuang xi*), happy marriage

phoenix

elegance, virtue, morality, prosperous future, the queen

*samtaegeuk*

heaven, earth, humankind, equality and balance, cycle of life



mandarin ducks

fidelity

lotus

purity, summer, enlightenment, happiness

