

Maneki Neko's Other Origin Tales

Find out three shocking creation stories behind the Japanese good luck symbol.

By Brad Kollus

Maneki Neko, a Japanese cat who is a symbol of good fortune. Maneki Neko is the tricolor bobtail Japanese cat statue often kept in Japanese businesses and homes. It is always shown with either its left or right paw raised, and is often called the beckoning cat. Maneki Neko statues are said to bring good luck to its owners.

The most popular legend of Maneki Neko's origins is one where a cat named Tama saves a Samurai leader's life by beckoning him with his raised paw just before a bolt of lightning was to strike him. The Samurai leader entered the poor temple where Tama lived, and was so impressed by the priest and his temple, made it his family's temple, bringing it great wealth. When the cat died, the priest gave him a burial with full honors and the legend of Maneki Neko was created to honor Tama.

However, other stories claim to explain the legend of Maneki Neko as well:

1. The Legend of the Courtesan

In the 18th century, there was a house for entertaining men in eastern Tokyo. One of the women who lived at the house, Usugumo, loved cats and had one as a pet. One evening, she got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. Her cat started pulling on her robe trying to keep her from the bathroom. The house owner came and upon seeing this suspected that the cat was attacking her. He drew his sword and cut off the cat's head. It flew through the air and landed on top of the toilet, biting and killing a snake that was there waiting to attack Usugumo. She was extremely upset about the mistaken slaying of the cat that saved her life. So in her cat's honor, one of the house guests gave Usugumo a carved wooden image of it. Some say the honored cat's statue was how Maneki Neko began.

2. The Legend of the Old Woman

During the 19th century, there was an old woman who was extremely poor and had a cat that she loved dearly. Eventually, she could no longer care for the cat and, one evening, had to let it go. That same night, her cat appeared to her in a dream telling her to make his image out of clay and that this clay image would bring her good fortune. The old woman followed the cat's instructions and, soon after, a visitor liked the clay cat so much, he offered to buy it. After that, the old woman made clay cats that more and more people bought, which lifted the woman out of poverty. Such is another account of Maneki Neko's origins.

3. The Legend of New Advertising

Another historical account as to Maneki Neko's rise in popularity comes from prostitution houses that traditionally used large male phallus sculptures to advertise their services. In the 18th century, when more American and European began visiting Japan, they complained that these images were pornographic. To keep relations felicitous, Maneki Neko statues, with his raised paw beckoning men to come to obtain the services these houses offered, replaced the giant phallus sculptures. Soon the new advertising practice spread to other commercial establishments beckoning customers to their doors.

No matter what Maneki Neko's origins, the symbolic cat promises good luck and good fortune.

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