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Emoji Apples: The Highly Prized Yet Transient Japanese Fruit Art



Mr. Kudo's farm in Hirakawa City, Aomori Prefecture, Japan | Image © Jane Alden Stevens



Greg Goodmacher
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Emoji apples can sell for tens of thousands of yen, despite only lasting a matter of weeks. The Japanese apple farmers behind these unusual artworks harness sunlight to transfer intricate designs into the skin of apples as they grow.

Long before expressive face symbols became ubiquitous on social media platforms and messaging services, the artistic apples that are created and sold in Aomori had been described as “emoji *ringos*” (emoji apples). The word emoji developed from combining the Japanese kanji 絵 (e), meaning picture, with 文字 (moji), which denotes written characters. The first emoji apples, which feature complex images on their skin – such as ancient gods, dragons fighting tigers, temple icons, zodiac signs and Japanese and Chinese characters – were created in Aomori in the 1970s.

An ardent pursuit in mastering a specialty is characteristic across [Japan](#). The farmers in Aomori, who started cultivating apple trees around 140 years ago, are no different, and extensive research and experimentation soon led Aomori to become, as the locals often boast, the apple centre of Japan. The Aomori apple industry now produces 60 percent of Japan’s apples, which are popular in many Asian countries for their particular taste and appearance.

The inventor of the emoji apple technique is Haruo Iwasaki, a farmer cultivating apples in Aomori. His son, Chisato Iwasaki, who is carrying on his father’s research, is acknowledged by the apple industry as the most talented apple artist today.

According to Chisato, his father spent five years of trial-and-error experimentation before developing an ingenious technique that uses sunlight to etch images onto apples while they are still growing. Though simple, the process is time-consuming and labour-intensive. The resultant decorated apples convey messages of good luck, prosperity, health, happiness and peace.

Kimura farm,
Aomori
Prefecture, Japan
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Alden Stevens



Apple farmers put dark bags over the young apples that they are cultivating to become emoji apples. When the apples have grown to the appropriate size, they remove the bags. The apples that have grown without sunlight lack the familiar bright red pigmentation. The farmers then apply clear plastic seals with black designs onto the apples. Sunlight on the uncovered areas stimulates chemical compounds called anthocyanins to produce natural red skin colouring, so it's vital that exposure to sunlight is even across the apples' skin. Farmers remove leaves that block sunlight and place reflective sheets on the ground to ensure that the sun's rays strike all surfaces of the apple.

After the apples have developed into mature fruit, the seals are removed. The apple skin under the black designs is a pale yellow. If all has gone well, one has a beautifully decorated apple. For each success, there are many failures, with wind, sunlight, insects and the health of the tree just some of the uncontrollable variables with which farmers have to contend.

Kimura farm in
Miwa, Aomori
Prefecture, Japan.
Inner bags are
removed once
the apple skin has
toughened up |
Image © Jane
Alden Stevens



Most emoji apple farmers purchase prepared seals at specialty shops in Aomori, but Chisato Iwasaki creates his own original designs. He also produces emoji apples to meet requests, like fellow apple artist Toshio Kimura, who creates emoji apples specifically for shinto shrine Dazaifu Tenman-gu.

At the 1,000-year-old Dazaifu Tenman-gu in [Fukuoka](#), one of the most important shrines in Japan, the head priest exhibits apples that depict Japanese apricot flowers on their skins – the shrine's symbol – in the main hall.

The embellished apples displayed in Dazaifu Tenman-gu come from Aomori apple farmer Toshio Kimura's garden. In Aomori, three women share the title of Miss Ringo, which is chosen via a competition. They represent Aomori for two years, promoting Aomori culture, especially its apples, both within Japan and overseas. Every November, that year's chosen Miss Ringo picks the emoji apples growing on Toshio Kimura's trees and personally delivers them to Fukuoka. During a formal ceremony called ringohounoushiki (apple dedication ceremony), Miss Ringo offers the apples to the head priest. She also gives apples to the young children who attend the kindergarten at Dazaifu Tenmon-gu.

In return, every January, the head priest and two shrine maidens travel from Fukuoka to Aomori to bestow blessings and gifts of red and white flowering Japanese apricot bonsai trees. Gift giving rituals are significant in Japan. Aomori chose apples because of their importance in Aomori, while the flowering bonsai represent a valued cultural asset of Fukuoka. This cultural exchange between north and south Japan started after flights first linked Aomori and Fukuoka around 20 years ago.

Chisato Iwasaki, Japan's foremost apple artist, explains that red and white represent good luck and health. In Japan, red and white decorations are used to celebrate weddings, the New Year and numerous other significant events. For special occasions, Japanese enclose gifts of money to give to friends and family in envelopes that are often decorated with white and red. Red is also a meaningful colour in the Shinto religion, with shrine gates painted with a particular shade of red that is said to protect against evil. In addition, the Japanese flag is a white background with a bright red sun. The varieties of fruit chosen for illustrated apples are always red, rather than green, yellow or pink, because red is an auspicious colour in Japan, as it is in many other Asian nations.

A select clientele pays a high price at auctions to purchase the rare, impermanent emoji apple artworks created by apple farmer-artists. The highest-quality apple artworks sell for as much as ¥100,000 (£763.40) each. Plucked off branches, displayed in elegant Japanese packaging, and auctioned off, these artworks are sweet, crunchy and highly treasured among the elite apple connoisseurs of Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan. They display their apples in places of worship, department stores, markets and private homes.

Every November, Chisato Iwasaki holds an emoji apple auction. It is a busy and exciting event. Apple brokers come to inspect his apples and outbid rivals. Prices range from a low of ¥100 (£0.76) for one apple with a simple design and mediocre colouring to ¥100,000 (£763.40) for flawless apples with intricate designs and perfect colouring.

Mr. Kudo's farm in
Hirakawa City,
Aomori
Prefecture, Japan
| Image © Jane
Alden Stevens



Raising delicious, gorgeously ornamented apples requires special skills. Packaging the apples does too. No simple paper or plastic bags will do for these beauties. Each one is cushioned in containers designed to augment the attractiveness of the apples while emphasising their cultural messaging, or telling stories of Asian folklore.

For instance, emoji apples that are charms for a prosperous future might be put into a box with windows and miniature shimekazari (a twisted straw rope with fern leaves) and kadomatsu (a decoration made with bamboo stalks and pine branches). These are symbols of good fortune, longevity and wealth.

Japanese folklore includes stories of the Seven Gods of Luck, known in Japanese as Shichi-fuku-jin. The gods are said to have travelled to Japan on a boat called the Takarabune (Treasure Ship). Apples connected with this theme are stacked in layers on miniature ships built to resemble the Takarabune.

It is said that beauty is only skin deep, and this is certainly true with emoji apples. The designs are in the skins, and the apples only last one or two months. But as one of the workers at the Kimura Apple Orchard explained, “Japanese appreciate the delicacy of transient beauty.”

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