

MANEKI-NEKO

by Elisa Parhad

Have you ever popped into a restaurant or shop and been greeted by a seated cat figurine with its paw up in the air? These cats, known as *maneki-neko*, are found all around the world, but are native to Japan. In Japanese, *maneko* means "beckoning" and *neko* means "cat." Business owners place the cats in their shop entrances in the hopes the cats will bring in good luck, as well as paying customers. For this reason, English speakers often refer to them as "Lucky Cats" or "Welcoming Cats."

To people from Western countries, the waving gesture looks like a "hello," but in Japan and other Asian countries, an upright arm with fingers moving in a scraping motion is a way to say, "Come here." While the name *maneki-neko* implies this gesture, some historians believe the upright paw shows that the cat is washing its face. This idea might have some merit as an old Japanese belief says that a cat washing its face means a visitor is sure to arrive. An ancient Chinese text repeats this notion: "If a cat raises its paw over the ears and washes its face, then patrons will come."

Whether a *maneki-neko* is washing its face or enticing someone to approach, its paws indicate further clues to the fortune it might bring. When the right paw is raised, money is said to come, while the left paw is believed to attract customers. The higher a paw is the more fortune a cat is thought to bring.

Like Japan's beloved *Hello Kitty* character, *maneki-neko* figures are modeled after a native breed of cats called Japanese bobcats, known for their short tails and calico fur. Because of an old folktale, these cats have long been associated with luck. According to the story, a monk was sitting under a tree when his cat beckoned with his paw for the monk to come to him. Puzzled, the monk walked over to the cat. A large branch fell where the monk had just been seated.

The domestic cat and some of its cultural associations originated in China. *Maneki-neko* is a Tokyo creation from when the city was known as Edo. A 17th century folktale links the city's Gotokuji temple to the tradition of lucky cats. Legend tells of the priest's cat that brought a feudal lord and his servants to safety during a thunderstorm. With a waving gesture, the cat invited the group inside the temple where they enjoyed hot tea while the storm raged outside. In gratitude, the lord became the temple patron and the temple prospered. When the cat died, his likeness was created as a monument—the first *maneki-neko*. These honored creatures of fortune line the temple grounds and greet visitors who come to pay their respects, and perhaps find some luck of their own.



Maneki-neko, known as "the beckoning cat," are sold throughout Tokyo.

WORD HELP

Beckon: make a gesture with the hand, arm, or head to encourage someone to come nearer or follow.

Monk: a member of a religious community of men typically living under vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Feudal: of, or relating to, the political, military, and social system in the Middle Ages.

FAST FACTS:

- Cats in Japan were once believed to have the power to charm or bewitch those who passed them by. Folktales often portray cats with the power to disguise themselves in human form, most often as a female.
- Just like cats, foxes are thought to have the ability to transform themselves, often into objects, such as teakettles. One especially beloved fox is Inari, a messenger of a deity who helps with the rice harvest. Many shrines are dedicated to Inari.



This large maneki-neko is located outside a Tokyo store.