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**Japan’s ambassador awaits arrival of 30 rare silk paintings from Imperial House**

**By** [**Ian Shapira**](http://www.washingtonpost.com/ian-shapira/2011/03/02/ABrXJuM_page.html)**, Published: March 13**

Ichiro Fujisaki, Japan’s ambassador to the United States, eagerly awaits the start of the National Cherry Blossom Festival this month in what is the centennial of the planting of Washington’s cherry trees, a gift from the city of Tokyo in 1912.

But beyond the cherry blossoms — expected to reach peak bloom earlier than usual this year — Fujisaki is fixated on another source of emblematic beauty, one that will be on display from March 30 to April 29 at the National Gallery of Art: [a set of 30 scrolls of 18th-century Japanese bird-and-flower paintings](http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/jakuchuinfo.shtm).

The entire set has never left Japan. But in honor of the cherry trees’ 100th anniversary on the Tidal Basin, the Japanese government is lending the National Gallery the silk paintings for four weeks. After that, they return to the Imperial Household.

“I have read so many books about these paintings and have seen so many pictures, and a great film, so I am excited to see the real ones,” Fujisaki said in an interview. “They are detailed and beautifully done and a favorite of a past emperor.”

The 100th anniversary of the cherry trees is almost as notable for all the ceremonies, presentations and events taking place beyond the Tidal Basin as for the blossoms.

The opening ceremony, on March 25 at the Washington Convention Center, will feature the traditional and surreal. [The Children’s Chorus of Washington](http://cchorus.homestead.com/) will sing the Japanese national anthem. (Coincidentally, the chorus recently welcomed a new executive director, Nao Tsurumaki, who is Japanese.) A group called [Samurai Sword Soul](http://www.samuraiswordsoul.com/samurai%20sword%20soul.html) will showcase — what else? — samurai sword fighting choreographed to rock music.

Joan Gregoryk, [founder and artistic director of the children’s chorus](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/music-review-nso-highlights-bernstein/2011/06/02/AGzIweHH_story.html), said the group’s members — students from 12 to 18 years old — have had no trouble memorizing the Japanese national anthem.

“To tell you the truth, we’ve been singing a lot of international songs this year, since our theme is Scandinavian,” she said. “Compared to Finnish and Danish, singing the Japanese national anthem has been quite simple.”

For Fujisaki, the entire festival reflects the great degree of trust behind the Japanese-U.S. relationship. “We are grateful to what Americans have done after 3/11,” he said, noting the date of last March’s earthquake in Japan. “A lot of Americans have gone out of their way — U.S. forces, U.S. schools and children.”

Recently, Fujisaki wrote a [Washington Post article](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/washingtons-cherry-blossoms-a-century-old-connection-between-us-japan/2012/01/13/gIQAD2XmEQ_story.html) about the history of the National Cherry Blossom Festival and told how, in 1912, first lady Helen Taft and the Japanese ambassador’s wife Viscountess Iwa Chinda planted the first saplings. In his research, Fujisaki said he was most struck by the generous reception given Tokyo’s mayor in 1950, just five years after World War II.

“Even during World War II, only a few trees were cut down, and almost all were left intact. Some people in the U.S. were really angry at Japan that all these trees were kept,” Fujisaki said. “But when the Tokyo mayor was invited to Congress, he was honored for his country’s gift of the trees in 1912. He even read a Japanese poem.”