

THE SYMBOLOGY OF THE ROOSTER

By Maria Manuela d'Oliveira Martins

Director of Museu do Oriente

Several symbologies are given to the rooster in the Western and Eastern cultures. In all of them, it is universally connected to the cult of the sun because its chant announces sunrise.

But the rooster becomes more relevant in China, either for its physical characteristics and grandness or its behaviour, which convey five virtues: the civil virtue, represented by the comb, conferring the look of a mandarin; the military virtue, because of the spur, symbol of bravery; courage, shown by its behaviour in fights (in countries where cockfights are allowed); kindness, for sharing food with the hens; trust, for the assurance which announces daylight everyday.

In this country the rooster is the tenth animal of the Chinese zodiac along with the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, dog and pig. In 2017 the year of the monkey will end and the year of the rooster will begin.

Roosters in China are not eaten or killed. They are considered protectors against demons. Having a painting of a red rooster at home means protection against fire. Placing a white rooster in a coffin keeps the dead away from demons.

In Chinese mythology, the rooster also means honesty, for its accuracy in marking time, and masculine strength. Cockfights, known in China since the 1st millennium B.C., became a very popular sport in the south, even though they were forbidden.

Its chant symbolizes fulfillment and fame. The Chinese word 'rooster comb' (guan) is homophonous to 'guan' meaning official. Offering a rooster with a pompous comb represents the wish for the person who receives it to get an official job.

In other Eastern cultures, like India, the rooster is also the Hindu Skandha, that personifies the energy of the sun.

In Japan, the rooster is also important, being its chant associated with the gods, especially Amaterasu, goddess of the Sun, who leaves her cave, attracted by the rays of the sun.

Magnificent roosters walk freely in the big Shintoist temples, being considered as sacred. The Japanese word 'torii' is homophonous to perch, a prominent place, referring to where the roosters stand.

Courage is another virtue the Japanese give the rooster, which can also be found in other Far East countries, where the rooster has a beneficent character.

Birds are symbol of protection, intelligence, wisdom and the divine, since they are messengers between heaven and earth. They also represent the soul because when they fly they are released from the earthly world.

In the West, the rooster is associated to the sacred. In Hellenic tradition, for instance, the rooster is associated to the gods and goddesses of the sun: Zeus, Apollo, Leto and Artemis.

In Christian tradition, the rooster is the symbol of Christ, like the eagle and the lamb, particularly emphasizing the solar symbolism, light and resurrection. As Christ, the rooster announces the light that follows the night. It can be found in weather vanes on top of church crosses and cathedral towers, meaning the supremacy of spirit over matter, the saviour celestial origin.

The Christmas mass on the night of 24th December represents the moment when in the north hemisphere a polar star would appear, marking the beginning of the winter solstice. The birth of Jesus meant the appearance of a new light to the world.

In Jewish Talmud the rooster is considered the master of delicacy because it announces the sun with its chant.

In Islam the rooster is worshiped in quite an unusual way comparing with other animals.

Many Eastern and Western countries use the rooster as a national symbol: France, Japan and Portugal.