

# ●Shinagawa Historical Museum Explanatory Sheet

## What are *Ema* Horse Plaques?

### The Origin and Development of *Ema*

In Japan, horses have been considered holy animals since ancient times, and long-ago, living horses used to be offered as sacrifices to the gods. Around the end of the third century, the offering custom evolved from live horses to figurines made of clay or wood. By the end of the eighth century, these various horse figurines were considered to have magical properties.

The custom of offering horses to Shinto shrines eventually further evolved into offering *ema* plaques illustrated with horses in place of figurines. Today, the oldest *ema* horse plaque still extant in Japan is a plaque from the late eighth century extracted from the Iba archaeological site in Hamamatsu City, Shizuoka Prefecture. By this time, *ema* horse plaques had already become a part of the religious worship of the common people.

Between the middle of the 14th century and the start of the 17th century, *ema* started being offered to Buddhist temples in addition to Shinto shrines, and their size increased. The illustrations of the plaques also diversified to include warriors, ships, landscapes and mathematical riddles in addition to horses, and the artistry of the illustrations increased as well.

As an increasing number of *ema* plaques were offered to temples and shrines, buildings began being built specifically to hold these offerings. Hatagaoka-Hachiman Shrine in Shinagawa City (Hatanodai 3-chome, Shinagawa City, Tokyo) has a building for holding *ema* plaques. While the area was razed during the aerial bombing of World War II, the *ema* hall alone escaped damage.

While the tradition of large *ema* continued to develop, the original tradition of making heartfelt offerings of small *ema* plaques still continued to be passed down through the ages.



▲The oldest *ema* (From the Iba archaeological site, Hamamatsu City, Shizuoka Prefecture)  
The late eighth century (Height 7.3cm, width 8cm, thickness 0.5cm)  
(Picture provided by Hamamatsu City History Museum)



▲Clay *ema* (From the Kita-no-dai archaeological site in Inzai City, Chiba Prefecture) (BOSO Fudoki no Oka Collection)



▲ The building holding the *ema* at Hatagaoka-Hachiman Shrine



▲ The large *ema* (Hatagaoka-Hachiman Shrine Collection, Shinagawa City Designated Cultural Property)

### Large *Ema* and Small *Ema*

*Ema* plaques with a breadth of over 30 centimeters, which are meant to be displayed as pictures are typically considered large *ema*, and those of a smaller size, which are meant to be hung, are considered small *ema*.

Large *ema* serve as a demonstration of the economic and social power of the one making the offer, and their illustrations are related to the wishes of the people at the time, offering hints into the social conditions and trends of the day. *Ema* were also often painted by the masters of the day, so many boast stunning artistry.

Small *ema* are imbued with the sincere wishes of the common people and are decorated in a variety of styles based on the people making the offering. Some small *ema* also demonstrate the humor found in the lives of common people, featuring inscriptions with riddles and rhymes.

### *Ema* Today

Small *ema* were considered consumable goods and were often disposed of after they fulfilled their purpose of being offered to temples or shrines. For this reason, few can be found today. On the other hand, many large *ema* still remain today at various temples and shrines, such as those found at Hatagaoka-Hachiman Shrine, Togoshi-Hachiman Shrine, and Kai'un-ji Temple.

The tradition of offering large *ema* began to decline after 1910, but with the advent of World War II, they once again appeared as prayers for victory.

After the end of World War II and life slowly returned

to normal, *ema* gained renewed attention. In contrast to the traditional custom of the person making the offering sponsoring the creation of the *ema*, shrines and temples began to directly sponsor *ema* plaques.

With every new year, temples and shrines prepare a variety of *ema* featuring the traditional images such as the Chinese zodiac animal of the year, horses, and treasure laden ships inscribed with wishes for traffic safety, good business, and succeeding in school entrance examinations.

Today, while the illustrations on *ema* plaques have become less diversified, and they no longer provide glimpses into the daily lives of the common people, the tradition of people offering *ema* plaques imbued with one's sincerest wishes has not changed.



▲ The *ema* at Togoshi-Hachiman Shrine