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Manhole covers and tourism:

a personal note

Introduction

My wife and I travel a lot in our spare time and have visited 45 countries and 46 American states. It was not until 2006 that I started looking for ground decorations and manhole covers. Originally these covers had just a practical importance: covering the inner organs of a city. The first group who found interest in these covers and their holes, were the early silent filmmakers who produced stars like the Keystone Cops, Charlie Chaplin, Ben Turpin, Harold Lloyd and Laurel and Hardy. These slapstick movies would hardly have been a success without someone falling into an open manhole.

Back in 2006 I visited the beautiful Portuguese island of Madeira in December. As any Portuguese or Brazilian city the pavements are covered with decorations in black basalt and white limestone. But there was a problem: the manhole covers could disrupt the artistic look. Therefore the constructors integrated the covers in the decoration. Walking along Estrada Monumental in Funchal on a winter's day, I suddenly noticed that a rascal among the street workers had done a trick. He had disarranged a manhole cover and disordered the systematical pattern:



Table 1. A gamin's trick in Funchal

This incident was crucial for my later travels. I spent more time looking downwards than before, just to discover the beautiful and exciting world of manhole covers and other signs or decorations on the ground.

Abstract

This article discusses to what extent manhole covers are used in cities today to promote attractions, sites and culture of the country or a specific area. I have examined quite a few manhole covers and ground decorations in the countries I have visited in the last years. Japan is the leading nation to use the possibilities that are, literally, lying on the ground, waiting to be discovered and used as a means to attract tourists and others looking for new ways of presenting country and culture. My wish is that more cities will see the importance of either physically activating their guests through a “tour of the town”, following manhole covers or signs on the ground, or presenting covers showing imitations or telling stories giving them a mental challenge. Manhole covers are under-used resources of the world’s cities. Time will show whether touristic or cultural interests can be joined by groups with solid economic background in order to develop a more efficient and artistic use of manhole covers.

It is a fact that producing lots of manhole covers with no engraving is cheaper per cover than making a few artistic and informative covers, even though the latter perform a double role: a functional one and one serving as advertisement or promotion of the city. Ultimately, this could be more profitable and could attract tourists who would like to see the sites and the sights on the covers as well as the manhole covers as works of art.

Key words: **The habit of decorating** – Riga – **The habit of decorating the ground** – Funchal – **Guidance through history and culture** – London – Boston – **Manhole covers – traditional use** – **Manhole covers – extended use** – Zagreb – Prague – Budapest – Siófok – Bruges – Calvi – Zadar – Charleston, South Carolina – Stavanger – Pozzello – Cusco – Harlem, New York – Havana – Kanazawa – Tokyo – **Direction indicators and samples of sights** – Berlin – Potsdam – Friedrichstraße, Berlin – Bergen – **Imitations** – Kanazawa – Osaka – **Culture and tradition** – Himeji – Hiroshima – Momotarō – Okayama – **Conclusion**

The habit of decorating

All over the world, the tourists are asked by their guides to look up – at the top of a church or at house decorations, revealing specific periods of the history of art. Newspapers arrange competitions among their readers by showing parts of a building and asking them to find the building this is part of. A typical example of this “look upwards”-tendency is Riga, the capital of Latvia.



Table 2. - The cat's house – kaķu nams

Here the tourists are told stories of different feuds that went on between the rich families of the city. This Hanseatic center had many merchants belonging to different guilds and one of the most famous attractions in Riga shows this fight: On top of the roof of the “Cat's House” – *kaķu nams* – in the center of the city, one can see a cat in steel lifting its tail in contempt and offending the merchants of the house of guilds who have their hall next door. Why? The reason is simple. The furious merchant had been banned from the guild of his trade, and this was his way of taking revenge.

This is only one of numerous examples where attractions are in the upper part of the field of vision.

As I have aged, I find it more comfortable to look down (for pennies?) than to bend my stiff neck upwards, and have noticed that there's a new world of opportunities down there, on the ground just waiting to be used in order to spread information.

The habit of decorating the ground

Tiles in white and blue are commonly seen in Portugal and the Portuguese influenced other countries. You find them most often along the streets, on walls and in churches, but never on the ground. The tradition of making mosaic pavement coverings in basalt and limestone is nevertheless widespread in these countries. White and black cubes (each side measuring three inches) are systematically arranged in patterns showing waves and other maritime symbols of the old mighty shipping nation, or narrative decorations of heraldic shields or ships, as the one shown from Madeira, celebrating the discovery of the island in 1419, and the one showing a folklore motif. The stones are laboriously laid by hand and then stuck together with pitchy, thick stuffing eventually drying up and becoming a hard mass. The surface is never totally even, and it is quite an achievement to walk gracefully on stiletto heels up and down the streets.

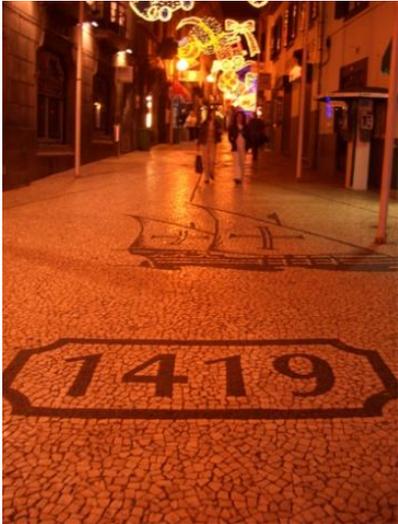


Table 3. - Funchal – Madeira

historical motif



Table 4. - Funchal – Madeira

cultural motif

In Brazil, the former Portuguese colony shows the same expressions on the footpath. But alas, what troublesome and painstaking work lies ahead if one has to dig a hole to repair some cables! Then the mosaic must be damaged like destroying a jigsaw-puzzle and restored neatly and thoroughly to regain its former magic. Yet the Portuguese are proud of this tradition and ensure it will end up beautiful. In a tourist’s sense these decorations are both tasteful and appealing. You want to walk along the streets to see if you can find other motifs, and your curiosity makes you explore the city on foot, unconsciously sensing the culture and milieu you are passing.

Guidance through history and culture

London gives one an impression of the importance of using the roadways and pathways for tourism. In 1977 a 23 kilometer long Silver Jubilee Walkway was built to celebrate the 25th wedding anniversary of Queen Elizabeth II. This path leads past all important attractions in London. The polished signs are recessed into the ground and easy to find:

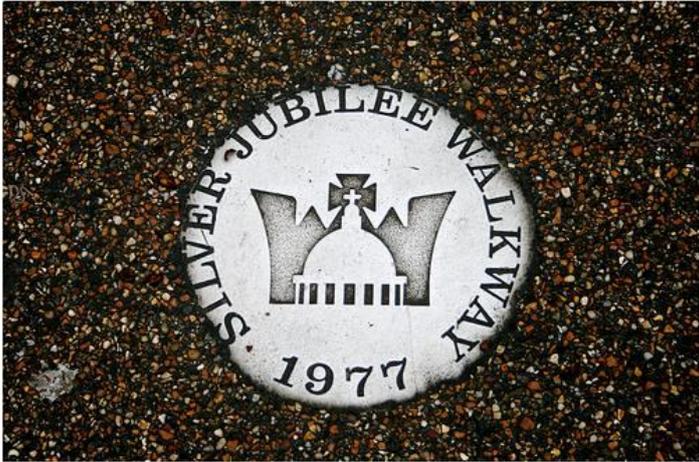


Table 5. - London – sign to follow on the Silver Jubilee Walkway

The succes of the Walkway has inspired the British to launch a new environmentally influenced Jubilee greenway, past the arenas raised for the Olympic Games in 2012. 97 kilometers is the length of this Greenway – more than two marathons.

Boston is often called “The Trail City” or the city with the most marked paths in the US. It has the Freedom Trail, a four kilometer long sightseeing tour, marked by a red line – mostly red bricks recessed into the pavement. This trail leads to historical monuments as well as to the famous television bar in the series “Cheers”.



Table 6. - Boston – signs and bricks to follow

Boston has also another way of using the ground in the interest of information. The Latin school has recessed slogans in both Latin and English just outside its entrance, and this beautiful “doormat” even has a small mythological figure reminding us of the bond to Roman culture and origin of the Roman Empire: the she-wolf who fed the two twins that founded Rome: Romulus and Remus.



Table 7. - Outside the entrance of the Latin School in Boston

Manhole covers – traditional use

As we have seen, markers recessed into the ground have been used a long time to inform and direct. It is not surprising that sooner or later the manhole covers were actual objects for people who saw the opportunity lying just before their feet.

Originally these covers had a practical function. They were covering the internal nerve system of the city, making it possible for workers to enter the water and sewage systems for repair or maintenance. (We have even seen children using these manhole covers as entrance doors to their underground homes in Romania.) At first the covers in cast steel were mainly decorated with the name of the producer and some traditional figures (circles, squares etc.). Then someone got the idea that these covers could brighten up the city, give information and even educate.

Using the city shield as motif is well known, and only the grade of details separate the different manhole covers. This is still the dominant expression on the covers of Eastern Europe in particular.

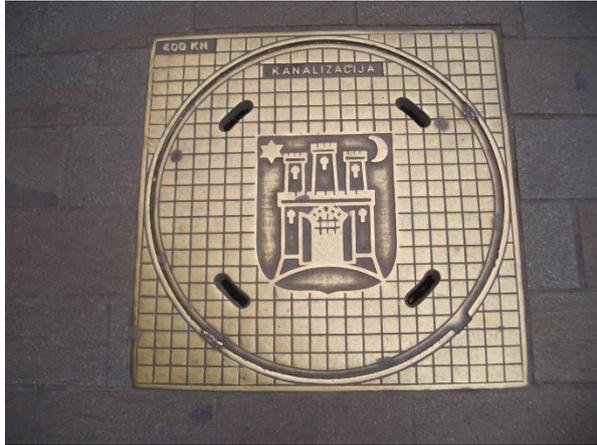


Table 8. - The city shield of Zagreb



Table 9. - The city shield of Prague

The next step on the way to develop the tradition of manhole covers in Europe is using old symbols from shields and coat-of-arms. Hungary, one of the most Western-oriented countries of Eastern Europe, has through the years had a prosperous nobility, and the country has played a dominant role in Central Europe.

This can easily be read from manhole covers, not only in the capital Budapest, but also in other parts of the country:



Table 10. - Budapest, Hungary



Table 11. - Siófok at the Balaton Sea, Hungary

Here we can see a symmetrical pattern with the four compass points dominating the center. And there are four lilies or *fleurs-de-lis* and between these we see the compass points covered with ash leaves.

National symbols are also quite common as manhole cover motifs. A great decorative “A”, the initial of Albert, the king of Belgium, is the dominant sign on a cover from Brugge (Bruges), and on the French island of Corse, you can see the dark silhouette of a Moor which dominates their flag on a water cover in Calvi. The Moors were dark, North-African muslims who occupied large parts of the Mediterranean countries in the Middle Ages. The Moor in the Corsican flag celebrates the time when these were expelled from Corse.



Table 12. - The royal "A" in Brugge (Bruges)

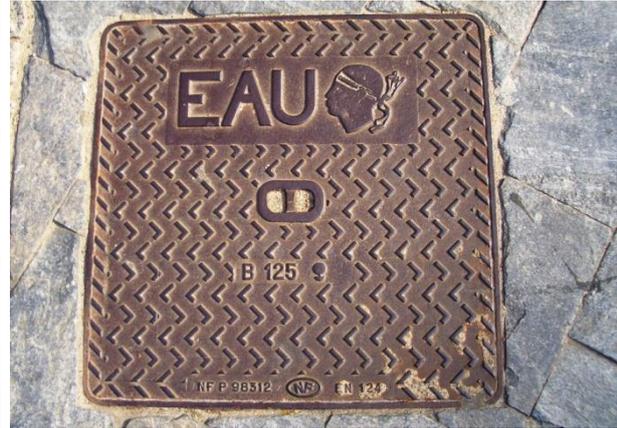


Table 13. - The expelled Moor in Calvi

History is also the basis of a manhole cover from Zadar in Croatia. This little city was under Venetian leadership in the Middle Ages, but had driven out the Venetians and established a new state. When the fourth crusade started at Venice in 1202, some participants decided to attack Zadar and bring the city back to Venetian hands, even though the pope Innocent III, threatened them with excommunication. The citizens of Zadar were Christians and in no way enemies of the Roman church, and the decision to conquer Zadar was a political one. The city fell, and it is this attack that determines the motif on the Zadar manhole cover.

There is a parallel between the two last manholes: both Calvi and Zadar have pictures of enemies that invaded their country.



Table 14. - A warrior from The fourth Crusade attacks Zadar in 1202

Some manhole covers use official symbols of the city or the adjacent area. Charleston, South Carolina, USA, also known for the special dance that was popular in the 1920's, has covers that show both its nature and history. Charleston was originally a major and important colonial city, and played an important role in several American wars. There are numerous forts and military bases around the city, and this is symbolized on a manhole cover found in the city:



Table 15. - A water meter cover in Charleston, South Carolina



Table 16. - An American quarter – one of 50 variants

Looking closely at the water meter cover, we can also see a palm tree, or a palmetto. This refers to South Carolina's nickname: The Palmetto State. This name is from the Sabal palmetto which grows in that part of the United States. The state flag features this palmetto, and we can find it on the American quarter. (You have one chance in 50 to have the one from South Carolina in your pocket, because the latest series of quarters have 50 different motifs, one for each state.)

This gimmick of using state symbols in the flag, on the manhole covers or even printed on the coins, is an American way of showing devotion for the state. It is also a brilliant way of showing people all over the nation the different symbols so they can recognize the state by seeing, for instance, the palmetto tree.

Other manhole covers are cast to show everyday life. These are most often peaceful and neutrally selective. The rainy Norwegian town of Stavanger, for example, is known as a small place known for its white wooden houses. This feature is shown in one of the manhole covers near the tourist office. Small houses, fences with private yards and umbrellas are used in a self-ironic way. (The number 40 in the left corner is indicating the weight this manhole cover is supposed to bear in tons.) This special cover is also used in other wet, coastal cities in Norway, for instance in Tromsø.



Table 17. - Everyday life in Stavanger

Motifs from daily life, especially from earlier days when working conditions were bad, ended sometimes up as signs of folklore and National Romanticism. But bit by bit, these national symbols of toil, strength and solidarity became political weapons. This is the case in a manhole cover from Pozzallo in Sicily:



Table 18. - Axe in a cluster ("fascio") from Sicily

At the left there is something like an agricultural implement, but Pozzallo being a port and harbour for the ferries to Malta, disguises the entire meaning. In fact, it is a cluster (in Italian “*fascio*”) of lopwood with an axe hewed into it, which is an old unifying fascistic symbol. It was used by the members of the Italian Fascist Party. It is an open question why this manhole cover still can be seen in Italy. Is it just showing that the cover is functional and too good to be thrown away? Or could Fascism still be active in Sicily?

The answer can be found by looking at the right hand side of the cover. “Anno IX” tells us that this actual cover dates from 1931. The Fascists ruled Italy from 1922 to 1943, and Benito Mussolini (“*Il Duce*”) was their leader and prime minister. The inscription “Anno IX” means that this manhole cover dates from year 9 after the start of Mussolini’s reign. So it must be a solid cover.

In the old Inca capital of Cusco in Peru the telephone companies found it more convenient to lay down telephone cables in the ground instead of using copper lines running from post to post. Most likely these would be stolen and sold on the scrap market. Therefore the Peruvians dug the cables down and placed manhole covers over the joints. To ensure these, they sealed the openings by welding the edges together.

On the cover we see the ten holes along the edge of the old disc phone. In the middle we detect the ordinary communication symbol:



Table 19. - A cover for telephone cables in Cusco, Peru

The welding on this Peruvian manhole cover tells us something about daily life in Peru: The authorities do not rely on their people. They fear theft. Likewise the authorities of

New York treat their citizens with suspicion. Acting after the belief that everyone is a potential thief, the people living in Harlem have this warning stated on the ground:



Table 20. - A 4 by 4 inches warning on 136th Street in Harlem, New York City

Manhole covers can reveal the ambience of a nation. In the United States anyone can be sued, and anyone can be punished for misdeeds. The authorities have estimated it necessary to pay extra for casting this message on this cover – which easily can be put in a pocket. But Harlem is Harlem, and the USA is the USA. Be prepared. In court the manhole thief might be released if the piece of steel does not carry this written warning.

Cuba has grown more and more poor in the last 50 years, and little has been done to improve its cities. Even though both Havana and Cienfuegos are attractive sites for tourists, the manhole covers in Cuba are merely functional and without artistic drawings. The only covers which have an informative message, are those belonging to the big firms which are well known abroad. This is one example:



Table 21. - A manhole cover outside the Rum Museum in Havana

In Japan – perhaps the homeland of the development of manhole clusters – we can discover new areas of information found on the ground. An alarming red fire engine is easy to locate if you are looking for a fire hydrant – even if it is on a pavement in a Japanese metropolis.



Table 22. - A fire engine in the streets of Kanazawa

The Japanese use unconventional means if they want a cleaner environment. Smoking outside is allowed, but when walking or queuing on an overcrowded pavement, one is politely asked to extinguish the cigarette.



Table 23. - “No queue-smoking” in Tokyo

Direction indicators and samples of sights

During the last decades, the use of manhole covers in the service of tourism, has become still more evident. Not only do they have the original function of covering the nerve system of a city; they are also appealing reminders of what a city can offer.



Table 24. - A compass manhole cover in Berlin

In Berlin you will find in the middle of the well-known street Unter den Linden, some covers showing 7 of the main attractions of the city – in a full angle of 360⁰ – with the TV tower on Alexanderplatz as the most conspicuous. Other buildings you can recognize, is the Olympic stadium from 1936, the Victory column with a reminder of three wars during a period of 7 years: the victory over Denmark in 1864, the war against Austria in 1866 and the fight against the French in 1870/71. Furthermore you can see the Parliament (Reichstag) and the ruins of the Gedenkniskirche and of course Brandenburger Tor. If the cover isn't tampered with by some repairing firms, you can actually use this manhole cover as a direction indicator or compass.

A local variant of this German signpost can be seen in the gardens of Sanssouci, this well-known palace in the Berlin suburb of Potsdam. Instead of annoying path signs on the lawns, you find direction indicators in form of manhole covers all over the park. You can't get lost, if you just look down!



Table 25. - No orientation worries in the garden of Sanssouci (“No worries”)

Walking through Berlin and looking for manhole covers of interest, you are bound to pass by Friedrichstraße. There on the pavement, just one block from the great Jewish Museum, you might suddenly see a small plate in bronze, just 3 by 3 inches large, casted among the paving stones and polished by millions of shoes for decades. You can still read the modest and personal message: “Hier wohnte MAX LASKE – jg. 1903 – ermordet 11.8.1942 in Sachsenhausen”. A German Jew – one of 6 millions – who was tortured to death during World War II. The man behind this plaque is the German artist Gunter Demnig who wants to memorize the Jews who were victims to the Nazi war crimes. 30000 plaques with different names engraved have so far been installed on pavements all over Europa. He calls these memorials “Stolpersteine” or “stumbling stones”.



Table 26. - A “Stolperstein” from Friedrichstraße in Berlin

The Norwegian poet of genius, Henrik Wergeland, used the expression: “å se det store i det små” – “to see the greatness in the detail” – and this small detail in Friedrichstraße which represented the fate of the entirety, made a stronger impression than all the Denkmals and Jewish memorials that you can find in the German capital. It was only a tiny plate on the ground; a plate that you will only be able to notice if you bend your neck (in reverence).

Decorating prosaic iron plates in a touristic purpose, like the compass from Berlin, seems to be the new trend in cities that have lots of destinations to present. Look at this excellent example from Bergen, released in 2000, and showing 8 attractions to visit – in right geographical order – and also some funny symbols of what is typical for the city:



Table 27. - A wet manhole cover in Bergen

We notice at the left hand corner a building from around 1300 – Håkonshallen, and to its right a medieval tower – Rosenkrantzårnet. In front of these stone constructions we see three or four wooden houses – Bryggen – from the Hanseatic age. Alongside the quay we can clearly observe the pride of Bergen – the barque “Statsraad Lehmkuhl”. In the background there are two means of transportation leading to two of the seven hights that are surrounding the city. The nearest is a climbing train – a funicular – that is bringing people to Fløyen, and in the distance we can glimpse the mountain Ulriken with its cable car. The funny parts are the sun and clouds at the top. Bergen is known for its rain – loads of rain – and the sun must be a joke. But the inhabitants of Bergen are very self ironic, and using this perception of themselves living in an extremely rainfull city, they even let the sun cry raindrops at each side of the manhole cover. This is a brilliant example of how to use these free advertisement points on the ground to promote what the city can offer.

Imitations

In Japan the tradition of using manhole covers to promote several touristic sceneries is replaced by showing unique sites in a naturalistic way or, more hidden, in a symbolic surrounding.

Japan is well-known for the gardens where the general elements: water, tree and stone form the basics of their construction. In short, these gardens are supposed to represent the nature in miniature; crude and untouched by human hand. Perhaps the most beautiful of these gardens is the one in Kanazawa, called Kenroku-en. The most celebrated motif in this garden is a stone lantern amidst some trees in the foreground and a small lake with a cottage as a tableau behind.



Table 28. - The original garden in Kanazawa



Table 29. - The copy in downtown Kanazawa

This scenic view is worth using in the promotion of the garden to tourist and other visitors. And the motif is used on manhole covers in downtown Kanazawa, bringing the real and raw nature into the human, cultural world. Another spectacular thing about this cover is that it is made with colours in the low relieved parts of the pattern: green for the gras and moss and blue indicating water. But the motif has not a photographic resemblance, but it is simplified and conventional. Whether this copy of nature or more precisely the Japanese garden has been given a place in the center of Kanazawa in order to attract tourists to “the real thing”, is doubtful. It is more likely that the Japanese wanted to bring nature into the cold and concrete dominated metropolis.

There are also some very special and peculiar castles in Japan, situated on hilltops and built in several stories and each story equipped with a gable. Some of these buildings are found in castings on manhole covers in order to please the esthetic nature of the inhabitants and to give tourists an idea of what the city can offer. The pride of the location is being attached to the ground.



Table 30. - A colourful

manhole cover showing Osaka castle

Two of the most famous castles are to be found in the cities of Himeji and Osaka. They are more than 40 meters high, and the manhole covers made in their honour are rich in details and show the most outstanding handicraft. The picture shows the Osaka castle and the cover of it has a relieved surface in three colours on a brown background: blue sky and ornaments, green castle and pink cherry flowers. They are reproduced very precisely and many details can be seen. As in a natural painting aiming to reproduce nature completely.

And on this point the Japanese go even further in the art of manhole covers. They concretize abstract tales by showing us situations or characters that we associate with the story, or they even elaborate symbols connected to buildings or legends. I will give you two examples of manhole covers that one cannot understand unless having heard the background story or learned the tradition.

Culture and tradition

If we look at the tradition around the Himeji castle (Himeji-jo) – which is astonishing like the castle of Osaka as we have studied above – we must know the story behind the building. It is called “The white heron” and placed on a height and visible from a great part of the city. And if we use our imagination, we can see that it looks like a white heron spreading her wings:



Table 31. - The Himeji castle – even each roof is spreading its wings

In the center of the city of Himeji, as a decoration on a manhole cover on a busy pavement, the authorities have used the motif of Himeji-jo in a symbolic way. They have not, as in Osaka, reproduced a naturalistic copy of the castle, but recessed a flying heron (to the left in the picture) in charge of the trees and nature underneath. The colours used are brown and yellow (even though the heron should have been white), but the symbolic meaning is not easy to grasp without knowing the nickname of this beautiful castle.



Table 32. - The flying heron in Himeji

Hiroshima has several interesting manhole covers, but I want to present a ground decoration that was laid indoor, showing two maple leaves of different colours. These are Japanese maple leaves, and they are a bit smaller than the ones we know from Canada; compare with the one in the Canadian flag. And the colours have a symbolic meaning: These are dead leaves, fallen from the growing tree. It is autumn, and the bomb went off on August 6th 1945 at 8:15am. The yellow leaf has died a natural death; just look at the stalk which is intact. The

red one, however, is dangerously radiated, and the stalk is broken – the leaf has been suffering an unnatural death. The cover indicates that nature has been exposed to something dangerous, and we know now that the radiation damage was terrible for the inhabitants of this busy city. This cover is a reminder of what happened that day.



Table 33. - The fate of Hiroshima in symbolic leaves

But life goes on, and the Japanese have used manhole covers to give people new hope, and especially in Hiroshima this was crucial and important. Just look at this cover in four colours; the brown iron background in high relief and as low relieved colours we find orange used as the most striking element, symbolizing the growing strength going through the trunk and branches of the tree – leading up to the leaves – ash tree leaves – and colouring them green. Leaves are necessary for the growth of the tree, as well. The last colour is mauve used on the female catkins which reproduce and prepare for new generations to come. The composition of the cover is based upon several groups of three: three branches, three groups of ash leaves and three female catkins in three different places on the cover. Harmony is ruling.



Table 34.
- A

flourishing manhole cover in Hiroshima

The last manhole cover I want to present, is going even further in comprehension and necessity of knowing the background. The city is Okayama and here legends and fairy tales have a strong and long tradition. The most famous tale is called Momotarō, or Peach Boy. A community in the neighbourhood is haunted by a devil – often used as a red faced souvenir doll today – and a prince was born out of a peach nut and designated to free the place from this nuisance by killing the devil. He could not manage this on his own and asked three animals – a dog, a monkey and a pheasant – to help him. They agreed to do so, on condition that he baked them a special rice cake. (These cakes can be bought in souvenirs shops as well as in bakeries in the area.) The cakes were baked, and the animals helped the prince in killing the devil. And the prince ended up as a prince should do: as the leader of the community.

A German scientist, Klaus Antoni, has written an interesting article on this legend where he finds reminiscence between the need of staying together against a common enemy, as in the fairy tale, and the nationalistic feeling that grew up in Japan during the Second World War. The Peach Boy became an inspiration for the Japanese in the fight against the allied forces.



Table 35. - The street version of The Peach Boy in Okayama

If we look at the manhole cover found in Okayama, just outside the railway station, you can clearly see the four characters of the story: the prince in the middle, scouting for the devil by holding his hand over his eyes, to the left is the monkey, holding a stick with three emblems, to the prince's right we notice the ever observant and watching dog and above them all, a flying pheasant. They go and look in the same direction – they have the same goal and objective: the enemy. And the aim is to destroy him. They stay together. But coming to Okayama as a tourist without the necessary cultural ballast, it is not possible to obtain the full and symbolic meaning of this cover.

Conclusion

This article shows different ways of using prosaic manhole covers in more ways than originally intended to. The growing stream of visitors have made it necessary to find new ways of introducing sites they want to visit, and using manhole covers is one source of letting people be informed of what a place can present, both in natural and understandable motifs and in more obscure, symbolic ones. But motifs that need being processed further in your mind, are often the most memorable.

To have an overall picture of manhole covers and pavement decorations, it is possible to contact the only museum of its kind in Ferrara, North Italy. The Manhole Cover Museum is a part of the National Archeological Museum, and some of the finest samples in the world are found here. As a curiosity I can mention that one manhole cover will cost 250\$ if you buy it through an ordinary ironworks. Perhaps you would like to start a restaurant and use manhole covers as tops on your tables?

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