

# ART

## A legacy spanning two millennia



### Scroll painting

*Kasugashinkozu* scroll painting. (Photo courtesy of National Archives of Japan)

Diverse factors have contributed to the development of Japanese art. Both technologically and aesthetically, it has for many centuries been influenced by Chinese styles and cultural developments, some of which came via Korea. More recently, Western techniques and artistic values have also added their impact.

However, what emerged from this history of assimilated ideas and know-how from other cultures is an indigenous expression of taste that is uniquely Japanese.

### Ancient Times

The first settlers of Japan, the Jomon people

(roughly 10,000 B.C. to 300 B.C.), crafted clay figurines called *dogu*, many of which represented women. Afterwards, the Yayoi people (approximately 300 B.C. to A.D. 300), whose core was a different immigrant group in the beginning of the era, manufactured copper weapons, bronze bells, and kiln-fired ceramics. Typical artifacts from the Kofun (Tumulus) period (approximately A.D. 300 to A.D. 710) that followed are bronze mirrors and clay sculptures called *haniwa*, which were erected outside of tombs.

The simple stick figures drawn on *dotaku*, bells produced in the Yayoi period, as well as the murals adorning the inside walls of tombs in the Kofun period, represent the origins of Japanese painting.



## The Influence of Buddhism and China

Painting began to flourish in the sixth century, when the ruling class took great interest in Buddhism and Buddhist culture, which had arrived from Korea and China. Paintings preserved from the late seventh and early eighth centuries were executed in styles developed in China in the late period of the Six Dynasties (222–589). They illustrate the life of Buddha and depict other Buddhist deities. After the tenth century, painting became increasingly influenced by *Jodo Shinko* (Pure Land Buddhism).

With impetus from the ruling class, temples and monastic compounds were constructed in various locations from the late sixth to the early seventh century. Notable examples are Asukadera, Shitennoji, and Horyuji. In the interior of these temple complexes, especially the halls and chapels, a substantial amount of Buddhist art was commissioned. The murals in Horyuji's Kondo (Golden Hall) are some of the most important paintings of the period. We can also see sculptures representing various Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and guardian deities in these temples. Prime among them is the Shaka Trinity, a sculpture housed at Horyuji. By the middle of the Heian period (794–1185), a clearly indigenous style, called *yamato-e*, had begun to replace Chinese modes of painting. *Yamato-e* depicts the scenery around Kyoto, and its earliest examples are seen on sliding and folding screens. Along with this new, native style came two new formats for painting: the album leaf and the illustrated handscroll, called *emaki*. *The Tale of Genji Scrolls* (ca. 1120) are the most famous *emaki*.

In the late twelfth century, although power shifted remarkably from the nobility to the *samurai* class, the nobility, as well as the administrators of temples and shrines, continued to retain great wealth and remained as patrons of various genres of art. The Kamakura period (ca. 1185–1333), whose name is taken from the place where the new seat of government was established, is characterized by two major trends: realism, which aimed to satisfy the taste of the

*samurai* class, and conservatism, which epitomized the nobility's taste in art.

Realism is most manifest in the form of sculpture. Unkei, the most noted sculptor of the Kei school (creators of a realistic sculptural style), has among his most accomplished works the two Nio guardian images at the gate of Todaiji and the wooden sculptures of two Indian sages, Muchaku and Seshin, at Kofukuji.

Zen Buddhism, which spread in the thirteenth century, introduced architecture and artistic works significantly different from those of other sects. In the fourteenth century, scroll painting largely gave way to ink painting, which took root in the prominent Zen monasteries of Kamakura and Kyoto. Zen painters—and more importantly, their patrons—showed a preference for an austere monochrome style, as introduced from Sung (960–1279) and Yuan (1271–1368) China. By the end of the 1400s, Zen painters and their patrons in Kyoto had developed a preference for monochrome landscape painting, called *suibokuga*. Among those Zen painters was Sesshu, a priest who went to China and studied Chinese paintings.

Painting in the late sixteenth century was dominated by the Kano school, which enjoyed the backing of powerful sovereigns such as Oda Nobunaga. It was a polychrome style that aimed for maximum effect in the form of screen and wall painting. The most remarkable figure of the school was Kano Eitoku.

## The Edo Period (1603–1867)

The Tokugawa shogunate came to power in 1603 and succeeded in bringing peace and stability to Japan, both economically and politically. As the merchants in Edo (later Tokyo) and Kyoto became more and more

**Ukiyo-e print**

Utagawa Hiroshige's *ukiyo-e* print  
*Tokaido gojusan tsugi: Nihonbashi*  
(The Fifty-Three Stations of the  
Tokaido: Nihonbashi). (Photo  
courtesy of AFLO)



wealthy under its regime, they began to take control of cultural activities.

Paintings from the period called Kan'ei (1624–1644) depicted people from every class of society crowding the entertainment district beside Kyoto's Kamogawa river. Similar districts existed in Osaka and Edo, where the uninhibited lifestyle of the *ukiyo* (floating world) transpired, that ultimately came to be glorified by the art genre known as *ukiyo-e*. These *ukiyo-e*, which often featured brothel districts and *kabuki* theater, gained popularity throughout the country. First produced in the form of paintings, by the early eighteenth century *ukiyo-e* were most commonly produced as woodblock prints.

Among the first types of printed *ukiyo-e* were sex manuals called *shunga* (pornographic pictures). These books or albums showed very explicit love scenes. There were also picture books with commentary that contained portraits of the leading prostitutes of the time, typically involved in some mundane activity such as washing their hair. It is their poses or the draping of their *kimono* that provides the main focus of these scenes.

By late in the century, the core activity of *ukiyo-e* had moved from the Kyoto-Osaka area to Edo, where portrayals of *kabuki* actors became standard subject matter. The public also showed great fondness for *ukiyo-e* featuring beautiful women.

By the late eighteenth century, *ukiyo-e* had entered its golden age. Feminine beauty, and especially the tall, graceful women who appeared in the work of Torii Kiyonaga, was a dominant theme in the 1780s. After 1790 came a rapid succession of new styles, introduced by artists whose names are so well known today: Kitagawa Utamaro, Toshusai Sharaku, Katsushika Hokusai, Ando Hiroshige, and Utagawa Kuniyoshi, to single out but a few.

For some Westerners, including the greatest artists in Europe in the late nineteenth century, *ukiyo-e* was more than merely an exotic art form. Artists such as Edgar Degas and Vincent van Gogh borrowed its stylistic composition, perspectives, and use of color. Frequent use of themes from nature, which had been rare

in Western art, widened painters' selection of themes. Émile Gallé, a French artist and glass designer, used Hokusai's sketches of fish in the decoration of his vases.

The Kano school continued to expand its influence and managed to establish itself as the painting academy of the Tokugawa Shogunate. In contrast to the Kano school, which was patronized by the authorities of the day and passed traditions down through a system of heredity or from master to apprentice, the Rinpa school was a style of painting that developed through the inspiration and influence gained from other artists rather than the heredity system which was common at the time. The best known figure in the Rinpa school was Ogata Korin, who was active in the middle of the Edo period (1603–1867). Once apprenticed to a Kano style master painter, Korin was influenced by the works of predecessors such as Tawaraya Sotatsu, who was known for bold composition and designs. Korin went on to develop a distinctive style that reflected the new sensibilities of the age. His style, known for its decorative aesthetics and refined design, had a huge influence over the art world, not just painting but also craft designs.

With the advent of the Meiji period (1868–1912) and its policy of Westernization, *ukiyo-e*, which had always been closely linked to the culture from which it drew its themes and vitality, began to die out quickly.

Meanwhile, European painting influenced a growing number of Japanese painters late in the Edo period. Major artists such as Maruyama Okyo, Matsumura Goshun, and Ito Jakuchu combined aspects of Japanese, Chinese, and Western styles.

## Modern Times

Culture in Japan underwent a rather dramatic transformation during the Meiji period, when Western technologies and concepts of government began to be studied



and, where appropriate, adapted for the good of the nation. In the course of this program of modernization, Western-style painting received official sanction, and the government sent a number of painters overseas to study.

After some decades of rivalry between traditional Japanese-style and the new Western-style painting, the Taisho period (1912–1926) was one in which Western influence on the arts expanded greatly.

Painters such as Umehara Ryuzaburo and Yasui Sotaro studied and promoted the styles of Paul Cezanne, Pierre Auguste Renoir, and Camille Pissarro.

In the pre-World War II years, however, Yasui and Umehara cast off the mostly derivative character of Western-style painting in Japan. Umehara stands out for having brought to his work elements of Japanese style, an innovation reversal that encouraged other Western-style painters in Japan to become more interpretative.

The modernizing of Japanese painting continued under the guidance of Yasuda Yukihiko and Kobayashi Kokei. Other painters tried to spread interest in Japanese-style painting by adopting popular themes and giving exhibitions more frequently.

It was early in the twentieth century that authentic interest in Western-style sculptures gained momentum, when artists returned to Japan from study abroad. Representative of those sculptors was Ogiwara Morie, who introduced the style of Auguste Rodin and became the pioneer in the modernization of Japanese sculpture. Another influential sculptor was Takamura Kotaro who, as an outstanding poet as well, translated Rodin's views on art.



Following the unproductive years of World War II, art in Japan rapidly regained its originality. Western artistic trends, after the war, found a quick reception in Japan, including such developments as pop and op art, primary structure, minimal art, kinetic art, and assemblage.

Having traditionally taken their lead from the art of other cultures, Japanese artists are now finding their own expression as original creators and contributors to the world art community. To mention a couple: Okamoto Taro, who published his works at the 1953 São Paulo Biennale and 1954 Venice Biennale, and designed the symbol of the international exposition held in Osaka in 1970, *Taiyo no To* (Sun Tower); and Ikeda Masuo, who published many printed works full of eroticism and irony, which established his fame worldwide. Ikeda also won the Grand Prix for printmaking at the 1966 Venice Biennale. Additionally, Hirayama Ikuo is highly respected for his pictures depicting Silk Road landscapes filled with fantasy. Iwasaki Chihiro, who painted pictures for children, is widely acclaimed for her portraits of them. Most of her pictures were painted for picture books, and these books are published in more than 10 countries. The artist Kusama Yayoi, who began by trying to capture the hallucinations which she suffered from as a child, creates paintings and other works with a repetitive motif of dots and net patterns and has exhibited in galleries and exhibitions all over the world. Artists such as Nara Yoshitomo, whose pictures of little girls with glowering eyes depict a world which is both cute and eerie, and Murakami Takashi, who draws on the typically Japanese culture of *manga* and anime for his life-sized figures of young women, etc., are very popular, especially among young people.

**Contemporary art work**

Yayoi Kusama's installation  
"Pumpkins" in a building in Ginza,  
Tokyo ©YAYOI KUSAMA  
(courtesy of GINZA SIX)