

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
JAPANESE ARTS

Marvin Marcus, Ph.D.

TRADITIONAL ARTS

Overview

For some, the civilization of Japan amounts to a constellation of literary and artistic genres, folk crafts, and performance styles— all subsumed under the category of ‘traditional arts.’ Japanese cultural history has indeed privileged these arts, together with the discipleship and mastery of technique associated with the artisan/ practitioner and the heightened aesthetic sensibility seen as underlying the entire enterprise. The uniqueness of the native product is taken for granted, and the fact of foreign origins and influences— be they Chinese, Japanese, or Western— has typically been overlooked. The traditionalist approach, which is by no means unique to Japan and its cultural products, needs to be taken with a grain of salt. Yet the sheer quantity, diversity, and quality of Japan’s traditional arts legitimately constitute a national treasure, and these continue to attract interest and admiration world-wide.

Backdrop

As in so many other areas, Japan’s debt to artistic borrowings and inspiration from China and Korea must be acknowledged. As of the 7th century, noteworthy examples of Buddhist temple architecture, sculpture, painting, poetry, and so forth showed both a mastery of form and technique and the capacity to adapt these to a native idiom.

It was during the Heian period that long years of experimentation with mainland forms and styles yielded distinctively ‘Japanese’ products that reflected the tastes and artistic genius of the courtier class. The Kyoto nobility, exquisitely sensitive to matter of fashion and style, developed elaborate codes and conventions of courtly elegance and proper form across a range of arts— poetry, calligraphy, painting, sculpture, textile design, and so forth. For Heian poets and painters, appropriate natural imagery and seasonal associations were de rigueur, as was the ability to make subtle allusions to important earlier work. Master practitioners achieved a high status, and they became arbiters of judgment and models for others to emulate. Judging quality was of the essence, and the official evaluations (*hyō*)— of poetry, for instance— were duly recorded and passed along to successive generations as a pedagogical tool. In sum, the Heian fascination with courtly beauty and elegance (*miyabi*) amounted to a virtual religion of style.

Unlike Europe, medieval Japan did not eventuate in a cultural ‘dark age.’ Rather, the aesthetic and artisanal culture of the Heian aristocracy was prized by the new warrior (*bushi*) elites, who adapted it to their own cultural practices and products. Strongly attracted to Zen Buddhism and the virtues of meditation and self-discipline, the warriors favored so-called meditative arts, which fostered a new minimalist aesthetic. In the area of poetry, the understated image of ‘autumn dusk’ (*aki no yūgure*) became a favorite trope. In painting, the spare, monochrome landscape was highly prized. The meditative arts can be said to have culminated, late in the medieval period, in the tea ceremony (*chanoyu*) and a veritable ‘cult of tea’ patronized by the warrior elite. Within certain arts— poetry, for instance— competing factions and coteries developed, each with its own secret traditions and practices (*denju*). A sort of cultural Balkanization took hold, with factions jealously guarding their respective turf and wary of the intrusion of heterodox practice.

Tokugawa Traditionalism

It was during the Tokugawa period that traditional arts— spanning theater, musical performance, poetry, flower arrangement, pottery, and so forth— were open to broader participation and patronage. At the same time, they were organized within formal schools operating under a strict master-disciple apprenticeship system (*iemoto seido*). Headship in these schools was passed down in a lineage of mastery, which helped ensure standards of excellence and the survival of the school’s ‘brand.’ Overall, this pedagogical model helped foster values of patience, dedication, and self-cultivation; and the family lineage system itself helped ensured continuity, so long as there was a steady supply of apprentices. What is more, traditionalism per se came to be valued, and this in turn would feed into a collective identity that transcended the individual arts communities.

Within the Tokugawa arts, the theater traditions of *kabuki* and *bunraku* (puppet theater) assumed particular prominence, owing to their importance in the ‘entertainment economy’ of the age. Related arts such as instrumental performance, textile and kimono design, and woodblock prints that served to advertise the plays and promote the actors— these all thrived. Also, traditional decorative arts, which had developed in the late-medieval period— the celebrated Kano and Rimpa schools, for instance— became ever more popular. Here, too, the market factor cannot be overstated.

Traditional Arts in the Modern Period

The Meiji modernization of Japan entailed a strong element of cultural conservatism, whereby many traditional arts, which went into serious decline in the late Tokugawa and would otherwise be eclipsed by rival Western arts, were ‘reinvented’ and given new life in the modern context. Credit here must go to a cadre of Japanophile foreigners— figures such as Lafcadio Hearn, Ernest Fenollosa, and Bernard Leach— who encouraged their Japanese protégés to value their traditional practices and support the training of a new generation of artists, craftsmen, and artisans. Kabuki and Noh theater were revived, with support from the state. The old poetic forms— *waka* and *haiku*— found new modes of expression. Tea ceremony, flower arranging, pottery— these and many other traditional practices found a new life in modern Japan, although it was a challenge to sustain the old master-disciple apprenticeship system in the face of the Western-style educational system and modern labor market. One important development was a new folk arts (*mingei*) movement, inspired by Yanagi Sôetsu (1889-1961). It coincided with a renewed interest in rural Japan and the notion of native roots and the healing powers of ‘native place’ (*furusato*) and the natural world.

Another important ‘traditionalist’ outlet was the martial arts— *judo*, *jujitsu*, *kendo*, *karate*, *aikido*, among others— which were essentially created during the Meiji period as an adaptation of the *bushidô* ethos to Japan’s modern circumstance. Encouraging dedication to one’s *sensei*, achieving mastery of form, and earning promotion in the ranks— with an eye upon the black belt— the martial arts became a fixture of the modern scene, widely taught in schools and private academies. And with the 1930s, they would be pressed into the service of the state in the run-up to war.

The arts in Japan were essentially held in abeyance with the rise of militarism in the 1930s and the outbreak of war. And they would require yet another rebirth in the wake of the nation’s defeat. This is one of many ‘miraculous survival stories’ associated with Japan, which point to the resilience of the Japanese and their indomitable creative genius— with the help of a market economy capable of sustaining their efforts.

The postwar reconstruction of Japan was both material and cultural, and the latter was marked by a renewed interest in the traditional arts. The established practices— pottery, flower arranging (*ikebana*), calligraphy (*shodô*), tea ceremony (*chanoyu*), the performing arts (*noh*, *kabuki*, *bunraku*), and traditional music (*koto*, *shamisen*, *shakuhachi*)— were restored, and the major schools were generally able to sustain themselves. The martial arts, too, would be reestablished, with the wartime militarist spirit having been laundered out, and they have remained popular— in Japan and beyond— to the present day.

Some of the arts, though, would be challenged by a declining number of individuals willing to devote themselves to years of apprenticeship. Foreigners attracted to the traditional arts have been taken on as apprentices, and some would go on to achieve success and acclaim. But many lesser arts— a local form of weaving, traditional doll-making, or bamboo basketry— have vanished with the passing away of a master practitioner with no successors. Japan shares with other advanced nations an ‘endangered cultural species’ problem that reflects a host of economic and social forces. Whether or not a given ‘vanished art’ can be resurrected is an open question— and challenge.

Support for the Arts

As with other modern nations whose cultural patrimony has been threatened with neglect if not extinction, Japan has prioritized the recognition of— and public funding for— traditional arts. A postwar agenda of cultural regeneration spurred the passing, in 1950, of the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties. It identified Japanese traditional performing arts (*gagaku*, *noh*, *bunraku*, and *kabuki*) and crafts (pottery, textiles, lacquerware, and paper-making, among others) as important cultural properties. In particular, the performing arts have greatly benefited from the training provided by the National Theater of Japan.

The government has also overseen the ‘Preservers of Important Intangible Cultural Properties’ program, under which outstanding master practitioners are honored with the designation of ‘Living National Treasure’ (*ningen kokuhô*). They receive a government stipend and serve— in the manner of poet laureate— as cultural ambassadors and exemplars.

In recent years, organizations such as the Japan Foundation and its Center for Global Partnership have been tasked with supporting traditional arts and promoting exhibitions of traditional crafts, productions of *kabuki*, *bunraku*, and *noh*, and traditional musical performances worldwide. High-gloss English-language publications such as *Niponica* and *Japan Close-Up* provide coverage of the traditional arts to a global readership. Japanese museums— on the national, prefectural, and local level— have actively exhibited traditional artifacts and products. And the major department stores have served as marketing outlets for the products of local craftsmen working in traditional media.

For modern-day Japanese, the traditional arts appeal to anyone seeking a hobby— be it serious or casual— or looking for a way to better oneself or burnish one’s personal appeal. Many, of course, are drawn to the host of non-traditional pursuits as well. The Japanese arts marketplace is wide open, and those seeking instruction in *shamisen* playing, martial arts, or flower arranging will be served— together with those wanting to learn jazz piano, ballroom dancing, or stand-up comedy.

Readings

Asquith, Pamela and Arne Kalland (eds.), *Japanese Images of Nature: Cultural Perspectives* (Curzon Press, 1997)

Okakura, Kakuzo, *The Book of Tea* (Kodansha International, 1989)

Philip, Leila, *The Road Through Miyama* (Vintage, 1989)

Shirane, Haruo, *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature, and the Arts* (Columbia, 2012)

Vlastos, Stephen (ed.), *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan* (California, 1998)

Yanagi, Sôetsu, *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight Into Beauty* (Kodansha International, 1972)

Discussion Questions and Topics

How should we distinguish among the constellation of Japanese ‘traditional arts’? Is there a sameness to their alleged ‘traditionalism’?

How do the traditional arts of Japan compare with those of its East-Asian neighbors? What of Western traditionalism in the domain of arts and culture?

How have foreigners contributed to the advancement and perpetuation of Japanese traditional arts? What of the influence of Japanese designs and techniques on the global arts scene?

How has ‘arts traditionalism’ been used to market the Japanese brand? Consider the ‘soft power’ role of the Japanese government and organizations such as the Japan Foundation and the Center for Global Partnership. What level of responsibility— if any— does government have to serve, in effect, as a life-support system for the arts?

Images



Tokyo's *Kabuki-za* theater (Wikipedia)



Pottery for sale in Mashiko, a major ceramics center near Tokyo (Source: japantoday.com)



Instruction in *chanoyu* technique as provided by Sen Genshitsu, the 15th in a centuries-old lineage of tea masters of the *Urasenke* school. (Wikipedia)



Ikebana arrangement by Yoshiko Nakamura, on display as part of Seattle's 2008 Cherry Blossom Festival



Shakuhachi flute being played by performer in traditional garb— including the bamboo basket headpiece— as part of the 2009 Himeji summer festival in Japan