

JAPANESE ART

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Introduction Japanese culture was influenced extensively by Chinese and Korean civilization during the early years of its development. New ideas on technology, religion, language and more were well received by the ruling elites who were seeking normative structures for society. In particular, though Japan had its own religion known as Shintō, Confucianism and Buddhism found a receptive population and was widely adopted in antiquity. Ideas on statehood, law, taxation, social structures and gender were also embraced in the years before the Nara era (710-794). In spite of this, Japanese culture retained a very strong sense of identity separate from that found on the mainland. Its position as a series of islands on the edge of the vast Pacific Ocean allowed its leadership to pick and choose what elements of culture it wanted to adopt and what elements it wished to discard. Like Great Britain, the ocean protected Japanese society from the worst forms of imperialism originating on the mainland. Because of this, Japanese society shares a number of cultural markers with China and Korea, but has its own unique heritage, culture and civilization.

PREHISTORY—The Neolithic Age (10,000-2000 BCE)

The Arts. There is scant evidence of many of the art forms as we know them today. Music, story-telling, painting, drama and the like almost surely existed but have disappeared from the human record. However, one that remains is sculpture in the form of ceramics, pottery and religious artifacts. Indeed, the very long and diverse era known as the neolithic period is understood to be the same epoch because from beginning to end, cord markings appear as decoration on ceramics. Sculptors shaped objects by hand without the use of wheels. They used clay with small amounts of connective fiber to fashion representations of the female form, of masks representing the sun or stars, animals—some with human faces, and phalluses. Early attempts were rather crude and were clearly created by people with little extra time or talent. These early objects were fired in open pits at relatively low temperatures. During periods of warming, for example, approximately 2500 BCE-1500 BCE, early Japanese populations lived in larger groups which allowed for some specialization. During this period, figurines and other ceramics were carefully sculpted with great attention to detail and were lavishly decorated with pigment and inlaid with exquisite decoration. A small number of artists used the medium of stone or bone to carve figures and inlay images and some woodworking rose to the level of art, but most artists used fired clay. Motifs, though more detailed and more carefully executed later in the period, remained much the same as in past millennia.

IRON AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)

Sculpture. Iron age Japanese produced a full range of ceramics—everything from very utilitarian clay pots to highly decorative religious artifacts to a whistle. In part, the Yayoi period (300 BCE-300 CE) is demarcated from the Jōmon period (8000-300 BCE) which preceded it, and Kofun period (250-538 CE) which followed it, by the particular style of pottery produced. Jōmon period pottery was generally very rough and crudely produced. However, Yayoi period pottery is more refined and used processes that are also found in Korea. It is likely that migrants brought this technology with them from Korea and, finding it useful, was adopted by Japanese potters. In particular, Yayoi period potters burnished porous surfaces with slip, which had the effect of smoothing the surface and making it more waterproof. Slip is a form of liquefied clay that has a slightly different composition than what is found in the body of an object and is added before firing. In addition, slip allowed for different forms of decoration and Yayoi pottery is distinguished by red and occasionally black pigment being used in decoration. There is no evidence of Yayoi potters using a wheel or other mechanical aids during production. Therefore, it is likely that potters used the cord stacking method to mold objects, indicating some continuity between Jōmon pottery and Yayoi pottery.

Bronze and Iron. Iron age artisans had also become adept at casting bronze and iron. This technology, which came to Japan very late in human history, was quickly adopted by early Japanese. In particular,

artisans crafted iron weapons—swords, tools, armor, rudimentary jewelry and cast bells and mirrors—for use in religious ceremonies. Motifs in sculpture and decoration on pottery included female figures, celestial objects, birds, wild and domesticated animals and structures.

POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD (500 CE-1500 CE)

The Fine Arts.Tea Ceremony. The Ashikaga period is remembered for the adoption of Tea Ceremony (*Cha-no-yu*). Tea Ceremony reflects the austere lifestyle of Zen. It is highly stylized and very formal. It is still practiced as an art in Japan and is an activity that all cultured Japanese aspire to participate in at some point in their lives. The austere aesthetic is also evident in some of the representative architecture of the time. For example, the Golden Pavilion (Kinkakuji) in Kyoto was built during the reign of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (the third Ashikaga shōgun) and later became a Zen monastery. In the dramatic and visual arts, the Ashikaga period saw the importation from China of new forms of monochrome painting. These forms, which were quickly adapted to reflect Japanese artistic sensibilities, were championed by artists such as Sesshū (1420-1506) who is reported to have been one of the first to have used ink splash techniques. Perhaps the most important and well known of the cultural arts introduced in the Muromachi period were Nō and Kyōgen. These forms, especially Nō, are still performed today and can be seen in most major cities in Japan on any given night.