13: Japan Before 1333 CE
13.1: Prehistoric Japan

13.1.1: Ceramics in the Jomon Period

Pottery from the prehistoric Jōmon period in Japan is thought by many scholars to be the oldest ever discovered.

Learning Objective

Describe the pottery of the Jomon people in prehistoric Japan

Key Points

- Prehistoric art of Japan begins with the Jōmon period (c. 10,000 BCE - 350 BCE), and the Jōmon people are thought to have been the first settlers of Japan. The Jōmon people are named for the "cord-markings," or decorative impressions made with rope, found on pottery of this era.
- Jōmon pottery is said by many scholars to be the oldest ever discovered.
- In the Middle Jōmon period (3000-2000 BCE), simple decorations on the pottery gave way to highly elaborate designs; flame vessels and crown-formed vessels are among the most distinctive forms from this period.
- Clay figurines called dogū, often described as "goggle-eyed," featured elaborate geometrical designs and short, stubby limbs; they are believed to have a religious or ritual significance.

Key Terms

dogū

Clay figurines crafted by the Jōmon people of ancient Japan.

cord-markings

Impressions made with rope, found as decorations on pottery of the Jōmon period.

Overview: Prehistoric Japan

Prehistoric art of Japan begins with the Jōmon period (c. 10,000 BCE - 350 BCE). The Jōmon people are thought to have been the first settlers of Japan. Nomadic hunter-gatherers who later practiced organized farming and built cities, the Jōmon people are named for the "cord-markings"—impressions made by pressing rope into the clay before it was heated to approximately 600-900 degrees Celsius—that were found as decorations on pottery of this time. The term Jōmon was first applied to the pottery and the culture by American Edward Sylvester Morse. Jōmon pottery is said by many scholars to be the oldest ever discovered.
Jōmon People and Their Art

The Jōmon communities consisted of hundreds or even thousands of people who dwelt in simple houses of wood and thatch set into shallow earthen pits to provide warmth from the soil. They crafted lavishly decorated pottery storage vessels, clay figurines called *dogū*, and crystal jewels.

Pottery Vessels

The oldest examples of Jōmon pottery have flat bottoms, though pointed bottoms (meant to be held in small pits in the earth) became common later. In the Middle Jōmon period (3000-2000 BCE), simple decorations on the pottery (created with cord or through scratching) gave way to highly elaborate designs. So-called flame vessels, along with the closely related crown-formed vessels, are among the most distinctive forms from this period.

Crown-formed vessel from middle Jōmon period (3000-2000 BCE)

"Crown-formed vessel," a variation on the flame vessel style for which Jōmon art is famous.
Dogū

Representative forms such as clay figurines of people and animals also appeared around this time. These figurines, called dogū, are often described as "goggle-eyed" and feature elaborate geometrical designs and short, stubby limbs. They are believed to have borne a religious or ritual significance.

A Final Jōmon Statuette (1000-400 BCE)

An example of Jōmon dogū.

13.1.2: Ceramics and Bronze in the Yayoi Period

Artifacts brought to the Japanese islands by the Yayoi people bore Chinese and Korean influences and ushered Japan into the Iron Age.

Learning Objective

Discuss how Chinese expansion under the Qin and Han Dynasties contributed to migrations to the Japanese
archipelago during the Yayoi period.

**Key Points**

- The Yayoi people arrived in Japan around 350-300 BCE, bringing knowledge of wetland rice cultivation, the manufacture of copper weapons and bronze bells, and wheel-thrown, kiln-fired ceramics.
- Artifacts brought to the islands at this time had a powerful effect upon the development of Japanese art by presenting objects to imitate and copy, such as bronze mirrors and swords in the Chinese and Korean styles.
- Yayoi period pottery tends to be smoother than that of the earlier Jōmon period and more frequently features decorations made with sticks or combs rather than rope.
- Three major symbols of Yayoi culture include the bronze mirror, the bronze sword, and the royal seal stone. Yayoi craft specialists also made bronze ceremonial bells, known as dōtaku.

**Key Terms**

Iron Age

A level of culture in which man used iron and the technology of iron production.

dōtaku

Ceremonial bronze bells of the Yayoi people in Japan.

Qin and Han

The name of respective Chinese dynasties: Qin (221-206 BCE) and Han (206-220 CE)

**Overview: The Yayoi People**

The Yayoi period is an Iron Age era in the history of Japan traditionally dated 300 BCE to 300 CE. It is named after the neighborhood of Tokyo where archaeologists first uncovered artifacts and features from that era. Distinguishing characteristics of the Yayoi period include the appearance of new Yayoi pottery styles, the start of intensive rice agriculture in paddy fields, and a hierarchical class structure. Techniques in metallurgy based on the use of bronze and iron were also introduced to Japan in this period.

The Yayoi followed the Jōmon period (13,000–400 BCE), and Yayoi culture flourished in a geographic area from southern Kyūshū to northern Honshū. Archaeological evidence supports the idea that during this time, an influx of farmers from the Asian continent to Japan (known now as the Yayoi people) absorbed or overwhelmed the native hunter-gatherer population. Chinese expansion under the Qin (221-206 BCE) and Han (206-220 CE) Dynasties is said to have been a primary impetus for migration to the Japanese archipelago.

**Influence on Art**

The Yayoi brought their knowledge of wetland rice cultivation, the manufacture of copper weapons and
bronze bells (dōtaku), and wheel-thrown, kiln-fired ceramics. Along with introducing bronze casting and other technologies into the islands, the Yayoi people brought cultural influences from China and Korea. Their artifacts had a powerful effect on the development of Japanese art by presenting objects to imitate and copy, such as bronze mirrors and swords in the Chinese and Korean styles.

Yayoi pottery was simply decorated and is thought to have been produced on a potter's wheel, as opposed to pottery from the earlier Jōmon period which was produced by hand. Pottery from the Yayoi period also tends to be smoother than that of the Jōmon period and more frequently features decorations made with sticks or combs rather than rope. Yayoi pottery, burial mounds, and food preservation have been discovered to be very similar to the pottery of southern Korea, suggesting the Yayoi people originated in the Korean peninsula; some pieces of Yayoi pottery also clearly show the influence of Jōmon ceramics.

Yayoi art

A jar from the Yayoi period (1st - 3rd century CE)

Chinese influence on the Yayoi culture can be seen in the bronze and copper weapons and other objects of the Yayoi people, as well as irrigated paddy rice cultivation. Three major symbols of Yayoi culture include the bronze mirror, the bronze sword, and the royal seal stone. Yayoi craft specialists also made bronze ceremonial bells known as dōtaku. By the 1st century CE, Yayoi farmers began using iron agricultural tools and weapons.
A Yayoi period dōtaku bell, 3rd century CE

Yayoi craft specialists made bronze ceremonial bells known as dōtaku.

13.1.3: Grave Goods in the Kofun Period

The Kofun period is the oldest era of recorded history in Japan, characterized by its earthen burial mounds.

Learning Objective

Locate the Kofun Period within Japan's history of contact with China and the introduction of Buddhism

Key Points

- The Kofun period from 250 to 538 CE is the oldest era of recorded history in Japan. It is characterized by the Shinto culture that existed prior to the introduction of Buddhism.
- During the Kofun period, the leader of a powerful clan won control over much of west Honshū and the northern half of Kyūshū, eventually establishing the Imperial House of Japan.
- The word kofun is Japanese for the type of burial mounds dating from this era, whose size reflected the power and influence of the ruling classes.
- The mounds contained large stone burial chambers and some were surrounded by moats. Unglazed pottery figures called Haniwa were often buried under the circumference of the kofun.
- Kofun come in many shapes, but round and square are most common. A distinct style is the keyhole-shaped kofun with its square front and round back. Kofun range in size from several meters to over 400 meters in length.

**Key Terms**

Shinto

The indigenous spirituality of the people of Japan.

Buddhism

The religion and philosophy founded by the Indian teacher Gautama Buddha.

kofun

The name of the earliest recorded period in Japanese history, named for the type of burial mounds dating from this era.

**Overview: The Kofun Period**

The Kofun period is the oldest era of recorded history in Japan, dating from around 250 to 538 CE. It followed the Yayoi period in Japanese history; the Kofun and the subsequent Asuka periods are sometimes referred to collectively as the Yamato period. The word *kofun* is Japanese for the type of burial mounds dating to this era. The close of the Kofun period saw the introduction of the Chinese system of writing as well as the widespread adoption of Buddhism.
Megalithic Tomb from the Kofun Period

Daisen Kofun, the largest of the earthen burial mounds from the Kofun period in Japan.

Kofun Culture

The Kofun period is distinguished from the following Asuka period by several cultural elements. The Kofun period is characterized by the Shinto culture that existed prior to the introduction of Buddhism. Politically, the leader of a powerful clan won control over much of west Honshū and the northern half of Kyūshū, eventually establishing the Imperial House of Japan. Kofun burial mounds on Tanegashima and two very old Shinto shrines on Yakushima suggest that these islands were the southern boundaries of the Yamato state. Its northernmost extent was as far north as Tainai in the modern Niigata Prefecture, where mounds associated with a person linked to the Yamato kingdom have been located.

Kofun Burial Mounds

Kofun (from Middle Chinese kú, meaning "ancient", and bjun, meaning "burial mound") are the burial mounds built for the people of the ruling class during the 3rd to 7th centuries in Japan. The Kofun period takes its name from these distinctive earthen mounds, which contained large stone burial chambers. Some were surrounded by moats.

Kofun come in many shapes, but most commonly round and square. A distinct style is the keyhole-shaped kofun, with its square front and round back. Kofun range in size from several meters to over 400 meters in length, and unglazed pottery figures called Haniwa were often buried under the circumference of the structures.

The oldest Japanese kofun is Hokenoyama Kofun located in Sakurai, Nara, which dates to the late 3rd century. In the Makimuku district of Sakurai, later keyhole kofuns (including Hashihaka Kofun and Shibuya Mukaiyama Kofun) were built around the early 4th century. The trend of the keyhole kofun first spread from Yamato to Kawachi (where very large kofun such as Daisenryō Kofun exist) and then throughout the country (with the exception of the Tōhoku region) in the 5th century. Keyhole kofun disappeared later in the 6th century, probably because of the drastic reformation which took place in the Yamato court; records suggest the introduction of Buddhism at this time. The last two great kofun are the Imashirozuka Kofun of Osaka, which is believed by current scholars to be the tomb of Emperor Keitai, and the Ikatoyama Kofun of Fukuoka, recorded in Fudoki of Chikugo to be the tomb of Iwai, the political archrival of Keitai.
Aerial Photo of Notable Kofun Group

The Furuichi kofun group in Osaka.

Attributions

- Ceramics in the Jomon Period

- Ceramics and Bronze in the Yayoi Period

- Grave Goods in the Kofun Period


13.2: Buddhist Art in Japan

13.2.1: Japanese Buddhism

The introduction of Buddhism to Japan resulted in the creation of temples, monasteries, paintings, and sculptures of extraordinary artistic achievement.

Learning Objective

Create a timeline of the introduction of Buddhism and the development of Buddhist art in Japan from the 6th through the 16th centuries

Key Points

- Before the introduction of Buddhism, Japan was already the seat of various cultural and artistic influences.
- The Japanese were introduced to Buddhism in the 6th century, when missionary monks traveled to the islands with numerous scriptures and works of art. The Buddhist religion was adopted by the state in the following century.
- Countless paintings and sculptures were made, often under governmental sponsorship. Indian, Hellenistic, Chinese, and Korean artistic influences blended into an original style characterized by realism and grace.
- Japan developed extremely rich figurative art for the pantheon of Buddhist deities, sometimes combined with Hindu and Shinto influences.
- Zen art developed in the 12th and 13th centuries and reached its apogee in the Muromachi Period (1337 - 1573) following the introduction of the faith by Dogen and Eisai upon their return from China.

Key Terms

haniwa

Terracotta clay figures made for ritual use and buried with the dead during the Kofun period (3rd to 6th century CE) of Japanese history.

Silk Road

An extensive interconnected network of trade routes across Asia, North and Northeast Africa, and Europe, historically used by silk traders.

Myōan Eisai

(1141 – 1215) A Japanese Buddhist priest credited with bringing the Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism and green tea from China to Japan.

Dōgen Zenji
Zen

A philosophy of calm associated with the Buddhist denomination.

Buddhism Reaches Japan

Before the introduction of Buddhism, Japan was already the seat of various cultural and artistic influences, from the abstract linear decorative art of the indigenous Neolithic Jōmon (10500 BCE to 300 BCE), to the pottery and bronze of the Yayoi period and the Haniwa art (terracotta clay figures used as funereal objects) of the Kofun period. The Japanese were introduced to Buddhism in the 6th century CE, when missionary monks traveled to the islands with numerous scriptures and works of art. The Buddhist religion was adopted by the state in the following century. Located geographically at the end of the network of trade routes through Asian, Africa, and Europe known as the Silk Road, Japan was able to preserve many aspects of Buddhism while it was simultaneously disappearing in India and being suppressed in Central Asia and China.

Buddhist Art

From 711 BCE, numerous temples and monasteries were built in the capital city of Nara, including a five-story pagoda, the Golden Hall of the Horyuji, and the Kōfuku-ji temple. Countless paintings and sculptures were made, often under government sponsorship. Indian, Hellenistic, Chinese, and Korean artistic influences blended into an original style characterized by its realism and grace.

Kōfuku-ji

Five-story pagoda and Tōkondō.

The creation of Japanese Buddhist art was especially fertile between the 8th and 13th centuries during the
periods of Nara, Heian, and Kamakura. Japan developed extremely rich figurative art for the pantheon of Buddhist deities, sometimes combined with Hindu and Shinto influences. This art tends to be very varied, creative, and bold.

The Asura in Kōfuku-ji, Nara (734)

A sculpture of an Asura, a type of supernatural being in traditional Buddhist cosmology.

Zen Art

From the 12th and 13th centuries, art in Japan further developed through the introduction of Zen art, which reached its apogee in the Muromachi Period (1337 - 1573) following the introduction of Zen Buddhism by Dōgen Zenji and Myōan Eisai upon their return from China. Zen art is primarily characterized by original paintings (such as sumi-e) and poetry (especially haiku) that strive to express the true essence of the world through impressionistic and unadorned representations. The search for enlightenment in the moment also led to the development of other important derivative arts in Japan, such as the Chanoyu tea ceremony and the Ikebana art of flower arrangement. This evolution considers almost any human activity with a strong spiritual and aesthetic content as art, including activities related to combat techniques such as martial arts.

13.2.2: Horyuji Temple

The Hōryū-ji Temple, one of the most celebrated Japanese temples, reflects the spread of Buddhism and
Chinese culture in Japan.

**Learning Objective**

Describe the creation, function, and characteristics of Prince Shōtoku's Hōryū-ji temple.

**Key Points**

- The Hōryū-ji Temple embraces architectural influences ranging from the Eastern Han to the Northern Wei of China, as well as from the Three Kingdoms of Korea, particularly those of Baekje.
- The temple was originally commissioned by Prince Shōtoku of the Asuka Period (c. 538 to 710 CE) and was dedicated to Yakushi Nyorai, the Buddha of healing, in honor of the prince's father.
- The original temple is believed to have been completed by 607 CE; after it was destroyed in 670, the temple was reconstructed but slightly reoriented in a northwest position around the year 711.
- The current temple is made up of two areas: the Sai-in in the west and the Tō-in in the east.
- The western part of the temple contains the Kondō (sanctuary hall) and a five-story pagoda. The Tō-in area holds the octagonal Yumedono Hall (also known as the Hall of Dreams).

**Key Terms**

- **Kondō**
  Usually the main hall of a Buddhist temple (literally "golden hall"), which started to be used during the Asuka and Nara periods.

- **pagoda**
  An Asian religious building, especially a multistory Buddhist tower, erected as a shrine or temple.

- **Prince Shōtoku**
  (February 7, 574 – April 8, 622) A semi-legendary regent and politician of the Asuka period in Japan who served under Empress Suiko and commissioned the celebrated Hōryū-ji Temple.

Hōryū-ji is one of the most celebrated temples in Japan, originally commissioned by Prince Shōtoku of the Asuka Period (c. 538 to 710 CE). It was originally called Ikaruga-dera (斑), a name that is still sometimes used. This first temple was completed around 607 CE. Hōryū-ji was dedicated to Yakushi Nyorai, the Buddha of healing, in honor of the prince's father. The original temple, named by modern historians and archaeologists Wakakusa-garan (若), was lost to fire after a lightning strike in 670. The temple was reconstructed but slightly reoriented in a northwest position around 711.

**Characteristics of Hōryū-ji Temple**

The reconstructed buildings embrace architectural influences ranging from the Eastern Han to the Northern Wei of China, as well as from the Three Kingdoms of Korea, particularly the Baekje Kingdom. With its origin dating back to early 7th century, the reconstruction has allowed Hōryū-ji to absorb and feature early Asuka period elements along with distinct elements only seen in Hōryū-ji, which were absent from the architecture of the following Nara period.
The current temple is made up of two areas: the Sai-in in the west and the Tō-in in the east. The western part of the temple contains the Kondō (sanctuary hall) and a five-story pagoda. The Tō-in area holds the octagonal Yumedono Hall (also known as the Hall of Dreams) and sits 122 meters east of the Sai-in area. The complex also contains monk's quarters, lecture halls, libraries, and dining halls.

**Distinguishing Features**

Certain features distinguish the precinct of Hōryu-ji from similar temple architecture. While most Japanese temples of the period were arranged like their Chinese and Korean prototypes—with the main gate, a pagoda, the main hall, and the lecture hall all in a straight line—the reconstructed Hōryū-ji breaks from those patterns by arranging the Kondō (main hall) and pagoda side-by side in the courtyard.

Excavations at Yamada-dera, a lost temple dating back to 643, revealed corridors with thick horizontal poles placed in the windows at narrow intervals. By contrast, those at Hōryū-ji are thinner and placed at larger intervals.

Major Asuka-style characteristics seen in Hōryu-ji and resembling designs found in the Yungang Grottoes (from the Northern Wei in China) include the railings decorated with a swastika pattern and the cved reentasis columns. Another notable Asuka-style element found only in Japan and with the only surviving originals in Hōryu-ji is the cloud-shape hybrid bracket support. These Asuka characteristics are not seen in later Nara period temples.

**Five-Story Pagoda**

The five-story pagoda, located in the Sai-in area and standing at 32.45 meters (122 feet), is one of the oldest wooden buildings in the world. The wood used in the pagoda's center pillar is estimated through a dendrochronological analysis to have been felled in 594. The central pillar rests three meters below the surface of the massive foundation stone, stretching into the ground. At its base is enshrined what is believed to be a fragment of one of Buddha's bones. Around it, four sculpted scenes from the life of the Buddha face north, east, south, and west. Although the pagoda is five-storied, it is not designed for visitors to climb inside but rather is designed to inspire people with its external view.
Hōryū-ji pagoda

The five-storied pagoda has certain characteristics unique to Hōryū-ji.

Kondō

The kondō, located side-by-side to the pagoda in Sai-in, is another one of the oldest wood buildings in existence. The hall measures 18.5 meters by 15.2 meters and has two stories, with roofs curved in the corners. Only the first story has a double roof; this was added later in the Nara period, with extra posts to hold up original first roof because it extended more than four meters past the building. The hall holds the famous Shaka Triad, bronze Yakushi and Amida Nyorai statues, and other national treasures.
The kondō of Hōryū-ji

The two-storied kondō is another of the oldest wood buildings in existence.

Yumedono

Yumedono, or the Hall of Dreams, is one of the main constructions in the Tō-in area, built on the ground which was once Prince Shōtoku's private palace, Ikaruga no miya. The present incarnation of this hall was built in 739 with the purpose of assuaging the Prince's spirit. The hall acquired its present-day common name in the later Heian period, after a legend that says a Buddha arrived as Prince Shōtoku and meditated in a hall that existed here.

Yumedono, Hall of Dreams

Yumedono, a hall associated with Prince Shōtoku.

13.2.3: The Todaiji
The Tōdaiji is the most ambitious Buddhist temple complex of the Nara period in Japan.

**Learning Objective**

Discuss the "golden age" of art during the Nara Period, including temple-building such as the Tōdai-ji.

**Key Points**

- The Nara period in Japan (710 - 784 CE) marked the emergence of a strong Japanese state and is often portrayed as a golden age for art.
- The cultural flowering during the Nara period was spawned by the transmission of Buddhism from contact with China and Korea.
- The Japanese recognized the facets of Chinese culture that could profitably be incorporated into their own, which for the arts meant new technologies, new building techniques, more advanced methods of casting in bronze, and new techniques and media for painting.
- Temple-building in the 8th century was focused around the Tōdaiji temple in Nara.
- Constructed as the headquarters for a network of temples in each of the provinces, the Tōdaiji is the most ambitious religious complex erected in the early centuries of Buddhist worship in Japan.

**Key Terms**

*Nara*

Period of Japanese history lasting from 710 to 784 CE, during which Japan emerged as a strong state and witnessed an artistic golden age.

*Tōdai-ji*

A Buddhist temple complex located in the city of Nara, Japan; its Great Buddha Hall (Daibutsuden) houses the world's largest bronze statue of the Buddha Vairocana.

**Background: The Nara period**

The Nara period of the 8th century—so named because the seat of Japanese government was located in the city of Nara from 710 until 784—is often portrayed as a golden age in Japanese history. The period marked the emergence of a strong Japanese state and was characterized by a cultural flowering. The transmission of Buddhism provided the initial impetus for contact between China, Korea, and Japan, and the Japanese recognized facets of Chinese culture that could profitably be incorporated into their own. These included a system for converting ideas and sounds into writing; historiography; complex theories of government, such as an effective bureaucracy; and, most important for the arts, new technologies, new building techniques, more advanced methods of casting in bronze, and new techniques and media for painting.

**The Tōdaiji Temple**

Temple-building in the 8th century was focused around the Tōdaiji in Nara. Constructed as the headquarters
for a network of temples in each of the provinces, the Tōdaiji is the most ambitious religious complex erected in the early centuries of Buddhist worship in Japan. Appropriately, the main Buddha hall, or Daibutsuden, was enshrined with the Rushana Buddha, a 16.2-meter (53-foot) Buddha completed in 752 that represents the essence of Buddhahood, just as the Tōdaiji represented the center for imperially sponsored Buddhism and its dissemination throughout Japan. Only a few fragments of the original statue survive, and the present hall and central Buddha are reconstructions from the Edo period.

**Daibutsu of Tōdai-ji.**

The Great Buddha statue (Daibutsu) has been recast several times for various reasons, including earthquake damage. The current hands of the statue were made in the Momoyama Period (1568–1615), and the head was made in the Edo period (1615–1867).

Clustered around the Daibutsuden on a gently sloping hillside are a number of secondary halls: the Hokkedō (Lotus Sutra Hall), with its principal image; the Fukūkenjaku Kannon (the most popular bodhisattva), crafted of dry lacquer (cloth dipped in lacquer and shaped over a wooden armature); the Kaidanin (Ordination Hall) with its magnificent clay statues of the Four Guardian Kings; and the storehouse, called the Shōsōin. This last structure is of great importance to art history as it stored the utensils used in the temple's dedication ceremony in 752 and the eye-opening ritual for the Rushana image, as well as government documents and many secular objects owned by the Imperial family.
Hokkedô at Todaiji in Nara Japan

The Tōdaiji (dating back to 728) is the most ambitious religious complex erected in the early centuries of Buddhist worship in Japan.

Attributions

- Japanese Buddhism
- Horyuji Temple
  - "1280px-Horyu-ji36s3200.jpg." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%C5%8Dry%C5%AB-ji#/media/File:Horyu-ji36s3200.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%C5%8Dry%C5%AB-ji#/media/File:Horyu-ji36s3200.jpg), Wikipedia CC BY-SA 2.5.
- The Todaiji


13.3: The Heian Period

13.3.1: Influence of Buddhism in the Heian Period

The Heian period in Japan witnessed a flowering of art and architecture influenced by Esoteric and Pure Land Buddhism.

Learning Objective

Describe the Amida hall and images of the Amida Buddha portrayed in the art of Pure Land Buddhism

Key Points

- The Heian Period (794 - 1185 CE) is considered Japan's "Golden Age," a high point in Japanese culture that greatly influenced art and architecture.
- Early Heian period sculptures inherited and modified late Nara period sculptural forms while developing new depictions of Esoteric Buddhist deities. During this time, wood also replaced bronze as the most common material for making Buddhist sculptures.
- The central role of ritual in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism led to a flourishing of the religious arts in the Heian period. Religious paintings, mandalas, and statues provided practitioners with ways to contemplate Buddhist deities and concepts.
- Pure Land Buddhism, offering salvation through belief in the Buddha of the Western Paradise, also influenced Japanese art.
- The Kyoto nobility created a new form of Buddha hall, known as the Amida hall, which blends the secular with the religious and houses one or more Buddha images within a structure resembling the mansions of the nobility.
- The golden Amida sculpture inside the famous Phoenix Hall was executed by the influential sculptor Jōchō, who used a new canon of proportions and the new sculptural technique of yosegi.
- Yamato-e, considered the classical Japanese style, was first developed during the late Heian period and inspired by the Tang Dynasty Chinese "blue and green style" of landscape painting.

Key Terms

Raigō

An appearance of the Amida Buddha on a purple cloud at the time of one's death, which gave rise to a type of Japanese painting (a raigō-zu) of a Buddha accompanied by bodhisattvas.

Esoteric Buddhism

A complex and multifaceted system of Buddhist thought and practice that evolved over several centuries.

Fujiwara

A powerful family of regents in Japan that originated when the founder, Nakatomi no Kamatari (614-
669), was rewarded by Emperor Tenji with the honorific name.

mandala

Any ritualistic geometric design symbolic of the universe used as an aid to meditation, particularly in Hinduism and Buddhism.

Saichō

(767 – 822) A Japanese Buddhist monk credited with founding the Tendai school of Buddhism based on the Chinese Tiantai school he was exposed to during his trip to Tang China beginning in 804.

Kūkai

(774–835) A Japanese monk, civil servant, scholar, poet, and artist; founder of the Shingon or "True Word" school of Buddhism.

yamato-e

A classical Japanese style of painting, first developed during the late Heian period and inspired by Tang Dynasty paintings.

Background: The Heian Period

In 784, the Japanese Emperor Kammu, threatened by the growing secular power of the Buddhist institutions in the city of Nara, moved the capital of Japan to Heian-kyō (Kyōto), which remained the imperial capital for the next 1,000 years. The Heian Period, as it came to be called, refers to the years between 794 and 1185 when the Kamakura shogunate was established at the end of the Genpei War. It is considered Japan's "Golden Age," a high point in Japanese culture that later generations have always admired. The period is also noted for the rise of the samurai class, which would eventually take power and start the feudal period of Japan.

Influence of Esoteric Buddhism

The Late Nara period saw the introduction of Esoteric Buddhism to Japan from China by Kūkai and Saichō, who founded the Shingon and Tendai schools. The Heian period witnessed a flowering of Buddhist art and architecture and the introduction of Esoteric Buddhism to Japan. Early Heian period sculptures inherited and modified late Nara period sculptural forms while developing new images to depict wrathful Esoteric deities. During this time, wood also replaced bronze as the most common material for making Buddhist sculptures.

Kūkai impressed the emperors who succeeded Emperor Kammu and generations of Japanese, not only with his religious practices but also with his poetry, calligraphy, painting, and sculpture. Shingon Buddhist practice is based on various rituals, including the chanting of mantras, hand gestures (mudras), and meditation through visualization of mandalas. The central role of these rituals in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism led to a flourishing of the religious arts in the Heian period. Religious paintings, mandalas, and statues provided practitioners with ways to contemplate Buddhist deities and concepts.

A famous example of a Shingon mandala is the Taizokai (Womb World) mandala. Part of the Mandala of
the Two Realms, the Womb World is composed of 12 zones representing different dimensions of Buddha nature. In the center sits the Vairocana Buddha within the lotus of compassion, surrounded by attendant Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The Shingon sect believed that all beings have an innate Buddha nature.

Taizokai (Womb World) Mandala (Second Half of the Ninth Century)

The center square represents the young stage of Vairocana Buddha (hanging scroll, color on silk).

Pure Land Buddhism and the Fujiwara Regency

Pure Land Buddhism offers salvation through belief in Amida Buddha (the Buddha of the Western Paradise). This branch of Buddhism became popular in Japan during the Fujiwara regency (794–1185), named for the powerful clan that dominated Japanese politics in the middle Heian period. The Fujiwara family, then the most powerful in the country, ruled as regents for the Emperor, effectively becoming hereditary civil dictators. Formal trade with China ended, allowing for the development of indigenous cultural forms. The Fujiwara period was a time of cultural and artistic flowering at the imperial court and among the aristocracy, and the Kyoto nobility developed a society devoted to elegant aesthetic pursuits.

The Amida Hall
New types of images were developed to satisfy the devotional needs of the increasingly important Pure Land sects in the 10th century. They created a new form of Buddha hall known as the Amida hall, which blends the secular with the religious and houses one or more Buddha images within a structure resembling the mansions of the nobility. The Hō-ō-dō (Phoenix Hall, completed in 1053) of the Byōdō-in, a temple in Uji to the southeast of Kyoto, is one of the finest examples of Fujiwara Amida halls. It consists of a main rectangular structure flanked by two L-shaped wing corridors and a tail corridor, set at the edge of a large artificial pond. Inside, a single golden image of Amida (c. 1053) is installed on a high platform.

Byōdō-in Phoenix Hall, Uji, Kyoto

The Phoenix Hall of the Byōdō-in is an exampla of Fujiwara Amida halls.

Raigō

Other popular images include the Raigō, which depicts the appearance of the Amida Buddha on a floating cloud along with his attendant celestial Bodhisattvas, Kannon and Seishi, at the time of one's death. A fine example of this type of image is found in the Phoenix Hall, whose walls are decorated with small relief carvings. These works depict the host believed to have accompanied Amida when he descended from his celestial realm to gather the souls of believers at the moment of death and transport them in lotus blossoms to the Western Paradise.

A famous early example of Raigō imagery dating from 1053 is painted on the interior of the Phoenix Hall doors of the Hō-ō-dō. It depicts the descent of the Amida Buddha and is one of the first examples of Yamato-e, a classical style of Japanese painting inspired by Tang dynasty paintings and fully developed by the late Heian period. It contains landscape elements such as softly rolling hills that seem to reflect the actual appearance of the scenery around Kyoto. Stylistically, the painting is deeply influenced by the Tang Dynasty Chinese “blue and green style” of landscape painting traditions.
Amida Raigo painting

Color on silk, late Heian period. The Raigo image was introduced in Japan by the Pure Land School of Art during the Fujiwara Regency.

Amida Sculpture

A growing sense of grace, refinement, and softness emerged in Amida-style Buddhist sculptures, which culminated in the work of Jōchō (d. 1057), a Japanese sculptor of the Heian period. Jōchō’s workshop in Kyoto perfected the Wayō or "Japanese style" of sculpture. He used a new canon of proportions along with a new technique, yosegi, in which a single image is carved from multiple pieces of wood joined from the inside. While this technique limited the amount of surface detail an artist could carve into each piece, it forced the sculptor to convey his intended message within these preset limits. This resulted in finer and more ephemeral pieces. Most importantly, it allowed several assistants to work on the sculpture at once, greatly speeding up the process. Jōchō’s sculptures were remarkable for their intricately carved halos and the kindness and compassion of their elegant facial expressions.

13.3.2: Painting and Calligraphy in the Heian Period

In the Heian period, a style of calligraphy and painting emerged that was unique to Japan.

Learning Objective

Evaluate the reasons for the emergence of a uniquely Japanese style of calligraphy during the Heian period.
Key Points

- Soukou Shujitsu is regarded as the first text with a unique style of Japanese calligraphy.
- In the last century of the Heian period, the horizontal, illustrated narrative handscroll known as emaki came to the fore.
- Dating from about 1130, the Genji Monogatari Emaki, a famous illustrated Tale of Genji, represents the earliest surviving yamato-e handscroll and is considered one of the high points of Japanese painting.
- 12th-century emaki artists devised a system of pictorial conventions that convey the emotional content of each scene. In the second half of the century, a livelier style of continuous narrative illustration became popular.
- The central role of ritual in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism led to a flourishing of religious painting and mandalas, which provided practitioners ways to contemplate Buddhist deities and concepts. A famous example is the Taizokai (Womb World) mandala.

Key Terms

- hanging scroll
  One of the many traditional ways to display and exhibit Chinese painting and calligraphy, in which the work is displayed for short periods of time then rolled up and secured for storage.

- yamato-e
  A style of Japanese painting inspired by Tang dynasty paintings and fully developed by the late Heian period; it is considered the classical Japanese style.

- mandala
  Any ritualistic geometric design symbolic of the universe, used as an aid to meditation, particularly in Hinduism and Buddhism.

- kana syllabary
  Syllabic Japanese scripts, a part of the Japanese writing system, that contrast with the logographic Chinese characters known in Japan as kanji (漢).

- handscroll
  A traditional Asian roll of papyrus, parchment, or paper that has been written, drawn or painted upon, which unfolds horizontally so that the reader can view one section at a time while holding it.

Calligraphy in the Heian Period

In the Heian period, a style of calligraphy emerged that was unique to Japan. Writing had been popularized, and the kana syllabary was devised to deal with elements of pronunciation that could not be written with the borrowed Chinese characters. At the time, Japanese calligraphers still fitted the basic characters, called kanji (漢), into the squares laid out centuries before.

Soukou Shujitsu is regarded as the first text that shows a style unique to Japanese calligraphy. The Tanka
(短) poem below was written in 749 CE and shows some differences from Chinese calligraphy. The authentically Japanese wayō (和) style, or wayō-shodō (和), is attributed to Ono no Michikaze (894-966 CE), one of the so-called sanseki (三, "Three Brush Traces"), along with Fujiwara no Sukemasa and Fujiwara no Yukinari. The "Cry for noble Saichō", a poem written by Emperor Saga on the occasion of Saichō's death, was one of the examples of this transformation. Ono no Michikaze served as an archetype for the Shōren-in school, which later became the Oie style of calligraphy. The Oie style was used for official documents in the Edo period and was the prevailing style taught in terakoya schools of that time.

Soukou Shujitsu

Soukou Shujitsu is regarded as the first text that shows a style unique to Japanese calligraphy. This Tanka (短) poem was written in 749 CE and shows some differences from Chinese calligraphy.
Emaki

In the last century of the Heian period, the horizontal, illustrated narrative handscroll known as emaki came to the fore. Dating from about 1130, the Genji Monogatari Emaki, a famous illustrated Tale of Genji, represents the earliest surviving yamato-e handscroll and is considered one of the high points of Japanese painting. Written about the year 1000 by Murasaki Shikibu, a lady-in-waiting to the Empress Akiko, the novel deals with the life and loves of Genji and the world of the Heian court after his death. The 12th-century artists of the emaki devised a system of pictorial conventions that convey the emotional content of each scene.

Panel from the Genji Monogatari Emaki Pictorial Scroll

A scene from the Illustrated scroll of the Tale of Genji (written by Murasaki Shikibu in the 11th century). The multi-panel curtain at the center bottom of the image is a kichō. The decorated sliding door panels at the top of the image are fusuma. The scroll was made in about 1130 CE and is in the Tokugawa Museum in Nagoya, Japan.

In the second half of the century, a livelier style of continuous narrative illustration became popular. The Ban Dainagon Ekotoba (late 12th century), a scroll that deals with an intrigue at court, emphasizes figures in active motion depicted in rapidly executed brush strokes and thin but vibrant colors.

Emaki also serve as some of the earliest and greatest examples of the otoko-e ("men's pictures") and onna-e ("women's pictures") styles of painting. There are many fine differences in the two styles, appealing to the perceived aesthetic preferences of the genders. Perhaps most easily noticeable are the differences in subject matter. Onna-e, epitomized by the Tale of Genji handscroll, typically deals with court life, particularly the court ladies, and with romantic themes. Otoko-e, on the other hand, often recorded historical events, particularly battles. The Siege of the Sanjō Palace (1160), depicted in the "Night Attack on the Sanjō Palace" section of the Heiji Monogatari handscroll, is a famous example of this style.

Mandalas

The central role of ritual in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism led to a flourishing of religious painting and
mandalas in the Heian period. These works provided practitioners with ways to contemplate Buddhist deities and concepts. A famous example of a mandala from the Shingon school of Buddhism is the Taizokai (Womb World) mandala. Part of the Mandala of the Two Realms, the Womb World is composed of 12 zones representing different dimensions of Buddha nature. The Shingon sect believed that all beings have an innate Buddha nature. In the center sits the Vairocana Buddha within the lotus of compassion, surrounded by attendant Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

![Taizokai (Womb World) Mandala (Second Half of the Ninth Century)](image)

**Taizokai (Womb World) Mandala (Second Half of the Ninth Century)**

The center square represents the young stage of Vairocana Buddha. (hanging scroll, color on silk)

**Attributions**

- Influence of Buddhism in the Heian Period
3.0.


- Painting and Calligraphy in the Heian Period

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  - "Soukou_Shujitsu.jpg." [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Soukou_Shujitsu.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Soukou_Shujitsu.jpg), Wiki Commons [Public domain](http://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/).
13.4: The Kamakura Period

13.4.1: Art of Pure Land Buddhism

The art of the Kamakura period reflected the introduction of the Pure Land School of Buddhism, which depicted the Amida Buddha.

Learning Objective

Compare and contrast the art of the Pure Land, Zen, and Kei schools of the Kamakura period.

Key Points

- The Kamakura period was a period of crises in which the control of the country moved from the imperial aristocracy to the samurai; it was also, however, a time when Buddhism greatly flourished.
- The Kamakura period saw the introduction of the Amidist Pure Land schools of Buddhism, which emphasized salvation through faith in Amitabha.
- The Kamakura period favored more realistic and naturalistic art, a style exemplified by the sculpture of the Kei School.
- Among sculptors of the Kei school, Unkei is the most famous and accomplished; while his early works are fairly traditional, many show a flair for realism different from anything Japan had seen before. Some of the most popular paintings of the Kamakura period depict an ascending Amida Buddha.

Key Terms

Amitabha

The principal Buddha in the Pure Land sect, a branch of Buddhism practiced mainly in East Asia.

busshi

Japanese sculptor specializing in Buddha statues.

Lotus Sutra

A popular Sanskrit treatise that is the basis of the many forms of Buddhism worldwide.

Background: The Kamakura Period

The Kamakura period in Japanese history (1185–1333 CE) was a period of crises in which control of the country moved from the imperial aristocracy to the samurai. The ascension of Minamoto Yoritomo to the title of Shogun following the Hōgen and Heiji rebellions and the victory of the Minamoto clan over the Taira marked the beginning of the Kamakura period. The era is sometimes called "the age of the warriors";
it is also, however, a time when exchanges with China's Song dynasty continued and Buddhism greatly flourished.

**Schools of Buddhism**

This period saw the introduction of the two schools that had perhaps the greatest impact on the country: the Amidist Pure Land schools and the more philosophical Zen schools. The Amidist Pure Land schools, promulgated by evangelists such as Genshin and articulated by monks such as Hōnen, emphasized salvation through faith in Amitabha and remain the largest Buddhist sect today in Japan (and throughout Asia). The more philosophical Zen schools were promulgated by monks such as Eisai and Dogen and emphasized liberation through the insight of meditation. They were adopted equally by the upper classes and had a profound impact on Japanese culture.

**Pure Land Buddhism and Art**

Pure Land Buddhism had substantial influence over the art of the Kamakura period.

**The Kei School**

The Kamakura period favored more realistic and naturalistic art, a style exemplified by the sculpture of the Kei School. Based in Nara, the Kei School was dominant in Buddhist sculpture in Japan beginning around 1200 and into the 14th century, remaining influential until the 19th century. The Kei school was developed and led by the Buddhist sculptor Jōchō, his successor Kakujō, and Kakujō's son Raijō, the leading sculptors of the preceding generations.

**Unkei**

Among sculptors of the Kei school, Unkei is the most famous and considered the most accomplished sculptor of the period. Unkei's early works are fairly traditional, similar in style to pieces by his father, Kōkei. However, the sculptures he produced for the Tōdai-ji, a Buddhist temple complex in Nara, show a flair for realism different from anything Japan had seen before.
Muchaku at Kōfuku-ji; National Treasure

This sculpture exemplifies the realism of Unkei's work.

Amida Buddha Sculptures

Some of the most popular paintings of the Kamakura period depict an ascending Amida Buddha. The main tenet of Pure Land Buddhism is that chanting the name of Amida could lead to a reincarnation in the "pure land." Thus, scrolls of Amida were hung in the rooms of people who were dying; it was believed they could be saved by chanting the Amida mantra.
Buddhist Sculpture of Kamakura Period

Unkei in the guise of a monk, with prayer beads; note the powerful hands.

13.4.2: Japanese Painting and Sculpture in the Kamakura Period

The Kamakura Period was marked by a continuation of Heian painting traditions and new innovations in sculpture.

Learning Objective

Describe the painting, sculpture, and calligraphy of Zen Buddhism during the Kamakura Period.

Key Points

- A deepening pessimism resulting from the civil wars of 12th century Japan increased the appeal of the search for salvation; as a result, various schools of Buddhism grew in popularity.
- Zen Buddhism, which stresses a connection to the spiritual rather than the physical, was very influential in the art of Kamakura Japan.
- Painting from the Kamakura Period largely continued the traditions of the previous Heian Period, including emaki handscrolls, the yamato-e style of painting, and painted mandalas.
- Emaki or painted hand scrolls usually encompassed religious, historical, or illustrated novels,
accomplished in the style of the earlier Heian period.
- The Kamakura period is widely regarded as a renaissance era in Japanese sculpture, spearheaded by the sculptors of the Buddhist Kei school.
- Among the sculptors of this era, the sculptor Unkei is the most famous and accomplished; his work exhibited a realism and humanism not seen in previous works.
- The Kei school was responsible for the restoration of the temples of Nara and Kyoto, which were destroyed during warfare in 1180-1185.

**Key Terms**

**Ji**

A branch of Pure Land Buddhism stressing the importance of reciting the name of Amida, nembutsu (念).

**Rinzai**

A school of Zen buddhism in Japan, based on sudden enlightenment though koans; for that reason, it's also known as the "sudden school".

**Nichiren Sect**

A branch of Buddhism based on the Lotus Sutra, which teaches that all people have an innate Buddha nature and are therefore inherently capable of attaining enlightenment in their current form and present lifetime.

Japan suffered a series of civil wars in the late 12th century between several rival families. These wars eventually led to the rise of the feudalistic Kamakura shogunate. In a time of disunity and violence, deepening pessimism increased the appeal of the search for salvation. Kamakura was the age of the great popularization of Buddhism, and the reestablishment of cultural ties with China spawned the growth of Zen Buddhism and Pure Land Buddhism (Jōdo shū Shinran) as the two major branches of Japanese Buddhism. These two new sects dominated the artwork produced during this period.

**The Rise of Buddhism**

During this time, a number of monks left the Tendai sect and founded separate Buddhist sects of their own. These included:

- Hōnen, founder of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism
- Shinran, disciple of Hōnen and founder of the Jōdo Shinshū sect
- Ippen, founder of the Ji sect, which emphasized devotion to Amida Buddha through an ecstatic dance
- Dōgen, founder of the Sōtō school of Zen
- Eisai, founder of the Rinzai school of Zen
- Nichiren, founder of the Nichiren Sect, which emphasized devotion to the Lotus Sutra, a manual of Buddhist aphorisms presented as a discourse from the Buddha

The older Buddhist sects, such as Shingon, Tendai, and the early schools of the Nara period, continued to thrive through the Kamakura period and even experienced some measure of revival. However, the older schools were partially eclipsed as the newer Kamakura schools increased in popularity and found followers among the new Kamakura government and its samurai.
Zen was not introduced as a separate school until the 12th century, when Myōan Eisai traveled to China and returned to establish a Linji lineage, which eventually perished. Decades later, Nanpo Shōmyō (南 (1235–1308) also studied Linji teachings in China before founding the Japanese Otokan lineage, the most influential and only surviving lineage of Rinzai in Japan. In 1215 Dōgen, a younger contemporary of Eisai's, journeyed to China himself, where he became a disciple of the Caodong master Tiantong Rujing. After his return, Dōgen established the Sōtō school, the Japanese branch of Caodong. The Sōtō school was further expanded by Keizan. Sōtō priests say that if Dogen is the father of Japanese Sōtō Zen, Keizan Jokin (1268-1325) is its mother. Keizan's Soji-ji temple was a rival to Dogen's Eihei-ji. Others say that Dōgen gave Sōtō Zen "high religious ideals" while Keizan ensured Sōtō's survival.

**Painting in the Kamakura Period**

Painting from the Kamakura Period largely continued the traditions of the previous Heian Period. As most of the paintings in both the Heian and Kamakura periods were religious in nature, the vast majority were by anonymous artists. Painted mandalas were common, and many were created as hanging scrolls and murals on the walls of temples. The classic yamato-e style of Japanese painting, which gained significance in the Heian period, was continued throughout this era. Stylistically, painting included landscape elements such as soft rolling hills that seem to reflect something of the actual appearance of the landscape of western Japan, and works continued to be informed by Tang Dynasty Chinese "blue and green style" landscape painting traditions.

Paintings were used to decorate sliding doors (fusuma) and folding screens (byōbu). In addition, the emaki format of painting, consisting of long illustrated hand scrolls, remained popularity. The Kamakura Period witnessed the production of a large number of emaki, usually encompassing religious, historical, or illustrated novels accomplished in the style of the earlier Heian period.

**Kamakura Sculpture**

While painting continued to develop throughout the period, sculpture was by far the most popular art form. The Kamakura period is widely regarded as a renaissance era in Japanese sculpture, spearheaded by the sculptors of the Buddhist Kei school. Based in Nara, the Kei school was the dominant school in Japanese Buddhist sculpture into the 14th century. Artist of the Kei school succeeded the technique "yosegi-zukuri" (woodblock construction) and developed a new sculptural style marked by realism, solidity, and representation of movement and emotion. These artists studied early Nara period masterpieces and Chinese Song dynasty sculptures and paintings to influence their work. Sculptors of the time often worked for the Kamakura shogunate and other military clans, producing Buddhist sculptures as well as portrait sculptures.

The Kei school was responsible for the restoration of the temples of Nara and Kyoto, which had been destroyed during warfare in 1180-1185. Among the sculptors of this era, the sculptor Unkei is the most famous and accomplished. His most famous works include a pair of Kongō-rikishi colossal statues in the Tōdai-ji temple of Nara, along with the elaborate portraiture-like statues of Indian priests in Kōfuku-ji. Unkei had six sons who were also sculptors, and their work, like his, is imbued with the new kind of realism and humanism. Tankei, the eldest son and a brilliant sculptor, became the head of his father's studio. Kōshō, the 4th son, produced a remarkable sculpture of the 10th-century Japanese Buddhist teacher Kuya (903-972).
Nio guardian, Todai-ji complex, Nara

Agyō, one of the two Buddhist Niō guardians at the Nandai-mon in front of the Todai ji in Nara. These are some of the finest wooden sculptures in Japan from the 13th century carved by the Kamakura-era sculptor Unkei in 1203.

Kaikei was another famous sculptor of the time, a collaborator of Unkei, and a devout adherent of Pure Land sect of Buddhism. He worked closely with the priest Chōgen (1121–1206) on the reconstruction of the Tōdai-ji temple in Nara. Many of his figures are more idealized than those of Unkei and his sons and are characterized by a beautifully finished surface, richly decorated with pigments and gold. Perhaps his most important work is Amitabha Triad of Ono Jōdo-ji (1195).
Kaikei Buddha

Many of Kaikei's figures are more idealized than that of Unkei and are characterized by a beautifully finished surface, richly decorated with pigments and gold.

13.4.3: Japanese Calligraphy in the Kamakura Period

Japanese calligraphy in the Kamakura Period was influenced by the principles of Zen Buddhism.

Learning Objective

Discuss the purposes of Japanese calligraphy

Key Points

- After the invention of Hiragana and Katakana, the unique Japanese syllabaries, a distinctive Japanese
writing system developed, and calligraphers produced styles intrinsic to Japan.

- Japanese calligraphy of the Kamakura Period both influenced and was influenced by Zen thought. With the rise of the Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism, a less technical style of calligraphy appeared, representative of Zen attitudes.
- Calligraphy of this era was exemplified in the works of Musō Soseki (in the sōsho style), Shūhō Myōcho (the founder of Daitoku-ji in Kyoto), and Fujiwara no Shunzei and Fujiwara no Teika (in the wayō style).
- Through Zen, Japanese calligraphy absorbed a distinctive aesthetic often symbolized by the ensō, or circle of enlightenment.

Key Terms

Katakana

A Japanese syllabary originating from 800 CE and one component of the Japanese writing system along with hiragana, kanji, and in some cases the Latin script (known as romaji).

Hiragana

A Japanese syllabary originating from 800 CE and one component of the Japanese writing system, along with katakana, kanji, and in some cases rōmaji (the Latin-script alphabet).

Japanese calligraphy is a form of artistic writing in the Japanese language. For many years, the most esteemed calligrapher in Japan was Wang Xizhi, a Chinese calligrapher dating to the 4th century; however, after the invention of Hiragana and Katakana, the Japanese unique syllabaries, a distinctive Japanese writing system developed, and calligraphers produced styles intrinsic to Japan.

Calligraphy in the Kamakura Period

Various cultural and religious influences contributed to the rise of Japanese calligraphy during the Kamakura period.

Background: Culture and Politics in the Kamakura Period

The ascension of Minamoto Yoritomo to the title of Shogun following the Hōgen and Heiji rebellions and the victory of the Minamoto clan over the Taira marked the beginning of the Kamakura period (1185–1333 CE). The era is sometimes referred to as "the age of the warriors," with a broad transition of influence from court to the military establishment. However, it was also a time when exchanges with China of the Song dynasty continued and Buddhism flourished.

Zen Calligraphy

Japanese calligraphy of the Kamakura Period both influenced and was influenced by Zen thought. With the rise of the Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism, a less technical style of calligraphy appeared, representative of
Zen attitudes. This was exemplified in the works of Musō Soseki, who wrote in a refined soshō style, or Shūhō Myōcho (better known as Daito Kokushi), the founder of Daitoku-ji in Kyoto. In terms of wayō (和様) style of calligraphy, the works of Fujiwara no Shunzei and Fujiwara no Teika are considered outstanding examples of the late Heian and early Kamakura Periods. Zen monks such as Shunjo studied in China, and the copybooks that he brought with him were highly influential for the karayō tradition of calligraphy, expressing a clear kaisho style. Other monks were also influential during this era, including Rankei Doryū, who founded the Kenchō-ji temple in Kamakura where many of his works have been preserved.

Zen Calligraphy of the Kamakura Period

Calligraphy by Musō Soseki (1275–1351, Japanese zen master, poet, and calligrapher. The characters "別" ("no spiritual meaning") are written in a flowing, connected soshō style.
Technique

In accordance with this school of Buddhist thought, for any particular piece of paper the calligrapher has but one chance to create with the brush. The brush strokes cannot be corrected, and lack of confidence will show up in the work. The calligrapher therefore must concentrate and be fluid in execution. The brush was believed to write a statement about the calligrapher at a certain moment in time.

Through Zen, Japanese calligraphy absorbed a distinctive aesthetic often symbolized by the ensō, or circle of enlightenment. Zen calligraphy is practiced by Buddhist monks and most shodō practitioners. To write Zen calligraphy with mastery, the mind must be cleared and the letters allowed to flow naturally. This state of mind was known as the mushin (無 "no mind state") by the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro. It is based on the principles of Zen Buddhism, which stress a connection to the spiritual rather than the physical. Before Japanese tea ceremonies (which are connected to Zen Buddhism), one looks at a work of shodō to clear the mind as an essential preparatory step.

Ensō

Ensō (c. 2000) by Kanjuro Shibata XX. Some artists draw ensō with an opening in the circle, while others close the circle.

Attributions

- Art of Pure Land Buddhism

- Japanese Painting and Sculpture in the Kamakura Period

- Japanese Calligraphy in the Kamakura Period