



Discovering the Arts of Japan: A Historical Overview

By Tsuneko S. Sadao, Stephanie Wada

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This handy reference book is perfect for anyone interested in Japanese art, whether they be art history students and enthusiasts or tourists visiting Japan. A comprehensive overview of the major trends in art throughout the history of Japan, *Discovering the Arts of Japan* includes a select bibliography and list of major museums housing collections of Japanese art. Handsomely presented and easy-to-use, this book offers a valuable introduction to the subject, and encourages further in-depth study of specific periods and art forms.

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About the Author

Tsuneko S. Sadao studied art at the University of California at Berkeley. She has worked as an art consultant to Japanese museums and galleries for many years, and is presently consultant to the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Inc., in the U.S. and Japan.

Stephanie Wada is Associate Curator of the prestigious Mary and Jackson Burke Foundation and the Mary Griggs Burke collection of Japanese Art in New York. She has taught Asian art at Columbia University and the City University of New York.

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INTRODUCTION

The genesis of this book was a seed planted many years ago when I took a course in the history of Western art in New York. At the end of the course we were given the assignment of preparing a scrapbook with illustrations highlighting important trends in the development of the arts, an exercise that I found both instructive and stimulating. It occurred to me that a similar concept could usefully be applied to a book introducing Japanese art to a non-specialist audience. The aim of this book, then, is to present a concise but comprehensive survey of the arts of Japan from pre-history to the start of the modern era.

The insular culture of Japan can best be understood as a process whereby successive waves of imported ideas and artifacts were assimilated and synthesized into a new interpretation. This survey commences with what we know of prehistoric Japan, when objects were created both ceremonial and utilitarian use: they are "primitive" yet expressive, and show the lively creativity of the early inhabitants of the Japanese islands. The sixth century saw historically documented contact with Korea and China, which heralded a golden age of Buddhist art with magnificent temples housing masterpieces of sculpture and painting. Elements of Chinese culture were eventually assimilated into a refined indigenous court culture, which produced a new style of Japanese painting in the form of beautifully illustrated hand scrolls. The subsequent decline of the imperial court and rise of the warrior clans witnessed a trend toward realism in sculpture, and the elevation of sword-making into an art. A new wave of Chinese influence in the form of Zen Buddhism emphasized a meditative spirit and an aesthetic of simplicity, epitomized by the dry landscape gardens of Zen temples, and the tea ceremony. The flamboyant sixteenth-century military leaders inspired a grand age of castle building, with magnificent paintings adorning castle interiors, while kiln technology introduced from Korea altered the course of Japanese ceramic production. During the three hundred years of national isolation instituted by the Tokugawa shoguns, the arts spread beyond the exclusive domain of the privileged classes amongst the general populace, as manifested in the popular *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. The fall of the shogunate was followed by rapid Westernization and profound changes in society, which in turn revolutionized the arts.

This brief summary encapsulates the flow of developments in Japanese art which we have tried to capture in this book. Our presentation is essentially image driven, with nearly 250 photographs carefully selected from important collections housed in museums, temples, and shrines, as well as private collections inside and outside of Japan. Some of these show well-known major works, while others are rarely available to public view. Certain works carry the notation *National Treasure* or *Important Cultural Property*. This designation

indicates the Ministry of Culture's assessment of the importance of these works to the national patrimony under the 1950 "Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties."

The preparation of this book has been a long and rewarding learning process for me. It is my hope that it will increase your interest in the unique and fascinating art of Japan and stimulate you to further study in the subject.

Tsuneko S. Sadao

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