KEY IDEAS

- The Japanese have one of the best preserved continuous artistic traditions in the world.
- Zen Buddhist thought dominates much Japanese artistic production.
- The tea ceremony is a unique feature of Japanese culture.
- Ukiyo-e prints were originally sold as a middle-class art form in Japan, but became a rage among the avant-garde in Europe.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Japan is one of the few countries in the world that has never been successfully invaded by an outside army. There are those who have tried, like the Mongols in 1281, whose fleet was destroyed by a typhoon called a kamikaze, or divine wind, and there are those who have defeated the Japanese without invading, like the Allies in World War II, who never landed a force on the four principal islands.

Because of the relatively sheltered nature of the Japanese archipelago, and the infrequency of foreign interference, Japan has a greater proportion of its traditional artistic patrimony than almost any other country in the world. It was Commodore Perry who opened Japan, begrudgingly, to outside influence in 1854. One by-product of Perry’s intervention was the shipment of ukiyo-e prints to European markets, first as packing material and then in their own right. They achieved enduring fame in nineteenth-century Europe and America, but were looked down upon by the upper classes in Japan, who were more than willing to send them off for export.
Patronage and Artistic Life

Japanese artists worked on commission, some for the royal court, others in the service of religion. Masters ran workshops with a range of assistants—the tradition in Japan usually marking this as a family-run business with the eldest son inheriting the trade. Assistants learned from the ground up, making paper and ink, for example. The master created the composition by brushing in key outlines and assistants worked on the colors and details.

Painting is highly esteemed in Japan. Aristocrats of both sexes not only learned to paint, but became distinguished in the art form.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ZEN BUDDHISM

Zen is a school of Buddhism that is deeply rooted in all East Asian societies, and was imported from China in the late twelfth century. It had a particularly great impact on the art of Japan, where the Zen philosophy was warmly embraced.

Zen adherents reject worldliness, the collection of goods for their own sake, and physical adornment. Instead, the Zen world is centered on austerity, self-control, courage, and loyalty. Meditation is key to enlightenment, for example, samurai warriors reach deeply into themselves to perform acts of bravery and great physical endurance.

Zen teaches through intuition and introspection, rather than through books and scripture. Warriors as well as artists were quick to adopt a Zen philosophy.

CHARACTERISTICS OF JAPANESE TEA CEREMONY

The tea ceremony is a ritual of greater importance than it at first seems to the Westerner. The simple details, the crude vessels, the refined tea, the uncomplicated gestures—these alluring items are all part of a seemingly casual, but in fact, highly sophisticated tea ceremony that endures because of its minimalism. Teahouses have bamboo and wooden walls with floor mats of woven straw. Everything is carefully arranged to give the sense of straightforwardness and delicacy.

Visitors enter through a low doorway—symbolizing their humbleness—into a private setting. Rectangular spaces are broken by an unadorned alcove that houses a Zen painting done in a free and monochromatic style, selected to enhance an intimate atmosphere of warm and dark spaces.

Participants sit on the floor in a small space usually designed for about five people, and drink tea. The ceremony requires four principles: Purity, harmony, respect, and tranquility. All elements of the ceremony are proscribed, even the purification ritual of hand washing and the types of conversation allowed.

CHARACTERISTICS OF JAPANESE ARCHITECTURE

The austerity of Zen philosophy can be most readily seen in the simplicity of architectural design that dominates Japanese buildings. A traditional structure is usually a single story, made of wood, and meant to harmonize with its natural environment. The wood is typically undressed—the fine grains appreciated by the Japanese. Because wood is relatively light, the pillars could be placed at wide intervals to support the roof, opening the interior most dramatically to the outdoors.
Floors are raised above the ground to reduce humidity by allowing the air to circulate under the building. Eaves are long to generate shady interiors in the summer, and steeply pitched to allow the quick runoff of rain and snow.

Interiors have mobile spaces created by sliding screens, which act as room dividers, by changing its dimensions at will. Particularly lavish homes may have gilded screens, but most are of wooden materials. The floors are overlaid with removable straw mats.

A principal innovation in Japanese design is the Zen garden, which features meticulous arrangements of raked sand circling around prominently placed stones and plants (Figure 29.1). Each garden suggests wider vistas and elaborate landscapes. Zen gardens contain no water, but the careful placement of rocks often suggests a cascade or a rushing stream. Ultimately these gardens serve for spiritual refreshment, a place of contemplation and rejuvenation.

There is a deep respect for the natural world in Japanese thought. The native religion, Shintoism, believes in the sacredness of spirits inherent in nature. In a heavily forested and rocky terrained country like Japan, wood becomes the natural choice for building, and stone for Zen gardens.

**Major Works of Japanese Architecture**

**Ise Shrine, first century, rebuilt every twenty years, Ise, Japan** (Figure 29.2)

- Raised off the ground by wooden piles
- Thatched roof, diagonal logs
- Unpainted cypress wood
- Simplicity of design much prized
- Few people allowed inside, just priests or royalty
- Building meant to complement, not intrude upon, the Ise forest

**Phoenix Hall, c. 1053, rebuilt, Uji, Japan** (Figure 29.3)

- Two gilt bronze birds on roof are in the phoenix shape; phoenix is a symbol of the protection of the Buddha; roof itself suggest the wings of a phoenix in flight
- All the arts combine to create this work: architecture, landscape, sculpture, painting, crafts; reflection in water is a key element in the design
- Used as a kondo, a hall for spreading Buddhist teachings
- Airiness, lightness, raised off the ground
- Open nonwalled wings
- Complicated roof structure; sham second story; horizontal lines do not run through the building
- Chinese influence in the tile roofs and the stone base
CHARACTERISTICS OF JAPANESE PAINTING AND PRINTMAKING

Genre painting from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries was dominated by ukiyo-e, a term that means "pictures of the floating world." The word "floating" is meant in the Buddhist sense of the passing or transient nature of life; therefore ukiyo-e works depict scenes of everyday life or pleasure: festivals, theatre (i.e., the kabuki), domestic life, geishas, brothels, and so on. Ukiyo-e is most famously represented in woodblock prints, although it can be found on scrolls and painted screens.

Ukiyo-e was immensely popular; millions of prints were sold to the middle class during its heyday, usually put between 1658 and 1858. Although disdained by the Japanese upper classes for being popular, they won particular affection in Europe and in the Americas as an example of innovative Japanese art.

Printmaking was a collaborative process between the artist and the publisher. The publisher determined the market, dictated the subject matter and style, and employed the woodblock carver and the printer. At first, all prints were in black and white, but the popularity encouraged experimentation, and a two-color system was introduced in 1741.

By 1765, a polychrome print was created, and while this made the product more expensive than before and more time-consuming to create, it was wildly popular and sold enthusiastically. Colors are subtle and delicate, and separated by black lines. Each color was applied one at a time, requiring a separate step in the printmaking process. This made the steps complicated with precise alignments critical to a successful print. Suzuki Harunobu was the first successful ukiyo-e artist in the polychrome tradition. Hokusai explored the relationship of ukiyo-e and landscape painting.

Western artists were taken with ukiyo-e prints. They particularly enjoyed the flat areas of color, the largely unmodulated tones, the lack of shadows, and the odd compositional angles, with figures occasionally seen from behind. Forms are often unexpectedly cut off and cropped by the frame of the work. The Western interest in realistic subject matter found agreement in ukiyo-e prints.

Major Works of Japanese Painting and Printmaking

The Burning of the Sanjo Palace, late thirteenth century, handscroll on paper, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Figure 29.4)

- Painted 200 years after the civil war depicted in the scene
- Look down from above onto the scene
  - Strong diagonals emphasizing movement and action
  - Swift active brushstrokes
  - Narrative read from right to left as the scroll was unrolled
  - Depersonalized figures, many with only one stroke for the eyes, ears, and mouth
  - Tangled mass of forms accentuated by Japanese armor
  - Lone archer leads the escape from the burning palace with the Japanese commander behind him

Figure 29.4: The Burning of the Sanjo Palace, late 13th century, handscroll on paper, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Suzuki Harunobu, woodblock print (Figure 29.5)

- Refined views of middle-class women in daily pursuits; women are characteristically delicate: small feet and hands, shrouded in billowing drapery
- Strong diagonal compositions

Hokusai, *The Great Wave*, 1826–1833, woodblock print (Figure 29.6)

- First time landscape is a major theme in Japanese prints
- Part of series of prints called *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*
- Personification of nature as it seems intent on drowning the figures in boats
- Mount Fuji, sacred mountain to the Japanese, seems to be one of the waves
- Striking design contrasts water and sky with large areas of negative space

**CHARACTERISTICS OF JAPANESE SCULPTURE**

Japanese sculpture runs the gamut from abstract forms seen in the haniwa figures to the intensely realistic sculptures of samurais or Buddhist priests. Masks are highly acclaimed in Japan, especially those used in religious rituals and in dramas, called Noh plays. Noh masks are small, delicately carved wooden masks that reveal to the audience the emotions of a character. Indeed, Noh masks are particular to a type of emotion, not to a character in a play, and can be used throughout a repertory of plays provided that one emotion is inherent (Figure 29.7).

**Major Works of Japanese Sculpture**

**Haniwa Figure**, sixth century, earthenware; Tokyo National Museum (Figure 29.8)

- Earthenware; the material is emphasized, not painted over
- Geometric, simplified shapes; unglazed figures
- Found in tomb sites made of artificial hills, these figures placed on top, close together, surrounding the grave mound
- Many shapes, sizes; animals, people, professions, houses, boats
- Never symmetrical: off-center eyes, unequal arms
- Tomb guardians? Spirit guardians?
Tori Busshi, *Shaka Triad*, 623, bronze, Nara, Japan (Figure 29.9)

- Shaka, the Japanese name for Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha
- Frontal, long face and hands; wide nose; heavy jaw; face is fierce yet merciful
- Influence of Chinese art in the elongated style, Tori was of Chinese descent
- Heads, hands, legs in high relief
- Attendant bodhisattvas
- Originally placed in the center of a kondo
- Long inscription on back of halo says that a prince was ill, and this sculpture grouping was a supplication for his recovery. He died and the statue was completed for the repose of his soul in paradise.

**VOCABULARY**

*Genre painting*: painting in which scenes of everyday life are depicted (Figure 29.5)

*Haniwa*: (from the Japanese for “circle of clay”) Japanese ceramic figures that were placed on top of burial mounds (Figure 19.8)

*Kondo*: a hall used for Buddhist teachings (Figure 19.3)

*Ukiyo-e*: translated as “pictures of the floating world,” a Japanese genre painting popular from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century (Figure 29.6)

*Zen*: a metaphysical branch of Buddhism that teaches fulfillment through self-discipline and intuition

**Summary**

With much of its artistic tradition intact, a firm history of Japanese artistic production can be studied from its earliest roots. Works of haniwa earthenware, among the oldest sculptures in Japan, show a sincere devotion to the honesty of the materials being used, a tradition that never ebbs in Japanese art.

Japanese architecture is particularly sensitive to the properties of wood construction. The earliest buildings maintain the beauty of untreated wood and show a great emphasis on harmonizing with the natural surrounding environment. Japanese buildings are meant to be viewed as part of an overall balance in nature. Japanese buildings never intrude upon a setting, but complement it fully.

Traditional Chinese forms of painting, such as scrolls, were admired in Japan. Nevertheless, uniquely Japanese artistic styles, such as ukiyo-e prints, were popular as well, particularly with the middle classes. The impact of ukiyo-e prints on nineteenth-century European art can not be overstated.
Practice Exercises

1. Japanese haniwa figures are found in
   (A) temples
   (B) burial mounds
   (C) kondos
   (D) Zen monasteries

Questions 2 and 3 refer to Figure 29.10.

2. This print is typical of ukiyo-e art in that it
   (A) shows the Zen philosophy of rejecting the attractions of the material world
   (B) reflects the values of middle-class society
   (C) presents women on an equal footing with men
   (D) shows the influence of Western art

3. Women are typically shown in ukiyo-e prints with all of the following characteristics EXCEPT they:
   (A) wear fanciful costumes
   (B) have small hands and feet
   (C) have small facial features
   (D) are always accompanied by men

4. The favorite material for Japanese architects is
   (A) wood
   (B) metal
   (C) stone
   (D) terra cotta

Questions 5–7 refer to Figure 29.11.

5. This building is called the
   (A) Forbidden City
   (B) Ise Shrine
   (C) Great Stupa
   (D) Phoenix Hall

6. This building was probably used as a
   (A) palace
   (B) kondo
   (C) Zen monastery
   (D) pagoda
7. Characteristic of Japanese architecture is the way in which this building

(A) integrates various types of stone into its structure
(B) has parallel horizontal lines that run across the structure
(C) is integrated into the landscape setting
(D) is influenced by Zen philosophy

8. Great simplicity of design is a Japanese characteristic that can be found in all of the following EXCEPT

(A) the tea ceremony
(B) ukiyo-e prints
(C) Zen architecture
(D) Japanese sculpture

9. The Shaka Triad was commissioned

(A) to assist in the recovery of an ailing prince
(B) as a diplomatic gift
(C) to be used as a model for haniwa sculptures
(D) to decorate a royal palace

10. Japanese painting can be characterized by

(A) strong shadows
(B) triangular composition
(C) devotion to Shiva
(D) depersonalized people

Short Essay

What aspects of Japanese art, visible in Figure 29.12, inspired nineteenth-century European painters? Use one side of a sheet of lined paper to write your essay.

Figure 29.12

Answer Key

1. (B)  3. (D)  5. (D)  7. (C)  9. (A)
2. (B)  4. (A)  6. (B)  8. (B)  10. (D)
Answers Explained

Multiple-Choice

1. (B) Haniwa figures have been found in ancient Japanese burial mounds.

2. (B) Ukiyo-e art shows the values of middle-class society. Men and women were not on an equal footing in traditional Japan, nor did the Zen approach to austerity appeal to middle-class values.

3. (D) Women did not need men to complete themselves in ukiyo-e prints. Many fine series of ukiyo-e artworks feature women in domestic roles.

4. (A) Traditional Japanese architects use wood.

5. (D) This building is the Phoenix Hall.

6. (B) This building was built as a kondo, that is, a building used to spread Buddhist teachings.

7. (C) Japanese architecture is known for being one with its environment.

8. (B) Ukiyo-e prints are not known for their simplicity of design.

9. (A) The Shaka Triad was commissioned to assist in the recovery of an ailing prince.

10. (D) Japanese art is depersonalized, sometimes with minimal facial features and expressions.

Rubric for Short Essay

4: The student describes the Japanese influence on nineteenth-century European art by examining characteristics within this print that can be directly related to European examples. There are no major errors.

3: The student describes the Japanese influence on nineteenth-century European art by mentioning characteristics in this print, but is less specific and speaks in general terms. There may be minor errors.

2: The student describes Japanese art in general terms and mentions the influence on European works, but does not detail examples. There may be major errors.

1: The student mentions only one characteristic of Japanese art and speaks in general terms about its European influence. There may be major errors.

0: The student makes an attempt, but the response is without merit.
Short Essay Model Response

Beginning in the mid-19th century, Japanese art began to influence European painters. This movement was referred to as Japonism (Japonisme in French) because it first influenced French painters. Traditional Japanese woodcuts began to influence the new-movements of Art Nouveau, and perhaps most directly, Impressionism.

This painting displays typical Japanese characteristics: simple curved lines, flatness, bright colors, and an odd sense of perspective (evident behind the open screen, the floorboards, and the bridge) that influenced European painters. Perhaps most unusual (and perhaps, influential) is the tilted perspective evident at the intersection of various planes. For example, the floor meets the door at a point in space that does not suggest depth but rather verticality. Similarly, the floorboards themselves do not seem to recede into the painting, they rather seem to move upward into space. The collective effect of the twisted perspective of the screen and floorboards is that the women stand on a floor that seems to slant upward, and thus, is not parallel to the screen. This odd perspective also makes it seem as if the woman seated directly behind the screen is not parallel or behind the other women but rather at an elevated location. The bridge in the background is also painted using the same distorted perspective; it fails to suggest any depth whatsoever. In fact, the bridge seems so close to the screen that it seems to be touching the other side of the screen. Lastly, this painting has writing placed in what seems to be a cloud that does not harmonize with the painting; this writing seems to intrude upon the artwork. These characteristics directly influenced the 19th-century work of European painters who began to use realist subject matter, abstraction of nature, and stylization characteristics of this and many other Japanese works.

—Sara T.

Analysis of Model Response

Sara points out general characteristics of Japanese art that Europeans found inspiring, and particularly cites several relevant examples in the painting. A fuller discussion is added, for example, about the tilted perspective used in the intersecting planes of various grids contained in the screen, the floorboards, and the bridge in the distance. Her summary tells us that these characteristics were important in the development of late nineteenth-century European art. This essay merits a 4.