

A TEACHER RESOURCE

# KAMAKURA

REALISM AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE SCULPTURE OF JAPAN







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**Cover image**  
Nyoirin Kannon  
Kamakura period, early 14th century Japanese cypress  
(*hinoki*) with pigment, gold powder,  
and cut gold leaf (*kirikane*)  
H. 19½ x W. 15 x D. 12 in. (49.5 x 38.1 x 30.5 cm)  
Asia Society, New York:  
Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection, 1979.205  
Photography by Synthescape, courtesy of Asia Society



# **Kamakura Realism and Spirituality in the Sculpture of Japan**

Art is of intrinsic importance to the educational process. The arts teach young people how to learn by inspiring in them the desire to learn. The arts use a symbolic language to convey the cultural values and ideologies of the time and place of their making. By including Asian arts in their curriculums, teachers can embark on culturally diverse studies and students will gain a broader and deeper understanding of the world in which they live. Often, this means that students will be encouraged to study the arts of their own cultural heritage and thereby gain self-esteem.

Given that the study of Asia is required in many state curriculums, it is clear that our schools and teachers need support and resources to meet the demands and expectations that they already face. This resource is designed to help educators integrate the study of Japan into their teaching strategies. It employs a selection of art objects from the exhibition “Kamakura: Realism and Spirituality in the Sculpture of Japan,” on view at Asia Society from February 9 to May 4, 2016, as an accessible and tangible starting point for discussion about the history, geography, and culture of Japan.

## **How to Use This Resource**

This resource is divided into two main sections.

Section One is intended to help teachers and students develop skills for working with art objects. Information about each object is included.

Section Two includes an appendix that contains additional background material and a bibliography. Teachers may use the background essays to enhance their own knowledge.



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# Section One: Looking at Art

When confronted with a work of art, many people feel uncomfortable; they often feel that there are expectations of what they are supposed to see. This resource suggests a strategy for teachers to help students look at works of art so that they can confidently discuss and enjoy looking at them.

## How to Use This Section

Teachers are urged to begin with one or more of the introductory activities. They may then use the Basic Lesson Plan to explore the objects. Teachers are encouraged to read the relevant background information for each object they choose to explore, so that they may lead class discussions. The background information is intended to give teachers the tools to extend the looking experience. It is suggested that they do not read the information to the class, but rather that they let the students look at the objects with fresh eyes.



# Introductory Activities

Following are a number of exercises that will help students develop some of the basic observational, deductive, and language skills that will assist in the study of works of art.

## Learning to Look

**Materials** Common household or classroom objects  
Paper  
Pencils

**Procedure** Students are given a set period of time to look at an object, after which the object is removed. Students are then told to draw the object from memory. The exercise is repeated several times to demonstrate how time and concentration can reveal information not seen at first glance.

## Learning to Describe

**Materials** Cloth or plastic draw-string bag  
Common household or classroom objects, placed inside bag

**Procedure** Students feel the objects and are asked to describe them. This activity may be done with small groups or with the entire class. Listening students can be asked to guess the identity of the object on the basis of the given description.

## Learning to Ask Questions

**Materials** Common household or classroom objects

**Procedure** Students work in pairs, sitting back to back. One student is given an object. The other may ask ten or twenty questions to find out what that object is. The first student can only give information in response to the questions; he/she may not name the object. The teacher should conduct a follow-up discussion about what types of questions provided the most useful answers.



# Basic Lesson Plan

<b>Theme</b>	What can we learn from looking at an art object?
<b>Performance Objective</b>	Students examine an image, analyze its components, and begin to learn about its meaning.
<b>Grade Level</b>	All grades
<b>Essential Question/Aim</b>	What can we learn by examining a work of art?
<b>Materials</b>	Visual representation of an object Looking Exercise
<b>Assessment</b>	Student's verbal responses, drawings, and written commentaries
<b>Procedure</b>	Teachers will use a strategy of questions to lead the students in a visual exploration of each object.  <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Make a list on the blackboard of features that students see in the image.</li><li>2. After the questioning is completed, each student draws the object. Teachers may want to have each student record the drawings in a special notebook of Asian art.</li><li>3. Each student writes a short description of the object next to the drawing.</li></ol>
<b>Extension</b>	A class visit to a museum or gallery that exhibits the kind of objects being discussed.



# Looking Exercise

## Step 1

**General questions that motivate observation and personal (or group) interpretation:**

- What can you see?
- Have you ever seen anything like it?
- What is going on here?
- What else do you see?

**To encourage students to ground their comments in observation ask:**

- What do you see that makes you say that?
- How is this the same/different from other things you have seen?

## Step 2

**Questions that extend the process of observing and interpreting:**

- Can you tell what it is made from?
- What makes you say that?
- How do you think it might be used?

**For figural works, you may want to ask:**

- Who do we see here?
- What can you guess about their lives and/or personalities?
- What do they seem to be doing?
- When is this happening? (What time of day or season of the year?)
- What are they wearing?

**For landscapes, you may want to ask:**

- Where is this?
- When is this? (What time of day or season of the year?)

**For both figural and landscape images, you may want to ask:**

- What about...(point to a detail not yet discussed)? Ask students to take note of clothing, activities, gestures, expressions, etc., that might not have been noticed.

## Step 3

**Questions that lead to reflecting on observations:**

- What makes you think/say that?
- Is there anything else that makes you think that?
- What can we learn from thinking about this?

# Objects



## 1. Kaikei (active ca. 1183–1223)

### Standing Shaka Buddha

Kamakura period, ca. 1210

Gold-painted (*kindei*) and lacquered wood with cut gold leaf (*kirikane*) and crystal urna

Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas: AP 1984.01 a,b,c

Photography: Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas



## 2. Standing Amida Nyorai

Kamakura period, mid–late 13th century

Japanese cypress (*hinoki*) with traces of pigment and cut gold leaf (*kirikane*) and with inlays of crystal

Asia Society, New York: Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection, 1979.204a–b

Photography by Synthescape, courtesy of Asia Society





### 3. Zen'en (1197–1258)

#### Jizō Bosatsu

Kamakura period, ca. 1225–26

Japanese cypress (*hinoki*) with cut gold leaf and traces of pigment, inlaid crystal eyes, and bronze staff with attachments

Asia Society, New York: Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection, 1979.202a–e

Photography by Synthescape, courtesy of Asia Society



### 4. Fudō Myōō

Heian–Kamakura period, late 12th century

Japanese cypress (*hinoki*) with traces of pigment and cut gold leaf (*kirikane*)

Asia Society, New York: Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection, 1979.201

Photography by Synthescape, courtesy of Asia Society





1. **Kaikei (active ca. 1183–1223)**

**Standing Shaka Buddha**

Kamakura period, ca. 1210

Gold-painted (*kindei*) and lacquered wood  
with cut gold leaf (*kirikane*) and crystal urna

Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas: AP  
1984.01 a,b,c

Photography: Kimbell Art Museum,  
Fort Worth, Texas

## Background

In the early phases of Buddhism, the Buddha was represented in art with symbols. By the beginning of the Common Era, actual images of the Buddha began to appear. Images and sculptures such as this one became a focal point of Buddhist worship and ritual.

This artwork was created by the master sculptor Kaikei around the year 1210. Inscribed on the wooden peg under the left foot is the sculptor's name "Kosho Hogen Kaikei." Kosho means "highly skilled craftsman" and hogen means "eye of the law," one of three ecclesiastical ranks granted to eminent artists.

## How was this object made

This statue was carved from Japanese cypress and assembled using the joined-woodblock technique of construction that was developed in the eleventh century. The image is composed of different parts—the head, feet, hands, and the torso—which were carved from separate pieces

of wood. The head and torso were hollowed out and then the pieces were joined together. The surface was lacquered, painted, and decorated with pieces of cut gold leaf. The eyes and *urna* are inlaid crystals.

## Function

We cannot be absolutely certain of the exact function of this particular image, but we know that in Buddhist worship today, as in earlier times, images like this are the focal point of personal worship and religious ritual. The worshipper may offer gifts—like candles, incense, food, and water—to the Buddha and in this way honor the deity and acquire either personal or family merit.

## How to look at this work

Buddhist images are visual narrations of traditional stories. We may identify these stories by the poses and gestures of the figures, by what is worn, and by other objects or beings depicted.

### Figure

- His *ushnisha*. The cranial bump that symbolizes the “expanded wisdom” the Buddha attained at the time of his enlightenment.
- His quiet and serene face. The eyelids are lowered as if in meditation. The earlobes are elongated, stretched by the large and heavy earrings he wore when he was a prince. They remind us that to secure enlightenment, we must surrender attachment to worldly possessions.
- His monk’s robe. This garment shows he has abandoned the material world and consists of two unsewn pieces of cloth. One piece is wrapped around the waist; the other is draped around the shoulders.
- His hair, usually depicted in the form of “snail-shell” curls. Monks have shaved heads, but according to legend, when the Buddha cut his hair, the uncut portions snapped into these curls and he never had to cut his hair again.
- His large hands.
- His hand gestures, which are called mudras and have symbolic meanings. In this image the right hand is raised to chest level with the palm facing the viewer. This is the gesture of reassurance. The open left hand is pointing down in the gift-giving gesture.

### Pose

The Buddha stands upright on an open lotus flower—the Buddhist symbol of purity, reminding followers that like the lotus blossom that grows out of the mud, their spirits can transcend the pollution of the world.

### Other elements

- The Buddha’s head is circled by a halo, a circle of light that often marks a sacred person.
- The Buddha’s body is encircled by a mandorla, a halo that encases the whole body, composed of open-work carved scrolls and flowers.
- The all-over gilding symbolically indicates the divine radiance of the Buddha.



## 2. Standing Amida Nyorai

Kamakura period, mid–late 13th century  
Japanese cypress (*hinoki*) with traces of pigment and cut gold leaf (*kirikane*) and with inlays of crystal

Asia Society, New York: Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection, 1979.204a–b  
Photography by Synthescape, courtesy of Asia Society

## Background

Amida (Amitabha in Sanskrit) Buddha, who presided over the Western Paradise, or Pure Land, became very popular as a focus of worship beginning in the tenth century. Certain priests and teachers preached a doctrine of universal salvation through belief in Amida and the recitation of “Hail to Amida Buddha.”

Belief in Amida Buddha and the Pure Land was codified in a work known as *The Essentials of Salvation* that set forth the delights of the Western Paradise and the rigors of the afterlife if salvation was not achieved. A belief that first developed among the nobility and later became more widely popular, espoused that the death of believers was a glorious ceremony during which Amida Buddha would descend from heaven and joyously welcome the deceased into paradise.

Because descriptions of Amida’s Pure Land, seemed both attractive and accessible, many Buddhists sought this seemingly easy path to enlightenment and doctrines about the saving grace of Amida Buddha gained great popularity.

## How was this object made

This statue was carved from Japanese cypress and assembled using the joined-woodblock technique of construction that was developed in the eleventh century. The image is composed of different parts—the head, feet, hands, and the torso—which were carved from separate pieces of wood. The head and torso were hollowed out and then the pieces were joined together. The surface was lacquered, painted, and decorated with pieces of cut gold leaf. The eyes and *urna* are inlaid crystals.

## Function

It is likely that this sculpture was placed in a Buddhist temple. It would have either been displayed alone or as part of a triad with images of the two bodhisattvas that attend him. Alternatively, this sculpture may have been placed before the deathbed of a devotee. The image would have been used to focus the devotee's attention and help him or her concentrate on the promise of Amida's welcoming descent.

## How to look at this work

Buddhist images are visual scriptures created to express ideas about the Buddha's life and teachings, and to indicate his transcendent and supernormal powers. We can often identify the story by the poses, gestures, garments, objects, and beings depicted by the artist.

The figure can be identified as the Buddha by the treatment of his face and body:

- the cranial bump, or *ushnisha*
- elongated earlobes
- serene expression
- downcast eyes

The figure wears a skirtlike garment and a long shawl. Both are painted and then covered with designs in cut gold leaf

### Hand Gestures

- Both hands perform the gesture of teaching. The right hand is raised. The tips of the thumb and index finger touch, forming a circle, while all other fingers are extended upward, with the palm facing outward. This is the gesture of expounding. In East Asia this gesture, with the right hand raised and the left lowered, signifies Amida's welcoming descent from heaven to greet the soul of a faithful devotee at death and guide him or her to his Pure Land.

The Buddha stands on an open lotus flower, the Buddhist symbol of purity, reminding followers that like the lotus blossom that grows out of the mud, their spirits can transcend the pollution of the world.



### 3. Zen'en (1197–1258)

#### Jizō Bosatsu

Kamakura period, ca. 1225–26

Japanese cypress (*hinoki*) with cut gold leaf and traces of pigment, inlaid crystal eyes, and bronze staff with attachments

Asia Society, New York: Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection, 1979.202a–e  
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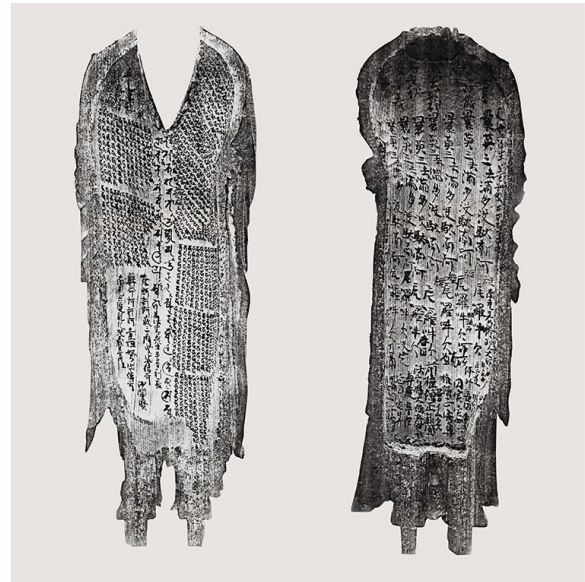


Fig. 1 Interior views of the sculpture

## Background

Jizō Bosatsu (pronounced gee-zoh in Japanese), was introduced to Japan during the Heian period and became a very popular and beloved bodhisattva. A bodhisattva is a compassionate being who has attained enlightenment, but delays nirvana in order to help others achieve enlightenment. Although he is mentioned in South Asian Sanskrit texts, where he is known as Kshitgarbha, the worship of the deity seems to have been important primarily in China, Korea, and Japan. Jizō is believed to help his followers in times and places of suffering and trial. He also saves beings suffering in hell. His role as guardian of travelers is recognized with stone images situated at crossroads. Because Jizō is also viewed as the protector of children, especially ones who remain unborn or who die young, small statues of Jizō are often venerated today by dressing them in children's clothing. In the Kamakura period, followers believed he would guide them during the period of the degradation of Buddhist teachings (the end of the world, known in Japanese as *mappo*, believed to have begun around 1052), when individuals would not be able to attain enlightenment through their own efforts but required the assistance of saviors.

The interior of this image contains the signatures of Zen'en and several other sculptors as well as the names of prominent monks of the Kofukuji temple in Nara, who are thought to have commissioned this work.

## **How was this object made**

This statue was carved from Japanese cypress and assembled using the joined-woodblock technique of construction that was developed in the eleventh century. The image is composed of different parts—the head, feet, hands, and the torso—which were carved from separate pieces of wood. The head and torso were hollowed out and then the pieces were joined together. The surface was lacquered, painted, and decorated with pieces of cut gold leaf.

When the statue was repaired in the 1960s, the hollow sculpture's interior surfaces were found to have inscriptions written in black ink (see fig. 1). These inscriptions identified the sculptor as Zen'en, who was active in Nara in the first half of the thirteenth century. Also named are two prominent monks active at a temple during the thirteenth century.

## **Function**

This statue of the bodhisattva Jizō probably came from the Kofukuji temple complex in Nara where it would have been venerated by supplicants and those seeking help. The ink notations written on the inside of the hollow sculpture include the names of donors and the wishes of worshippers.

## **How to look at this work**

Jizō is depicted here as a Buddhist monk with a shaved head, even though he is a bodhisattva. The mark on his forehead is called an *urna* and refers to his supernatural wisdom. He is dressed in the robes of a Japanese Buddhist monk: a vest over a long shirtlike garment with a shawl wrapped around the upper part of his body. The different patterns and designs that ornament these textiles were originally very colorful and vibrant and were highlighted by cut-gold leaf. The monk's staff, held in his right hand, is used to open the doors of hell. The little rings hanging from the top are said to make a clinking sound when he taps the staff on the ground to warn even the smallest insects of his approach, so they may escape and not be crushed underfoot.

In his left hand, Jizō holds a jewel of wisdom that grants all wishes. He carries this jewel to infernal realms to illuminate the darkness and ease the suffering of those who dwell there.

Jizō stands on a lotus, a Buddhist symbol of purity.





#### 4. Fudō Myōō

Heian–Kamakura period, late 12th century  
Japanese cypress (*hinoki*) with traces of pigment and cut gold leaf (*kirikane*)  
Asia Society, New York: Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection, 1979.201  
Photography by Synthescape,  
courtesy of Asia Society

### Background

Wrathful deities are characteristic of Esoteric Buddhist art. Despite their terrifying appearance, these beings are positive forces that employ their great power and abilities to help the faithful combat obstacles to enlightenment, including the external threats of demons and disease, and the inner states that keep one from enlightenment like anger, ignorance, sloth, and lust.

One such wrathful deity, Achala (The Immovable One), is invoked by the worshiper as both a powerful remover of obstacles and an important personal meditational deity. Fudō Myōō (pronounced Foo-doh Me-yoh), the Japanese form of Achala, was introduced in Japan during the Heian period as part of the imagery associated with the Esoteric pantheon.

Despite his Indian roots, Fudō Myōō achieved his greatest popularity in Japan. He is credited with being a stalwart defendant of the Buddhist faithful, as well as capturing the ignorant and leading them to Buddhist salvation. His determination is unwavering. As one of a group of Esoteric deities known as *myōō* or wisdom kings, Fudō represents the energetic powers of the

all-powerful cosmic Buddha Vairochana (Dainichi Nyorai in Japanese). His association with fire ceremonies originates in his Indian roots.

### **How was this object made**

This statue was carved from Japanese cypress and assembled using the joined-woodblock technique of construction that was developed in the eleventh century. The image is composed of different parts—the head, feet, hands, and the torso—which were carved from separate pieces of wood. The head and torso were hollowed out and then the pieces were joined together. The surface was lacquered, painted, and decorated with pieces of cut gold leaf.

### **Function**

Fudō was a principal object of worship in the Kamakura period. He was called upon in fire-filled rituals to protect the state and sovereign from natural disasters and military insurrections, and to address individual concerns like ensuring safe childbirth, curing illness, extending life, and subjugating enemies.

This sculpture was once part of a group of five wisdom king sculptures and would have been placed in the center of the group in a temple.

### **How to look at this work**

The sculpture depicts Fudō Myōō, a wrathful deity from the Esoteric Buddhist tradition. This identification is based on a number of characteristics commonly associated with the deity. Among these are the sculpture's jewelry, long and matted hair, and heavy build. The bulging eyes express Fudō Myōō's vigilance and steadfastness, further emphasized by a scowl that exposes his fangs. He wears one garment that drapes from one shoulder and another garment decorated with geometric designs and floral roundels draped around his waist. He once sat on a tiered pedestal (now missing) with one leg crossed and one leg hanging down.

The sculpture's right hand once held a sword, used to cut through ignorance and which symbolizes his protection of the faithful. The left hand once held a rope, or lasso, that the deity uses both to grab people who are reluctant to relinquish ignorance, and to tie up evil forces.

# Appendixes



# Japan

## Geography

Japan is an island nation consisting of four principal islands—Hokkaido (which officially became part of Japan in the nineteenth century), Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu,—and more than three thousand small adjacent islands and islets in the Nanpo chain and more than two hundred other smaller islands in the Ryukyu Island archipelago. The four major islands are separated by narrow straits and extend along a northeast-southwest axis forming a natural entity.

The Japanese archipelago lies off the eastern coast of Asia separated from the mainland by the Sea of Japan. The distance between Japan and the Asian continent is about 200 kilometers (124 miles), with the Korean peninsula as the nearest landmass.

The Japanese islands cover approximately 381,000 square kilometers (147,116 square miles) and measure nearly 3,800 kilometers (2,361 miles) from north to south.

Japan is located in the Pacific Basin, a zone where the earth's crust is unstable. Many earthquakes occur in Japan each year. The mountains of Japan are volcanic and more than forty of the volcanoes are active.

Japan lies at approximately the same latitude as the eastern coast of the United States. Seasonal change is clearly marked. Two major ocean currents affect Japan's climate. The Black Current flows north on the Pacific side warming areas as far north as Tokyo while another current flows southward along the northern Pacific, cooling adjacent coastal areas. Monsoons (seasonal winds) contribute to the hot, humid summers, rainy seasons in early summer and early fall, and the cold northern winters.

More than two-thirds of Japan is mountainous. A long chain of mountains runs down its middle, dividing it into halves. One half faces the Pacific Ocean, the other the Sea of Japan. The Japanese islands are, in fact, the summits of mountain ridges that formed near the outer edge of the Asian continental shelf.

Most of the population is concentrated in the plains and mountain basins. This means that most cities, factories, farms, and people are squeezed into one-third of Japan's total land area.

# The Provinces of Japan in the 1330s



Adapted from *The Origins of Japan's Medieval World: Courtiers, Clerics, Warriors, and Peasants in the Fourteenth Century* by Jeffrey P. Mass. © 1997 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University. All rights reserved. Used with the permission of Stanford University Press, [www.sup.org](http://www.sup.org).

## Overview of Japanese History

(Note: dates based on The Metropolitan Museum of Art sources)

Jōmon period	ca. 10,500 – ca. 300 BCE
Yayoi period	ca. 4th century BCE–ca. 3rd century CE
Kofun period	ca. 3rd century–538
Asuka period	538–710
Nara period	710–794
Heian period	794–1185
Kamakura period	1185–1333
Nambokuchō period	1336–1392
Muromachi period	1392–1573
Momoyama period	1573–1615
Edo period	1615–1868
Meiji Restoration	1868–1912
Taisho period	1912–1926
Showa period	1926–1989
Heisei period	1989–present

It is not known when the Japanese islands first became inhabited, although periods of cold temperatures during the Paleolithic period created land bridges when water tables receded, facilitating access to the islands from the mainland. The first inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago seem to have arrived from northern parts of continental Asia or Southeast Asia. Japan's Neolithic period is called Jōmon (ca. 10,500–ca. 300 BCE) and judging from excavated sites, encompasses a wide range of cultural developments, most of which varied by region. The name of this era derives from the term for “cord markings,” which characterized many of the flamboyant, distinctive pottery containers made at that time. The population, whose ethnic identity and language are not known, depended on fishing, hunting, gathering, and some limited farming for food. They lived in small communities made up of shallow pit-houses covered with thatched or grass roofs. They also used stone and bone tools and produced clay figurines.

Around the fourth century BCE new waves of immigrants, probably from Korea, entered Japan and mixed with the existing population. These new arrivals brought with them such important technologies as wet-rice cultivation, metallurgy, and more advanced pottery-making techniques, such as the potter's wheel. Other cultural changes included residence in permanent villages, the development of social classes, and the weaving of cloth. This period is titled Yayoi (ca. 4th century BCE–ca. 3rd century CE), after the site in Tokyo where the first archaeological evidence of this culture was discovered.

The period that followed the Yayoi period takes its name from the era's distinctive tomb mounds, or Kofun (ca. 3rd century–538), built by powerful clans to hold the remains of their deceased. These tombs of piled-up earth covered richly furnished graves and were demarcated

above ground by pottery stands that were often shaped into figures of houses, shields, boats, human figures, and animals (known collectively as *haniwa* or “clay cylinders”). With time this practice spread over a broader territory. The construction of larger tombs in the areas of Nara and Osaka after the fourth century indicates that the clans based in these locales had become more powerful. Eventually in a later period, one of these families claimed the title of emperor.

Buddhism was introduced from the continent and brought revolutionary change during the Asuka (538–710) and Nara (710–794) periods—named after the capital cities of each era. Along with this new faith, numerous other important new practices and ideas were introduced, such as the Chinese writing system (before this time, Japan had no written language of its own), the recording of history, the use of coins, and the construction of permanent capital cities.

A new imperial capital was established in 794 in Heian-kyō (now known as Kyoto), where it remained until 1868. The country was ruled during the Heian period (794–1185) by members of the imperial family and high-ranking aristocrats, such as the Fujiwara family. The nobility reveled in a life of beauty and elegance, rarely leaving the capital. Buddhism continued to develop during this time: the Esoteric school, which had developed in India and relied on secret and magical rituals and an expanded pantheon to attain enlightenment in a single lifetime, was introduced into Japan and faith in Amida Buddha, who offered devotees salvation after death, spread throughout the country. During the latter half of the Heian period, the Japanese focused their attention on developing their own culture and traditions, after absorbing so much from abroad for several centuries. They gradually loosened official ties with the Asian continent and turned their attention inward. As a result, distinctively Japanese forms of literature and the decorative arts evolved. Lady Murasaki’s early eleventh-century novel *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*), which epitomized the lifestyle and aesthetic ideals of the Heian court, is one of the best known examples of this trend.

The end of the Heian period was characterized by civil war and social distress, as political power shifted from the court aristocrats to the military estate owners in the provinces. Following a series of devastating battles between rival warlords, the warrior Minamoto Yoritomo (r. 1192–1199) seized control and established himself as head (termed shogun, literally “barbarian-quelling general”) of a military government (*bakufu*) based in the town of Kamakura, to the east of modern Tokyo. As a result, the Kamakura period (1185–1333) ushered in the beginning of a seven-hundred year period when the emperor reigned as a figurehead in Kyoto, while actual power was wielded by a series of warrior regimes. These elite warriors became an important new source of patronage for religious arts, while the imperial court and aristocratic clergy continued their sponsorship of sculpture workshops in Kyoto and Nara even as their fortunes gradually declined. Zen Buddhism, which emphasized individual efforts toward spiritual development, became popular among the warrior class.

The heightened military alert that followed the attempted Mongol invasions in 1274 and 1281 brought economic problems and unrest among the military. The weakened Kamakura shogunate was overturned by a group of allies of Emperor Go-Daigo (1288–1339) when they briefly restored political authority to the throne. However, the leaders of this movement soon separat-



ed into factions. The warrior Ashikaga Takauji (1305–1358) seized control and established a new shogunate in 1336. During the next 56 years of ongoing strife, known as the Nanbokuchō or Northern and Southern Courts period (1185–1392), Japan had two imperial rulers—a court supported by the Ashikaga shoguns in Kyoto and a rival lineage of Emperor Go-Daigo and his descendants, based south of Kyoto in Yoshino.

During the succeeding Muromachi period (1392–1573), named after the district in Kyoto where the military government was based, members of the Ashikaga family held the position of shogun. However, the Ashikaga shoguns were never able to consolidate their control as widely as did the Kamakura shogunate. As a result, the period was extremely violent, marked by intensive rivalries between competing provincial warlords (*daimyo*), who succeeded in exerting a strong influence over not just contemporary political events but also over cultural trends. These armed disputes escalated until they peaked in the Onin War (1467–1477), which resulted in the destruction of Kyoto and the disintegration of the central government's control. A century of warfare and social disruption followed, known as the Age of the Country at War (Sengoku). In spite of these unstable conditions, Japan's first modern commercial and urban developments appeared during this time. Supported by many elite members of the warrior class, who sought to establish their own independence and traditions, and influenced by renewed ties with China, Muromachi culture witnessed the maturation of arts, especially Noh drama, flower arrangement (*ikebana*), ink monochrome painting, and the tea ceremony, associated with Zen Buddhism, which espoused a more cerebral and austere artistic sensibility.

During the latter half of the sixteenth century, a series of three powerful and talented warriors—Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598), and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616)—were able to reunify the country by quelling all rivals through military and diplomatic means. This Momoyama period (1573–1615) of constant warfare was named after the site outside Kyoto where Toyotomi Hideyoshi built his castle. Momoyama aesthetics embraced two contrary trends: a bold and sumptuous style that made lavish use of gold to decorate the buildings, furnishings, and possessions of the *daimyo* and their imposing stone fortresses paralleled a taste for the rustic simplicity exemplified by misshapen and rough-looking tea ceremony utensils. Japan was also heavily involved with the outside world at this time, for in addition to existing contacts with China, Japan also carried out two invasions of Korea and experienced the arrival of the first European merchants and missionaries.

Tokugawa Ieyasu finally defeated his rivals and established a new shogunate, based in Edo (modern Tokyo). Seeking to establish stability, the military government strictly enforced conservative social policies and sharply curtailed all international trade and exchange. The relative peace that resulted permitted expansion of the country's economy, population, commerce, education, and agricultural production. Urban merchants and artisans benefited most from these developments in the long term. Although these classes occupied a low status in the officially sanctioned social system, they were able to use their financial resources to exert social and cultural influence. In particular, they were enthusiastic patrons of the pleasure quarters found in most large cities, where one could find kabuki actors, courtesans, restaurant and tea-house owners, and prostitutes, as well as supporters of the visual and literary arts associated with this “floating world” (*ukiyo*).

Eventually in the nineteenth century, the shogunate was weakened and defeated by tension between the government's conservative policies and these new social and economic developments. Acerbated by increasing pressure from western countries with imperialist ambitions, a group of young, educated samurai seized upon this period of crisis and "restored" nominal power to the emperor in 1868. During the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912), Japanese devoted themselves to modernizing rapidly by borrowing and assimilating a wealth of foreign ideas, technologies, and practices (in this case from European countries and the United States). Within a few decades, Japan succeeded in becoming a prosperous and powerful modern nation.

## Religions

### Shinto

Shinto (pronounced shin-toe, literally “the way of the gods”) is Japan’s native belief system and predates historical records. The many practices, attitudes, and institutions that have developed to make up Shinto revolve around the Japanese land and seasons and their relation to the human inhabitants of Japan. Expressions of Shinto beliefs toward nature include the recognition of divine spirits (*kami*) in venerable old trees, large mountains, and tall waterfalls, as well as celebrations of each season. This reverence is often expressed by the placement of a small shrine next to the natural element or garlanding it with a white rope. Traditionally, Shinto also involves purification rites and customs to overcome the polluting effects of death and decay. However, Shinto does not espouse a moral code, lacks religious scriptures, and does not conceive of a life after death.

The introduction of Buddhism did not cause the abandonment of Shinto. Instead, it led to new sectarian developments where religious pantheons were expanded so that Buddhist figures adopted complimentary Shinto identities and Shinto kami were thought to strive toward Buddhist enlightenment. In this way, new converts to Buddhism were not obliged to abandon their traditional beliefs. Buddhism was able to appeal to a wide range of people.

### Shinto Imagery

The earliest sacred items associated with Shinto practices are mirrors, swords, and jewels found in ancient burials. It was not until around the eighth century, after the arrival and influence of Buddhism in Japan, with its long tradition of producing anthropomorphic representations of Buddhist deities, that statues and paintings of Shinto divinities started to be produced. Without scriptural descriptions of the appearance of kami, early craftsmen of Shinto images depicted them as men and women in secular, courtly costumes and attitudes. Traditionally, these icons were hidden from the view of practitioners, in closed inner sanctuaries of shrines, and venerated from the outside.

### Buddhism

Buddhism is a religion that offers a spiritual path for transcending the suffering of existence. Samsara, the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth to which all living beings are subject, results from the consequences incurred by one’s karma, the sum of good and bad actions that accumulates over many lives. Release from this endless cycle is achieved only by attaining enlightenment, the goal for which Buddhists strive. A Buddha (“enlightened one”) is an all-knowing being who has reached that perfect state of transcendent knowledge in which the fires of greed, hate, and delusion are quenched, and upon passing into nirvana (the literal translation of which is “blowing out, to become extinguished”), is never subject to rebirth again.

According to tradition, the founder of Buddhism was born in 563 BCE in the region that is now southern Nepal. He was born a prince, named Siddhartha (“He who Achieves His Goal”)

and also known as Shakyamuni (“sage of the Shakya clan”). Siddhartha left his palace, renounced his princely life, and set out to find the cause of human suffering. He became a wandering monk. After years of searching, he found his answer—his awakening—and proceeded to teach others. When he died, he attained nirvana—the final release from earthly suffering and became the Buddha (“the awakened or enlightened one”). After the death of the Buddha, his followers wrote down his teachings and spread his message. These texts are called sutras. An organized religion began to take form and with the passage of time, several branches of Buddhism emerged.

### **Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana Buddhism**

Three main types of Buddhism have developed over its long history, each with its own characteristics and spiritual ideals. Theravada or “Foundational Buddhism,” the earliest of the three, emphasizes the attainment of salvation for oneself alone and the necessity of monastic life in order to attain spiritual release. Mahayana (“Greater Vehicle”), whose members believed that the adherents of Theravada pursued a path that could not be followed by the majority of ordinary people, teaches that all can attain salvation. Practitioners of Vajrayana (“Diamond Vehicle”), or Esoteric Buddhism, believe that one can achieve enlightenment in a single lifetime. These three schools were not mutually exclusive but emphasized different practices. For example, while Theravada teaches that only a few devotees are able to reach enlightenment and that they do it alone, Mahayana and its later offshoot, Vajrayana, teach that buddhahood is attainable by everyone with help from buddhas and savior beings known as bodhisattvas.

A major, long-established East Asian route of trade and influence ran from northern China down the Korean peninsula and across the Korean Straits to Japan. Traveling along this route, Mahayana Buddhism was introduced to Japan from Korea in the sixth century (traditionally, in either 538 or 552, as part of a diplomatic mission that included gifts such as an image of Shakyamuni Buddha and several volumes of Buddhist text). As in Korea, the religion had a lasting effect on the native culture. By the seventh century, when the religion was firmly established, Japan had dozens of temple complexes, various orders of priests, and a body of skilled artisans to craft the icons and other accoutrements that the faith required.

Vajrayana or Esoteric Buddhism and its attendant pantheon of deities and secret, mystical rituals, was introduced to Japan in the early Heian period by a number of Japanese priests. They studied the religion in China and returned home to found influential monasteries, two of which became the centers of the two main Japanese Buddhist sects, Tendai and Shingon. Images of wrathful deities, such as Fudō Myōō (Acala in Sanskrit), were introduced at this time as part of the Esoteric Buddhist pantheon.

### **Pure Land Buddhism**

In the late Heian period and following centuries, Pure Land Buddhism became very popular. The salvationist Pure Land Buddhism taught faith in Amida (Amitabha in Sanskrit), the Buddha of the Western Paradise. Believers trusted that the diligent recitation of his name enabled the soul to be reborn in a heavenly Pure Land rather than in a Buddhist hell or other undesir-

able rebirth. Intense devotion to Amida produced a great demand for Buddhist statuary and paintings, in addition to the many temples dedicated to him. Another salvationist deity popular at this time was Jizō, who had been introduced to Japan centuries earlier as a bodhisattva in the Mahayana Buddhist pantheon. Jizō is a deity of compassion and benevolence whose powers expanded as time passed. During the Kamakura period, Buddhism became the faith of all people of all classes. This was due in part to the many priests who became itinerant evangelists and brought Pure Land Buddhism to the masses.

### **Zen Buddhism**

Zen is the Japanese development of the school of Mahayana Buddhism that developed in China as Chan Buddhism. While Zen practitioners trace their beliefs to India, its emphasis on the possibility of sudden enlightenment and close connection with nature derive from Chinese influences. Zen and Chan, which mean “meditation,” emphasize individual meditative practice to achieve self-realization and thereby, enlightenment. Rather than rely on powerful deities, Zen stresses the importance of the role of a teacher, with whom a disciple has a heart-mind connection that allows the former to offer the student helpful assistance in his spiritual development. Zen also values intuition, instead of habitual, logical thinking, and developed expressionistic and suggestive (rather than explicit and descriptive) painting styles and poetic forms, as well as illogical conundrums (koan) to stimulate one’s intuition. While Zen was first introduced into Japan several centuries earlier, it did not become firmly established until the thirteenth century, when the warrior class began to favor this school.

## Buddhist Imagery

In India, several hundred years after the time of Shakyamuni, Buddhism developed a rich tradition of visual imagery for depicting sacred beings. Based on verbal descriptions recorded in the scriptures, buddhas are shown as humans with supranatural attributes to represent their spiritually elevated status. The most commonly depicted bodily markings include a bump on the top of the head to indicate wisdom (*ushnisha* in Sanskrit), a mark in the middle of the forehead that also shows great understanding (*urna*), elongated earlobes that are a reminder of Shakyamuni's princely youth and the heavy earrings he once wore, and a body with idealized proportions and contours. In addition, buddhas are often, although not always, shown as ascetics who wear simple monastic robes and are devoid of decorative shawls, scarves, and jewelry. Bodhisattvas, on the other hand, customarily are richly ornamented, representing their continued engagement with this world. Buddhist icons offer messages or information to viewers through their hand gestures (*mudra*). Common hand positions include the ones for meditation, teaching, fearlessness, and wish fulfilling.

For a guide to common mudras, please refer to:  
<http://education.rma2.org/mudras-do-matter/rubin-mudras>

The appearance of Buddhist imagery varies according to the time the object was made, current stylistic preferences, the materials used, the skill of the craftsmen, and religious requirements. Whereas Zen-related representations are often relatively austere, encourage a contemplative attitude, and can be closely linked to Chinese prototypes, icons associated with court-supported temples of the Esoteric schools can have multiple arms and heads to express great power and suprahuman abilities, and be richly ornamented with sumptuous materials and complex layers of decorative patterning.

## Suggested Resources

### Books

Addiss, Stephen. *How to Look at Japanese Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996.

Covaci, Ive ed. *Kamakura: Realism and Spirituality in the Sculpture of Japan*. New York and New Haven: Asia Society and Yale University Press, 2016.

Leidy, Denise Patry. *Treasures of Asian Art: The Asia Society's Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection*. New York: The Asia Society Galleries, 1994.

Mason, Penelope. *History of Japanese Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993.

Murase, Miyeko. *Bridge of Dreams: The Mary Griggs Burke Collection of Japanese Art*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000.

Tanizaki, Jun'ichirō. *In Praise of Shadows*. Translated by Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker. South Creek, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1977.

Varley, H. Paul. *Japanese Culture*. Fourth edition. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000.

### Websites

*Asia Society*

[www.asiasociety.org/education](http://www.asiasociety.org/education)

*Columbia University, Asia for Educators, An Initiative of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute*

<http://afe.easia.Columbia.edu>

*Education about Asia (part of Association of Asian Studies)*

<http://www.asian-studies.org/Publications/EAA/About>

*The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Timeline of Art History*

<http://www.metmuseum.org/learn/for-educators/timeline>

*National Consortium of Teaching about Asia*

[www.nctasia.org](http://www.nctasia.org)

*National Museum of Japanese History*

<http://www.rekihaku.ac.jp/english/>