

The Art of Japan
Art 244 Fall 2012

Common Characteristics of Traditional Japanese Art

1. Reverence for nature and awareness of the seasons from the native Shinto religion
 - a. preference for asymmetry and natural imperfections
 - b. deeply felt love for unspoiled nature
 - c. reverence for natural materials, clay and wood
 - d. tradition of rustic, handmade objects
 - e. periods of silence for contemplation, poetry, drama, tea ceremony to be experienced slowly and thoughtfully
2. Influenced at key points by the art, architecture and religions of other cultures
 - a. China, beginning in the 6th century AD
 - b. Europe, briefly between 1543 – 1638
 - c. Europe and America, beginning in 1853
3. During periods of isolation, adapted foreign influences into arts to develop a unique aesthetic based on Japanese values.
4. Developed one of the first popular cultures, artistic traditions spread through printed communications, wide-spread travel and theater.

The Religions and Philosophy of Japan

1. Shintoism – the native religion of Japan, the “Way of the Gods,” natural features (mountains, rivers) are sanctified by deities, *kami*, that live within them. It is a quest for purity and harmony with nature based on practices and institutions with a reverence for the land and the life cycles of the earth and humans.
2. Buddhism – Buddhism prescribes a path in life with the ultimate aim of achieving *nirvana*, release from earthly existence. Enlightenment will be reached by the middle way, rejecting both luxury and asceticism. Buddhists accept the Four Noble Truths and follow the eightfold path. Originally exclusively practiced in the court but later spread to the common people. Zen Buddhism greatly influenced the arts and samurai culture.
3. Confucianism – respect for tradition and morality codified by Confucius (551-479 BC). This includes *ren* – human heartedness and education, loyalty, justice with empathy, respect for age and authority. This especially influenced samurai culture.

Sources: *Art Beyond The West*, By Michael O’Riley, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 2002