

## Japan Foundation Organised Event at The British Museum: Crafting Beauty in Modern Japan

**Date:** 19 July – 21 October 2007

**Venue:** The British Museum, London

This exhibition showcases Japanese works of art and craft produced during the past 50 years in fields such as ceramics, textiles, lacquer, metal and bamboo. They are the creations of members of the Japan Art Crafts Association. Many of these artists are designated “Living National Treasures”, a title conferred by the Japanese government on individuals who possess exceptional skills in a traditional craft. Each item has won an award. Although modern, these works demonstrate the continuity of Japanese aesthetics through the centuries and the influence of these ideals on the West.

Minimalism has recently gained a lot of interest, but the idea of “less is more” is nowhere better illustrated than in Japanese art.

We see a taupe lacquerware box on which only a dozen flying birds have been drawn on its uppermost quarter – the rest of the box is plain. There is a ceramic dish with russet maple leaves and waves, on a white backdrop which actually takes up as much space as the pattern. The concept of “ma”, or “space” is at the centre of Japanese aesthetics. The interplay of “positive space” (that occupied by the main subject of the work) versus “negative space” (the background) creates a sense of tranquillity.

Japanese art whispers rather than shouts. At a time when in Britain there is a plethora of conceptual art based on impact, it is refreshing to find that every metal artwork in the exhibition - bar one - is polished in such a way that its silver or gunmetal shine is dulled rather than enhanced. A cluster of rugged bowls for use in the tea ceremony is made of clay mixed with sand - so rough that the potter's hands apparently bled while he was crafting them.

Bamboo weaving is a medium considered a handicraft rather than an art in Japan (hence the majority of bamboo art is exported to foreign collections) but works such as a tray made of thin strips of bamboo, aligned to resemble a flowing brook, have a poetry which justifies their inclusion.

In the West, traditional clothing has long disappeared from fashion (wimples, anyone?) but the kimono is still going strong. Its rigid cut and prescribed way of wearing actually allow for an emphasis on pattern. Looking at a grainy monochrome kimono, we can almost feel the texture of the gravel in a Zen garden – a far cry from the flowery geisha-style kimonos found on postcards.

A closer look reveals historical and cultural details. The Buddhist concept of transience, so beloved of the Japanese, is echoed on a shimmering box decorated with fireflies. A gossamer textile is woven by reviving an intricate pattern dating back to the medieval Heian period. And only a Japanese could create a painstaking inlay using miniscule crushed quails' eggshells.

When it comes to traditional art forms, modern Japanese artists have chosen evolution rather than revolution. The understated elegance of these works seems very modern, but in fact it is the very essence of Japanese tradition.

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