

The Reopening of the Japanese Galleries at the British Museum
September 2006

The Collections

The collections at the British Museum that relate to Japan are the most comprehensive in Europe. Totalling some 26,000 objects, they comprise fine and decorative arts, antiquities and historical materials dating from ancient pre-history to the present day. The collections embody the dynamic relations between art, artefact and history. Perhaps uniquely outside Japan, they can tell many of the significant stories in the unfolding of that country's past, encouraging us to enjoy a deeper engagement with its present and future.

The British Museum's founding collections of 1753 already included a significant group of objects and manuscripts brought back by Engelbert Kaempfer from Nagasaki in the 1690s, subsequently acquired by Sir Hans Sloane. Collecting began again in earnest after the opening of Japan in the middle of the nineteenth century, and has continued ever since. Particular highlights and the collectors who assembled them include: ceramics (Augustus Franks), paintings (William Anderson), archaeological materials (William Gowland), ukiyo-e prints (Arthur Morrison), swords (R.W. Lloyd), netsuke (Anne Hull Grundy), illustrated books (Jack Hillier), modern prints (Robert Vergez).

The Japanese Galleries

The suite of fully air-conditioned galleries (Rooms 92-94) devoted to Japan opened in April 1990, following a highly successful fundraising campaign in UK and Japan. Since that time many major loan exhibitions have been staged, as well as themed and general displays of the British Museum's own collections. All projects have relied on close cooperation with many different groups in Japan.

From September 2005 the galleries for Japan, Prints and Drawings and Asia Temporary Exhibitions have been undergoing a major refurbishment, as part of an ongoing rolling programme of gallery renewal. In addition to a complete renovation of the major air-conditioning system, the opportunity is being taken to renew case linings, carpet and lighting and to redesign the approaches to the Galleries.

'Perspectives on Japan'

The reopening of the refurbished Japanese Galleries in September 2006 gives the chance to re-present in a new way the Museum's collections that relate to Japan. *Perspectives on Japan* is a sequence of significant stories told by fascinating objects. The dynamic relations between the art, artefacts and history within and without the remarkable cultures of Japan are explored from many angles. Particular emphasis is given to continuities. Sometimes, however, the long, often unbroken threads of ancient cultural forms collide with the modern in surprising ways. The displays will reconnect the history of Japan with East Asia and, for more recent times, with the wider world.

Entrance area (The Urasenke Gallery)

Entering the newly refurbished galleries, the visitor is welcomed by the statue of a Buddhist saviour deity, 'Kudara Kannon', an actual-size replica of the famous eighth century National Treasure, made for the British Museum in the 1920s. A 'Time Line' of Japanese history is signalled by an impressive 'feudal lord's clock' on a lacquer and mother-of-pearl stand. The Urasenke Tea House, used for regular demonstrations of the 'Way of Tea' is complemented with a small display of tea wares.

Sections and Stories

The displays in the three rooms of the Japanese Galleries are essentially chronological, with modern objects occasionally brought back into the narrative to juxtapose with older works. Broadly themed 'Sections' are subdivided into more specific 'Stories'. Paintings and prints will, as a rule, be rotated every three months.

Room One: Early Japan (Prehistory to 1603)

Early Japan: Developing Cultures

Stone Age; sacred landscapes; Jōmon and Yayoi cultures; tomb culture (Gowland Collection);
Haniwa; early Buddhism; sutras; palace elite

Early Japan: Religious Traditions

Elite (Esoteric) Buddhism; popular (Pure Land) Buddhism; syncretic Shinto-Buddhism/*Kami*
worship; Zen and warrior culture; Christianity

Room Two: Edo Period (1603-1853)

Edo Period: Samurai, Court and Townspeople

Symbols of authority; Edo Shogunate; arts of the elites; samurai women

Business and leisure; accessories and fashion; 'The floating world'; travel and popular religion

Edo Period: The World Outside

Tsushima and the Korean (Choson) kingdom; Satsuma and the Ryukyu kingdom; Chinese and Dutch
trade through Nagasaki; Matsumae and the Ainu

Room Three: Modern Japan (1853 to present)

Modern Japan: Nation-Building and Empire

Japan opens, Japanese missions abroad; 'Rich Country, Strong Army'; Cultural exchange, national
and international exhibitions; International relations, empire; Mobilising for war; Defeat and
reconstruction

Modern Japan: City and Countryside

1880s Tokyo; Tokyo, modern city; Kansai, cities of western Japan; Rural idylls; Tokyo, now and
future

Modern Japan: The Expressive Self

Intimate portraits; Performance; Images of women; Images of men; Manga; Abstract expression

Modern Japan: Significant Artists

'Living National Treasures'; Artists of international reputation