

## Emperor and the Shogun

The title of *shogun* [SHOW-gun], or general, was first bestowed on military commanders in the 700s who were asked to recruit soldiers for some specific campaign. Once the campaign was over, the title of shogun reverted back to the emperor. The temporary shogun was always a member of the imperial family.

However, in the late 1100s, the shogun Minamoto Yoritomo maneuvered to make the title of shogun permanent and hereditary, meaning that it would remain in his family generation after generation. This was the beginning of the Kamakura Shogunate [kah-mah-KOOR-ah SHOW-gun-it]. A shogunate in Japan is like a dynasty in China. The term refers to both the rulers and the period during which they ruled.

At the time, Japan was beset with rival factions, and a strong military power was needed to keep the warring parties in check. The emperor was a child and Yoritomo conspired with the regent (the official who rules when a child occupies a hereditary office) to abolish the emperor's right to choose his own shogun. Without this power, the emperor was at the mercy of the shogun because the shogun controlled the military. In practice, the emperor became ruler in name only and the shogun, or members of powerful families ruling in the name of the shogun, held the real power through the military. This continued through three dynasties of shoguns. In the 1800s, Japan moved beyond its feudal society and began to modernize.

## Feudal Japanese Society

Like Europe, Japan developed a feudal society; however, Japanese feudalism developed later than in Europe. In the 1100s through the 1300s, when feudalism was strengthening its hold on Japan, its influence in Europe was lessening through the development of stronger national states, the development of towns and cities, and the growth and spread of commerce. As students may know from their study of European feudalism in Grade 4, feudalism was a political and military system based on a concept of reciprocal self-defense.

The Japanese feudal system can be imagined as a large pyramid:

- At the top of Japanese feudal society was the shogun.
- Below the shogun were the vassal lords, known as daimyo [DIME-yo]. The daimyo were large landholders who held their estates at the pleasure of the shogun. They controlled the armies that were to provide military service to the shogun when required.
- The armies were made up of samurai [SA-moo-rye] and lesser soldiers. The samurai were minor nobles and held their land under the authority of the daimyo.
- Peasants were the next rank in feudal society. As in Europe, they were the majority of the population, and it was their labor that made possible the functioning of the rest of the society.
- Below the peasants were the artisans.
- At the bottom of society were the merchants. As buyers and sellers of others' goods, they had little status. Japanese society valued the creators—farmers and artisans—above those who merely sold and traded.

The ranks changed over time, however. By the 1600s, the samurai became less important as war became less important. Samurai moved from small estates to castle towns and became administrators. At the same time, the status of artisans and merchants rose as towns and cities developed, and trade became more important to the Japanese economy.

### Samurai: Code of Bushido

The samurai were the soldier-nobles of feudal Japan, similar to the knights of feudal European society. Their position was hereditary and they served a daimyo in return for land. Below the samurai were foot soldiers.

The samurai dressed in armor made of strips of steel held together by silk cords. More colorful and less bulky than European armor, it provided greater flexibility, yet ample protection against an enemy's sword.

The samurai developed a code of ethics known as Bushido, the way of the warrior. According to Bushido, samurai were to be frugal, incorruptible, brave, self-sacrificing, loyal to their lords, and above all, courageous. It was considered better to commit ritual suicide than to live in dishonor. In time, Zen Buddhism influenced the samurai code, and self-discipline and self-restraint became two important virtues for samurai to master. 45

## Japan Closed to Outsiders

From 1603 to 1867, the Tokugawa Shogunate ruled Japan. Early in the dynasty, the shogun closed off Japan from most of the rest of the world and reasserted feudal control, which had been loosening. In the 1500s, the first European traders and missionaries had visited the island nation and brought with them new ideas. Fearing that further contact would weaken their hold on the government and the people, the Tokugawa banned virtually all foreigners. One Dutch ship was allowed to land at Nagasaki once a year to trade.

The ban was not limited to Europeans. Only a few Chinese a year were allowed to enter Japan for trading purposes. In addition, the Japanese themselves were not allowed to travel abroad for any reason.

This isolation ended when Commodore Matthew Perry of the United States Navy sailed into Edo (Tokyo) Bay in 1853 and forced the Tokugawa to sign a treaty allowing trade with the United States the next year. Other countries followed and by 1867, a group of lords removed the Tokugawa shogun and set Japan on a path to modernization and industrialization.

## Religion

### Buddhism

Buddhism originated with the thinking of Siddhartha Gautama in the late sixth century BCE. A son of a wealthy Hindu family in India, Gautama lived in luxury behind palace walls, shielded from poverty and human suffering. One day while out riding, he came across a sick man, a poor man, and a dead man. For the first time, he saw what it meant to be human. He gave up his life of privilege and began six years of wandering while he looked for an answer to life. After sitting under a tree meditating for 48 days, he suddenly received enlightenment, that is, he understood the answer.

Taking the name Buddha, meaning “Enlightened One,” he began to teach others the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths are

1. Pain, suffering, and sorrow are natural components of life.
2. Desire is the cause of suffering.
3. Achieving nirvana—overcoming desire—is the only way to end suffering.
4. Achieving nirvana is possible by following the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path to nirvana means living a life that embraces “right views, right aspirations, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right contemplation.”

Buddha’s followers spread his teachings throughout India and to what are now the nations of China, Tibet, Korea, Japan, and Sri Lanka. Buddhism reached Japan from Korea around 552 CE. The emissaries of the Korean king who

commended Buddhism to the Japanese also brought with them Chinese writing and ideas about the arts, architecture, and government. The Japanese adopted some of these ideas. In the 1200s, several sects, or offshoots, of Buddhism developed. One major sect was Zen Buddhism. The word *zen* means “meditation” and this is the central element of Zen Buddhism. Rituals and ceremonies are considered useless. Meditation is one important exercise Zen Buddhists use in their attempt to achieve Satori, or self-understanding. Zen became particularly popular among the samurai. Today, less than 10 percent of Japan’s population are adherents of Zen, but Zen Buddhism has attracted followers in the west as well.

## Shinto

Shinto is the original religion of the Japanese. It did not have a name until Buddhism arrived and people wanted to distinguish the two. Shinto means the way of the *kami*, which are the forces of nature; for example, typhoons, rain, sunlight, earthquakes, a growing flower. A reverence for nature is a major element of this religion.

Early Shinto had no shrines. After the arrival of Buddhism, the Japanese began to build simple shrines in beautiful natural settings in which to worship the *kami*. These shrines typically have a gateway, called a *torii*, marking the entrance, and a basin for washing hands before entering the oratory, known as a *haiden*. The *haiden* is where a visitor will make an offering and pray. There are no rituals in Shinto—other than washing one’s hands before entering a shrine with an offering—and no ceremonies other than reciting prayers. The most important building in the shrine is the *honden*, a sanctuary where an important religious symbol called *shintai* is kept. The *shintai* is generally a mirror but it could also be a sword, a wooden symbol, or another object. Only the main priest is allowed to enter the *honden*; all others are forbidden to enter or see the *shintai*.

By the 700s, the imperial family was claiming that it had descended from the female sun deity, Amaterasu [AH-ma-tah-rah-su], in order to legitimize its role and its power. In the later 1800s, Shinto was divided into State Shinto, which involved worship of the emperor as divine, and Sect, or religious, Shinto. Because the emperor was considered to be a god, he was to be given complete loyalty and obedience. Government ministers manipulated State Shinto in order to develop a sense of national identity, or patriotism, among the Japanese and gain support for the government’s new industrial and military policies. State Shinto was banned after World War II, when the emperor renounced any claim to divinity.

An important aspect of Shinto is ancestor worship. Followers believe that a person continues to play a role in the family and community after their death. In some Shinto households, an altar called a *tamaya* is built to honor deceased relatives.

Buddhism and Shinto are not seen as incompatible religions: The majority of modern Japanese—about 84 percent—practice both Buddhism and Shinto.

# What Teachers Need to Know

## Background

Many cultures have influenced Japan's history, culture, and art throughout the ages. Chinese and Korean influence dominated from the seventh to the ninth centuries. Europe began to have an influence in the sixteenth century as did the United States after 1868. Despite the variety of outside influences, Japanese art has distinct characteristics. One is simple elegance in form and design. Notice the careful inclusion of details in Suzuki Harunobu's *Girl Viewing Plum Blossoms at Night*. (See discussion on p. 366.) Japanese art also demonstrates a keen sensitivity to the sublime aspect of nature. Japanese gardens honor nature's splendor while subtly shaping the outdoors into three-dimensional artistic experiences. (See discussion on pp. 365–366.) Subtlety, too, pervades sculpture, even in such a monumental piece as *The Great Buddha of Kamakura*. Draped over Buddha's quiet body, the pleats in his robe create only the slightest hint of repeated pattern. (See discussion on pp. 364–365.)

**Note:** The descriptions and activities in the main text below are intended to help you become familiar with the artworks before presenting them to students; however, some of the activities might be adapted for classroom use. Activities intended specifically for students can be found in the Teaching Idea sidebars. The Looking Questions given below are also printed on the reverse side of the *Art Resources*, and have been written with students in mind, so that they might be used as a rough plan for class discussion. You should feel free to use these questions or develop questions of your own. Be sure students have time to look at the reproductions carefully before asking the Looking Questions.

## History of Japanese Art

### The Early Years

Some of the earliest surviving Japanese art dates from as early as 10,000 BCE, and consists of expressive clay vessels and figurative sculpture. By about the 3rd century CE, sculptors modeled clay figures of humans and animals to serve as funeral items for the ruling class, and metalworkers cast bronze ritual bells and decorated mirrors.

### Buddhism Arrives

The introduction of Buddhism from Korea and China in the mid-6th century greatly affected Japanese society and art. Until the 10th century, Japanese artists mainly reworked the existing Chinese and Korean art styles. Sculpture was largely tied to Buddhism. Painters depicted both Buddhist and non-Buddhist themes. Like the Chinese, Japanese painters historically worked with ink and water-soluble colors on paper or silk. They likewise worked with established Chinese subjects—narratives, landscapes, and portraits. In both Japan and China, calligraphy was considered an art form, critiqued for the visual qualities of the ink strokes.

## Three-Dimensional Landscape Art

Japanese Zen Buddhism and the ancient Shinto religion were both key to the development of Japanese gardens. Both religions connect deeply to nature. According to Shinto belief, spirits or gods manifest themselves in all aspects of nature, including trees, rocks, and waterfalls. (See the World History and Geography section “Feudal Japan,” pp. 220–230, for more information on Shinto.) Nature, therefore, reflects the beauty of the gods. Zen Buddhists from the 1200s through the 1400s taught that the best way to gain the wisdom of Buddha was through contemplation and by living in simple harmony with nature. Japanese gardens offer sanctuaries where humans can become closer to the divine.

Japanese gardens take many forms, but the most essential ingredients are water, plants, stones, waterfalls, and bridges. However, whether a dry rock garden such as Ryōan-ji (see discussion on pp. 365–366), or one lush with trees and ponds, all Japanese gardens utilize nature to produce a beautiful, serene place for people to reflect and meditate.

Among the aristocracy, Zen Buddhism gave rise to the tea ceremony, a prescribed ritual for drinking tea that involved all the senses. Potters made exquisite, minimally designed bowls, water jars, and tea-powder holders. Hanging scrolls depicting natural scenes were hung on walls and in niches. The ritual gestures for pouring, passing, drinking, and sharing the tea enhanced the slow pace in which participants relished the rarified peace and beauty of the entire experience.

# Looking at the Included Reproduced Artworks

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## The Great Buddha of Kamakura (1252)

Buddhists try to escape the constant cycle of birth, suffering, and death by breaking free of the world of illusion to achieve personal enlightenment (a state called nirvana). *The Great Buddha of Kamakura* visually demonstrates a part of this process. The Buddha is depicted deep in meditation, a practice through

which believers try to extinguish their personal desires and passions. Everything about the enormous sculpture depicts a deep sense of spiritual calm. The Buddha's downcast eyes indicate inner focus, as do his relaxed hands and posture.

The figure is fairly idealized, rather than a specific portrait of a historical figure. Buddha's perfect outward body posture is meant to indicate his inner, spiritual perfection.

### Looking questions

- **What type of person do you think this figure represents? What in the art specifically supports your idea? Answers will vary.**
- **What do you think the figure is doing? What clues can you find? Answers will vary, but the posture and the expression of the figure should lead students to the conclusion that Buddha is meditating.**
- **Why do you think the sculpture is so large? The size of the sculpture increases the emotional impact of the work. It emphasizes the importance of Buddhism in the culture.**
- **How did the designer of this sculpture use line to make the figure seem approachable and not frightening? There are no harsh, strong vertical or horizontal lines. Most lines are soft and curving.**



## Ryōan-ji Temple Garden (1499)

Japanese garden design existed at least as early as the eighth century. In fact, the Japanese word for “garden” initially indicated a purified place for worship of native Shinto spirits. Zen dry rock gardens were developed later and were designed as fixed spaces with large rocks on gravel. Japanese gardens are intended to create a sense of peace and simplicity.

Ryōan-ji rock garden in Kyoto is one of the most famous rock gardens in Japan. Ryōan-ji means “Temple of the Peaceful Dragon.” It measures 30 meters by 10 meters and contains 15 large rocks. However, the rocks are arranged in such a way that only 14 can be viewed from any one vantage point. It is said that only those who have achieved genuine spiritual enlightenment can see all 15 rocks at once. At Ryōan-ji, onlookers view the austere beauty from the temple terrace. Where is the “water” that is so typical of Japanese gardens? One possible interpretation is that the rock formations are intended to represent islands floating in the sea, represented by the pebbles or gravel.

### Looking questions

- **What makes this a garden? It's outside, it's made from natural materials, and it's clearly designed.**
- **This garden is meant for meditation. What qualities does it have that might encourage thoughtful reflection? Answers will vary. The simplicity and gentle lines are restful, without demanding a great deal of attention the way that a lush flower garden would.**
- **This garden has 15 stones. As you walk in the garden, you can see only 14 stones at any one time. How might this feature encourage meditation? The scene changes slowly, but never surprisingly. You make progress, but simultaneously do not progress. This is in the Buddhist tradition of learning to be in the moment within your thoughts, i.e., in the present.**



- What materials form this garden? *Materials include gravel, dirt, boulders, and rocks.*
- What elements of art are used? *Answers will vary, but should include line (raked pattern), texture (gravel and rocks), shape, and light.*
- How would you feel if you were sitting in this garden? *Answers will vary, but students could mention concepts such as calm, contemplative, and in harmony with nature.*

## Suzuki Harunobu, *Woman Admiring Plum Blossoms at Night* (c. 1764–1770)

Ukiyo-e (“the art of the floating world”) became wildly popular with the merchant class in the 18th century. The woodblock prints could be reproduced in large numbers and, therefore, sold inexpensively. Middle-class people bought prints of actors and fashionable “social” women, much as modern Americans buy entertainment magazines with pictures of celebrities today.

The Chinese invented woodcuts during the Tang dynasty (618–906 CE), and this art form came to Japan during the 8th century. Japanese artists perfected the medium, using separate blocks to print every color. An individual wooden block was carved for every area that had a particular color. For example, one block would be carved for all the lines and areas that would appear in black. Another block was carved for shapes that would be yellow, and so forth. Printers printed one block on top of another. They had to line each new block up carefully to exactly match the existing, emerging image so that the final picture looked like a single piece.

Suzuki Harunobu’s beautiful young woman on the veranda lights up the night with her lantern. Harunobu (1725–1770) picks up the same bright color in the blossoms, which will quickly lose their beauty with the change of seasons.

Note: This work, although not in the *Sequence*, has been added to give students another example of Japanese art.

### Looking questions

- How did Suzuki Harunobu indicate the time of day? *There is a lantern lighting up the scene, and the background is black, indicating night.*
- Where are the two strong diagonals in this print? *There is a diagonal in the veranda, in the implied line from the tree branch to the lantern, and through the woman’s body.*
- What visual clues did Harunobu provide about the woman’s life—if it was a hard existence or one of luxury? *Answers will vary, but students should note the woman’s adorned hair, elegant kimono, and leisure activity.*
- This figure could be described as “flat.” Can you see why? *The emphasis is on line and the pattern of clothes rather than on defining the three-dimensional form of the figure.*