



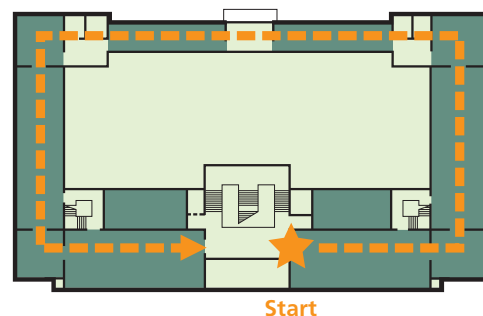
Highlights of Japanese Art

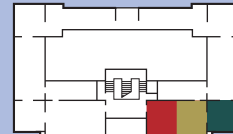
Welcome to the *Highlights of Japanese Art* at the Tokyo National Museum.

The galleries on this floor provide an overview of Japanese history and culture while exploring the chronological development of Japanese art. Proceed counterclockwise through the ten exhibition rooms to travel from the early Jōmon period, over 12,000 years ago, to the fall of the Tokugawa samurai government in the late 19th century. The timeline on the back cover shows the relationships between key periods in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean history.

*Please note that as objects are rotated regularly for conservation reasons, works featured in this leaflet are not always on exhibit.

Japanese Gallery (Honkan), 2F





Ancient Art Ca. 11,000 BC–7th century AD

In the Jōmon period, people lived in a hunter-gatherer society and created highly stylized pottery and clay figurines (*dogū*). During the following Yayoi period, society embraced rice cultivation and created many ritual objects, such as bronze bells (*dōtaku*) and bronze mirrors. The Kofun period gave rise to local rulers buried in elaborate tomb mounds, leading to the creation of tomb sculptures (*haniwa*) and bronze mirrors used as symbols of authority.

► Deep Vessel with a Flame-Like Rim

Jōmon period, 3,000–2,000 BC

The Jōmon period takes its name from the cord markings (*"jōmon"*) that decorate many pieces of pottery from this time. Other examples of these ornate, sculpture-like works of pottery have not been found anywhere else in the world.



◀ Clay Figurine (*Dogū*)

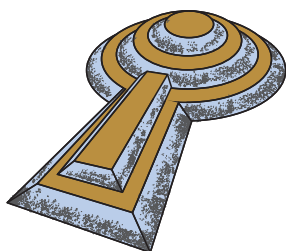
Jōmon period, 1,000–400 BC



◀ Bronze Bell (*Dōtaku*)

Yayoi period, 1st–3rd century

Originally, these bronze bells were small and contained clappers for ringing. They were produced in progressively larger sizes after being adopted as ritual objects, and many later examples were constructed without a clapper.



▲ The Kofun period is named after enormous round, square, or keyhole-shaped burial mounds (called *kofun*).



▲ Tomb Sculpture (*Haniwa*): Man in Formal Attire

Kofun period, 6th century

Tomb sculptures (*haniwa*) were placed on giant burial mounds (*kofun*) and are thought to be related to funeral rites. The sculptures represent humans, animals, houses, weapons, and other objects.

The Arrival of Buddhism 6th–8th century

Based on the teachings of the buddha Śākyamuni, Buddhism emerged in India about 2,500 years ago and spread throughout Asia. It was officially introduced to Japan in the mid-6th century when, according to ancient records, the Kingdom of Baekje on the Korean Peninsula presented the ruler of Japan with Buddhist items.

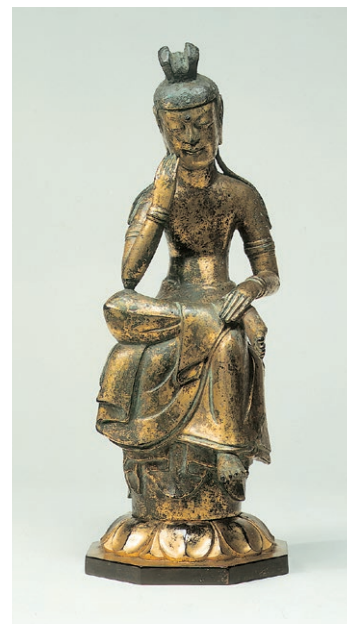
Initially, Buddhism was practiced among the nobility, who created, copied, or commissioned works of Buddhist art. Over time, Buddhism spread throughout the country and heavily influenced the development of Japanese art, beginning with the introduction of temple architecture and religious art forms, such as calligraphy and painting techniques.

► Bodhisattva with One Leg Pendant

Asuka period, 7th century

This is an example of a Buddhist statue made in Japan shortly after Buddhism was introduced.

At that time, statues in this posture were common on the Korean Peninsula.



Room
1 [1]

Room
1 [2]

Room
2

National Treasure Gallery

The Japanese government designates artworks and other precious objects as Important Cultural Properties in order to protect them. Those of superior quality and cultural value are designated as National Treasures. Japan has been actively protecting cultural properties since the Meiji era. These efforts were formalized in 1950 with the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties, following the loss of ancient Buddhist murals in a 1949 fire at Hōryūji Temple, the site of the oldest wooden buildings in the world.

► Bodhisattva Kokūzō

Heian period, 12th century

This is an example of Buddhist paintings produced during the Heian period. Its meticulous detail and abundant use of silver and gold leaf represent the pinnacle of Japanese works in this genre.



Paleolithic Period

— ca. 11,000 BC

Jōmon Period

— ca. 5th c. BC

Yayoi Period

— ca. 3rd c. AD

Kofun Period

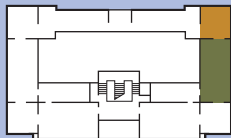
— ca. 7th c.

Asuka Period

— 710

Nara Period

— 794



Buddhist and Courtly Art

The Arts of Buddhism | 8th–16th century

Esoteric Buddhism, which emphasizes rituals and verbal transmission, was introduced to Japan in the 9th century. This resulted in the development of the Esoteric arts and other styles of Buddhist art. Illustrated handscrolls depicting the origins of temples and shrines or miraculous occurrences were often made during this period. These works were initially influenced by those from China and Korea, but gradually developed a distinctly different style.

The Arts of the Imperial Court | 8th–16th century

The court culture of the early Heian period was heavily influenced by Chinese culture and aesthetics. Over time, a taste developed for literature and art based on Japanese themes, reaching a peak in the mid-Heian period.

Proficiency in calligraphy and waka poetry was important in the daily life of court nobles. Early Heian calligraphy was strongly influenced by Chinese styles, but this trend gradually declined and a Japanese style (*wayō*) developed.

The nobility also appreciated illustrated handscrolls. These works often depicted scenes from works of literature, like *The Tale of Genji*, and *waka* poems. Literary references were popular motifs across all genres, such as folding screens, lacquerware, and textiles.

Zen and Ink Painting

13th–16th century

During the Kamakura period, the first samurai government witnessed the introduction of Zen Buddhism into Japan. Along with Zen teachings, new cultural influences from China flooded into Japan, including ink painting. At that time, most landscape paintings in China were ink paintings. Daoist and Buddhist paintings also adopted the styles and techniques of landscape paintings due to their excellent expression of light and spatial depth.

These Chinese paintings differed completely from the Japanese painting traditions of earlier periods. Following Chinese examples and influences, ink



paintings were adopted in Japanese Zen temples.

Two centuries later, in the Muromachi period, ink painting was no longer limited to Buddhist art and established itself as a major genre of Japanese painting.

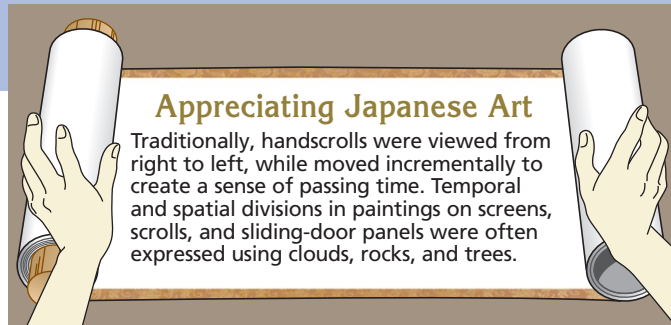
◀ Bodhidharma under a Pine Tree

Kamakura period, 14th century
Inscription by Issan Ichinei (1247–1317)

Ink paintings of Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen Buddhism, were worshipped by Zen monks, just as richly colored images of Buddhist deities were worshipped by other sects.

Appreciating Japanese Art

Traditionally, handscrolls were viewed from right to left, while moved incrementally to create a sense of passing time. Temporal and spatial divisions in paintings on screens, scrolls, and sliding-door panels were often expressed using clouds, rocks, and trees.



◀ Cosmetic Box (*Tebako*) with Cart Wheels in Water

Heian period, 12th century

This cosmetic box is a celebrated example of decorative art from the late Heian period and reflects the opulent tastes of aristocrats. The design of half-submerged wheels

floating in a stream is rendered in mother-of pearl inlay and gold and silver powder (*maki-e*) applied with lacquer. It may have been used to store sacred Buddhist sutra scrolls.



Room
3 [1]
[2]

Room
4

Tea Ceremony

With a scroll hanging in the alcove (*tokonoma*) and woven mats (*tatami*), this room reflects a traditional Japanese tea room. The practice of drinking tea was

imported from China by Zen monks during the late 12th century and later spread to other social classes, including the samurai. During the Muromachi period, wealthy local samurai lords (*daimyō*) used expensive, imported utensils for tea ceremonies. However, a different style, in which tea was enjoyed in more humble settings, also developed. The tea master Sen no Rikyū (1521–91) brought the tea ceremony to its peak. The expression *wabi-sabi*, which describes the Japanese aesthetic of humility and simplicity, refers to Japanese tea ceremonies. This aesthetic can typically be seen in the irregular shapes and surface textures of many vessels used for tea.

In tea ceremonies, utensils of varying origins—art from China, specially commissioned tea wares, and everyday items—are freely combined. Different combinations, based on the host's individual taste or theme, make each ceremony unique.



▶ Tengōan Teahouse

Edo period

This free-standing tearoom, or teahouse, was pioneered by Sen no Rikyū. It was built in Kyoto by the tea master Kobori Enshū (1579–1647) and later moved to the museum gardens. It can be seen from the lounge between Rooms 15 and 16 on the first floor.



Heian
Period

1192

Kamakura
Period

1333

Nanbokuchō
Period

1392

Muromachi
Period

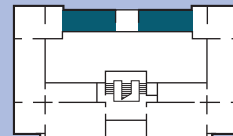
1573

Azuchi-
Momoyama
Period

1603

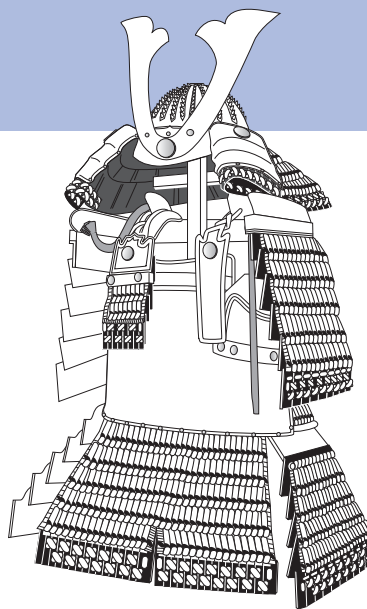
Edo
Period

1868



Arms and Armor of the Samurai 12th–19th century

The samurai (meaning "one who serves") of the Heian period originally ranked beneath the nobility, but gradually rose to power and established a samurai government. During the Kamakura and Muromachi periods when the samurai held power, imperial authority diminished considerably. When the Muromachi samurai government fell into decline, the capital city of Kyoto was destroyed in the Ōnin War (1467–77) and a century of turmoil followed as local samurai lords (*daimyō*) vied for supremacy. Decorated arms and armor were standard samurai attire, ensuring honor for those who fell in battle.

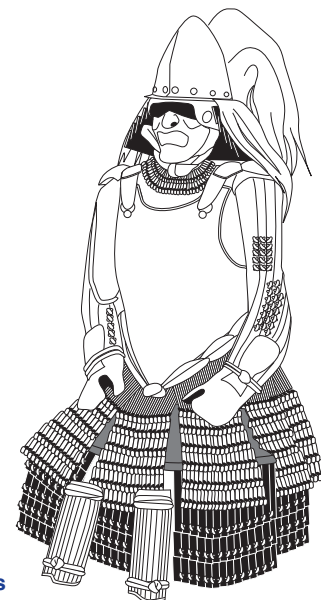


◀ Heavy Armor

Oyorai type

Kamakura period, 14th century

Made of small metal or leather plates laced together with silk cords, heavy armor with a smooth front, such as this, allowed the wearer to use a bow and arrow on horseback.



▲ Sword Mounting (*Hyōgo gusari*) with Flocks of Birds

For the sword named "Uesugi-no-Tachi"

Kamakura period, 13th century

Swords were hung from the waist by cords or chains with the cutting edge facing down. This style was used by aristocrats and samurai from the Heian to the Kamakura period.

Following the death of the powerful samurai lord Oda Nobunaga (1534–82), his successor Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–98) unified Japan and went on to rule as regent. In 1600, after Hideyoshi's heir was defeated by Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616) in the Battle of Sekigahara, Ieyasu reunified Japan and established the Tokugawa samurai government in Edo (present-day Tokyo).

During the Edo period, the samurai government sought to maintain peace by placing firm restrictions on local samurai lords (*daimyō*) and society. Samurai code required sword scabbards to be black and prohibited ostentatious decoration. Nonetheless, decorative swords were produced as gifts, or for ornamental purposes and private appreciation.



▶ Sword Mounting for a Pair of Long and Short Swords (*Daishō*)

Red-lacquered scabbards with gold spiral banding

Azuchi-Momoyama period, 16th century

Long swords (*katana*) were worn tucked into the wearer's sash with the cutting edge facing up.

This style became popular in the Muromachi period. These swords were used by the samurai lord Toyotomi Hideyoshi.



Room

5 & 6

▶ *Gusoku* Armor with European-Style Cuirass

Azuchi-Momoyama period,

16th century

Firearms forever altered the field of battle when they were introduced from Europe in the 16th century. Inspired by European designs, this armor features an iron cuirass to protect against pikes and bullets.

▶ The Tale of Heiji

Illustrated handscroll, Volume chronicling the removal of the imperial family to Rokuhara

Kamakura period, 13th century

This figure is from an illustrated handscroll chronicling a great battle, and shows how armor was worn by the samurai at that time



Paleolithic
Period

— ca. 11,000 BC

Jōmon
Period

— ca. 5th c. BC

Yayoi
Period

— ca. 3rd c. AD

Kofun
Period

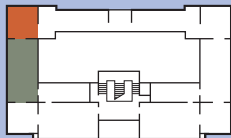
— ca. 7th c.

Asuka
Period

— 710

Nara
Period

— 794



◀ This is an interior view of Ōkyōkan, a historic building on the museum grounds. The sliding doors were painted by Maruyama Ōkyo.

Paintings on Folding Screens and Sliding Doors 16th–19th century

Folding screens and sliding doors often featured paintings of seasonal plants and birds, landscapes, figures, and narrative scenes. In pre-modern times (the Muromachi to Edo period), samurai adorned the interiors of grand buildings with paintings in bold ink, or gold leaf and bright colors. The Kanō school of painters emerged in the Muromachi period and were favored by the samurai class, while the Tosa school followed the courtly art tradition. The unrestrained, realistic styles which appeared in the latter half of the Edo period reflected the tastes of the townspeople.



▲ Yoshiwara Pleasure Quarters and Theater District

Edo period, 17th century

By Hishikawa Moronobu (died 1694)

This scene of the Yoshiwara Pleasure Quarters shows how folding screens were used to decorate interiors.

Decorative Arts 16th–19th century

The Azuchi-Momoyama period, named after Oda Nobunaga's castle in Azuchi and Toyotomi Hideyoshi's castle in Momoyama, witnessed international exchange on an unprecedented scale. As a result, the merchant class enjoyed increased economic power which continued to grow throughout the peaceful Edo period. Affluent merchants commissioned artisans to produce works which appealed to the tastes of their class, including ceramics, tailored robes, furnishings, metalwork, and fine lacquerware—such as writing boxes with literary-themed designs in gold and silver powders and mother-of-pearl inlay.

► Writing Box with Ivy-Bound Path

Edo period, 17th century
By Tatsuke Chōbei

This writing box contains an inkstone, a water dropper, and writing brushes. It is decorated with mother-of-pearl and metallic powders applied with lacquer.



Room
7

Room
8 [1]

Room
8 [2]

Painting and Calligraphy 16th–19th century

Painting

The rise of decorative and genre paintings were defining characteristics of the Azuchi-Momoyama period. Local samurai lords commissioned decorative screens, sliding doors, and walls with bold paintings in color and gold leaf. Genre scenes became subjects in their own right as yearning for the afterlife was eclipsed by interest in this life, and paintings began to feature everyday activities and seasonal events of common people.

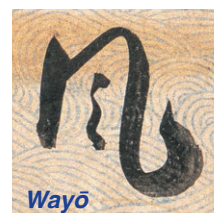
In the Edo period, continued peace and economic growth led the culture to mature, and many new styles emerged. Painters from the Kanō school followed the first Tokugawa shogun, Ieyasu, to Edo, establishing the Edo Kanō school which was patronized by the shogun's government. In Kyoto, which remained a major cultural center, a new style of painting was created by Tawaraya Sōtatsu. Later known as "Rinpa," it influenced other art forms, including decorative arts. Other key styles include the realistic expression of the Kyoto-based Maruyama school and the *bunjinga* ("literati painting") style inspired by the literati of Ming-dynasty China.

Calligraphy

Two major calligraphic styles were practiced in the Edo period: *wayō*, a Japanese style which was developed during the Heian period, and *karayō*, based on a traditional Chinese style. The Japanese style was used by the imperial court and the samurai government, and spread to the general populace through small private schools known as *terakoya*.

The Chinese style was mainly practiced by Zen monks. Its popularity was influenced by the calligraphy of Zen monks who came to Japan from China along with the promotion of Confucian studies by the Tokugawa samurai government. Unlike the Japanese style, which valued adherence to established forms, the Chinese style allowed for greater freedom of expression. This attracted poets and intellectuals, causing the Chinese style to flourish from the mid- to late Edo period.

▼ The Chinese character for "wind" in various styles:



Heian
Period

1192

Kamakura
Period

1333

Nanbokuchō
Period

1392

Muromachi
Period

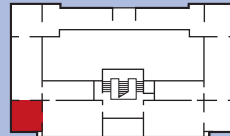
1573

Azuchi-
Momoyama
Period

1603

Edo
Period

1868



Performing Arts

Noh is a Japanese performing art that originated in the 14th century. It was based on traditional court dances known as *bugaku*, originally introduced from China, and was patronized by the samurai government. In the Edo period, Noh became the official performing art for ceremonial occasions. Actor-playwrights Kan'ami (1333–84) and son Zeami (1363–1443) contributed greatly to Noh's development.

Noh actors wear masks to indicate their roles, which include samurai, priests, women, or spirits, and their movements are slow, symbolic, and highly stylized. As Noh plays developed in complexity, Noh costumes became increasingly sophisticated and elaborate. Costumes consist of inner garments (*kitsuke*), outer garments (*uwagi*), and trousers (*hakama*), with designs reflecting the nature of each character. While dyeing techniques were central to pre-modern textile art, figure weaving was also still in use. When Noh grew popular among the samurai class, the demand for costumes increased dramatically and many excellent figure-woven pieces were produced. Between Noh plays, short comical or satirical acts known as *kyōgen* were performed, and these spawned yet another performing art: Kabuki.

Kabuki was developed in Kyoto in the early 17th century by a female performer named Izumo no Okuni. Originally entirely performed by female actors, the samurai ruler of Japan later banned women from performing in Kabuki, and it was reborn in its current form entirely performed by men. Kabuki incorporates dance, dramatic gestures, and music. Through the influence of the puppet plays by Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1724), it also came to feature complex plotlines. Unlike Noh costumes, which were based on the courtly garments of the middle ages, Kabuki costumes were based on clothing worn by commoners in the Edo period. Colorful and unconventional Kabuki costumes became a source of fashion trends among Edo townswomen.



◀ Noh Mask: *Ko-Omote*

Edo period, 17th–19th century
Noh masks are smaller than *bugaku* masks and do not cover the entire face. *Ko-omote*, the smallest Noh mask, represents a young woman. Other masks include demons, elders, women, men, and samurai.



▶ Bugaku Mask: *Chikyū*

Kamakura period, 13th century
Bugaku, a Japanese court dance originally introduced from China, became the basis for Noh. This mask is used for the *chikyū* dance, which celebrates the eternal prosperity of the world.

Room

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▼ Noh Costume (*Karaori*) with Pine Trees and Sails

Edo period, 18th century
Mainly used for female roles, *karaori* costumes are characterized by colorful woven designs. Samurai lords often commissioned ornate Noh costumes after advanced weaving techniques were developed in Kyoto during the mid-Edo period.



◀ Kabuki Theater

Edo period, 17th century
By Hishikawa Moronobu (died 1694)
This is the Nakamura-za, a Kabuki theater of late 17th-century Edo (present-day Tokyo). Based on the Noh theater style, it had no floor or roof for spectators. Special seating was available for high-ranking patrons and sign boards outside announced the program.

Paleolithic Period

— ca. 11,000 BC

Jōmon Period

— ca. 5th c. BC

Yayoi Period

— ca. 3rd c. AD

Kofun Period

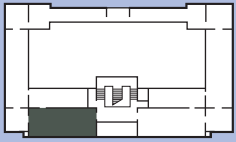
— ca. 7th c.

Asuka Period

— 710

Nara Period

— 794



The Art of Fashion 17th–19th century

Kosode kimonos, characterized by their small wrist openings, rapidly gained popularity from the mid-15th century onwards. In the Azuchi-Momoyama period, *kosode* came to be worn by people from all social classes and new methods of fabric decoration emerged. Particularly popular were *tsujigahana*, which combined tie-dyeing, painting, gold and silver leaf, and color brushing, and *nuihaku*, which combined embroidery with applied gold and silver leaf. These styles became the basis for the many decorative techniques that appeared during the later Edo period.

In the mid-Edo period, dyeing techniques developed further, giving birth to the *yūzen* method. *Yūzen* is a paste-resist dyeing technique that can create colorful and detailed designs much faster than hand-painted methods. *Yūzen* dyeing is regarded as one of the most notable developments in the history of pre-modern Japanese textile art.



◀ Kimono (*Kosode*) with Flower Baskets and Maple Leaves

Edo period, 18th century

The term *kosode* refers to kimonos with small wrist openings. *Kosode* designs changed over time to reflect fashion trends. Their motifs, colors, and embroidery represent Edo-period tastes.

Room

10



◀ Long-Sleeved Kimono (*Furisode*) with Pines, Maples, Peonies, Streams, and Peacocks

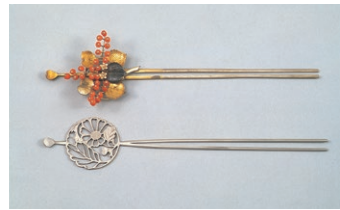
Edo period, 19th century

Furisode are kimonos with long, hanging sleeves. Featuring innovative designs which made use of picturesque styles and blank space, these garments were highly fashionable among young women of the Edo period.

▼ Hairpins

Edo period

This image shows two types of hairpins. The top example features a three-dimensional floral ornament, while the lower example is flat with an openwork design. Other types feature pendant ornaments or unusual and novel decorations.



Geisha with *Shamisen* (Detail) ▲

Edo period, 18th century

By Kitagawa Hidemaro (dates unknown)

During the Edo period, it became customary for women to wear hair ornaments such as combs and hairpins. Originality in materials, shapes, designs, and usage sparked trends, making them an indispensable part of women's fashion.

▼ Famous Products of Edo from the Series “The Making of Color Prints”

Edo period, 18th century

By Kitagawa Utamaro (possibly 1753–1806)

Images of women in contexts or roles normally occupied by men are typical among parody-type works. This image shows the process of printmaking, with the artist drawing and engravers making woodblocks.



The Art of *Ukiyo-e* | 17th–19th century

In contrast to the ideal landscapes depicted in ink painting, woodblock prints and paintings called *ukiyo-e*—literally, “pictures of the floating world”—depict famous places, beautiful women, courtesans, kabuki actors, and merchants. This new form of expression reflected a shift in economic power from the samurai class to merchants and townspeople during the late 17th century.

Parody-type *ukiyo-e* depict subjects in a humorous or ironic way. Examples include images of women performing manual labor (traditionally the role of men), as well as historical, legendary, or literary subjects. As the Edo period was a time of rich learning, people were able to understand and enjoy the nuances of these works.

Ukiyo-e were produced in two formats: woodblock prints, which allowed mass-production and distribution, and paintings, which were produced individually for wealthy clients.

Heian
Period

1192

Kamakura
Period

1333

Nanbokuchō
Period

1392

Muromachi
Period

1573

Azuchi-
Momoyama
Period

1603

Edo
Period

1868

Timeline

	Japan	China	Korea
BC	-10,000 BC Paleolithic 10,000 – 5th century BC Jōmon	-10,000 BC Paleolithic 10,000 – 21st century BC Neolithic 21st century – 16th century BC Xia 16th century – 11th century BC Shang	-8,000 BC Paleolithic 8,000 – 1,500/1,000 BC Neolithic
1500			
1000		11th century – 8th century BC Western Zhou	1,500/1,000 – 4th century BC Bronze Age
500		8th century – 5th century BC Spring and Autumn	
AD 1	5th century BC – 3rd century AD Yayoi	5th century – 3rd century BC Warring States 221 – 206 BC Qin 206 BC – 8 AD Western Han 8 – 23 Xin 25 – 220 Eastern Han	4th century – 1st century BC Early Iron Age
100			1st century AD – 3rd century AD Proto-Three Kingdoms
200			
300	3rd century – 7th century Kofun	221 – 280 Three Kingdoms 265 – 316 Western Jin 317 – 420 Eastern Jin	4th century – 668 Three Kingdoms
400		420 – 589 Northern and Southern Dynasties	
500			
600	593 – 710 Asuka	581 – 618 Sui 618 – 907 Tang	676 – 935 Unified Silla
700	710 – 794 Nara 794 – 1192 Heian		
800			
900		907 – 960 Five Dynasties 916 – 1125 Liao 960 – 1127 Northern Song 1038 – 1227 Western Xia	918 – 1392 Goryeo
1000		1115 – 1234 Jin 1127 – 1279 Southern Song	
1100		1271 – 1368 Yuan	
1200	1192 – 1333 Kamakura		
1300	1333 – 1392 Nanbokuchō 1392 – 1573 Muromachi	1368 – 1644 Ming	1392 – 1910 Joseon
1400			
1500			
1600	1573 – 1603 Azuchi-Momoyama 1603 – 1868 Edo	1644 – 1911 Qing	
1700			
1800			
1900	1868 – 1912 Meiji 1912 – 1926 Taishō 1926 – 1989 Shōwa 1989 – 2019 Heisei 2019 – Reiwa		
2000			

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Translated and edited by Frank Witkam (Tokyo National Museum) and Rebekah Harmon

Cover Image: **Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji: A Mild Breeze on a Fine Day**, Edo period, 19th century, By Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849)

