

JAPANESE ART FASCINATING FACTS

Edo period pillows were often cool porcelain head rests, to preserve the intricate, stiffly greased and perfumed hairstyles through the night.

In 9th Century Japan, beautiful women dyed their teeth black with iron dissolved in vinegar mixed with powdered gallnuts. Eyebrows were shaved and repainted higher up.

From 1740 to around 1860, unsophisticated prints depicting Europeans were produced in Nagasaki and Yokohama, based on Dutch book illustrations. To the insular Japanese, 'foreigners' going about their daily lives were fascinating.

Furniture was little used in ancient Japan: traditionally the 'tatami' thick rush mat was for seating, with cloth cushions and armrests. Padded bedding was unrolled for sleeping. Boxes and chests were used to store clothes.

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1 - *Carp, Taito. Period 1820-1853*
- 2 - *Actor as Moronao. Kumisada. Period 1852*
- 3 - *Two women with Green Blind. Utamaro Period 1791-1800*
- 4 - *Rain at Shono, Tokaido Road. Hiroshige. Period 1834.*
- 5 - *Fuji in clear weather. Hokusai. Period 1834*



celebrating the high-ranking courtesans of the Yoshiwara pleasure quarter of Edo were also a craze, as these women were the alluring symbol of desirability. Wrestler prints 'sumo-e', were most popular at the end of the 18th Century.

Landscape prints 'fukei-ga' developed in the 19th Century, with ideas of Western perspective being



introduced only gradually. The strangely-angled, high view point of Oriental pictorial composition influenced many 19th Century European painters, including Whistler and Degas. Two masters stand out: first Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), a forceful artist who synthesised new, dynamic landscapes (like his famous Mount Fuji views) by distilling major schools and retaining artistic control during printing. By contrast, Ando Hiroshige (1797-1858) produced subdued, poetic reflections of the natural world, combining well coordinated blocks of colour in designs which seem to draw the viewer right amongst the scene.



Japan's Edo period (1600-1868) is famous for 'ukiyo-e' prints, a people's art depicting the transient, 'floating world' of ancient Tokyo. Print production method was sophisticated. The artist provided the image on thin,

translucent paper, which the engraver pasted down onto a cherry wood block sawn along the grain. The paper was then scraped until the image was visible, and the outline incised to varying depths. Areas not to print were excavated. Ink was applied to the print surfaces with a brush, which allowed subtle gradations of tone.

Multiple colours were often painted onto a single block. To print, hand pressure assisted by a pad was used.

Wood-block illustrated books became popular as a new, literate

class grew up during the peaceful Edo period. The Kabuki theatre entertained an emerging ebullient and witty population, who demanded the latest printed representations of their favourite actors 'shibai-e'. Prints helped fans emulate the actor's mannerisms, dress and hairstyles.

'Bijinga' (beautiful women) prints



JAPANESE ART FASCINATING FACTS

Green tea, 'matcha', was introduced to Japan in the 13th Century from China, where the caffeine helped Zen monks to stay awake during meditation.

'Sho-jos' are small, mythical humanoids of the sea shore unable to resist saki (Japanese rice wine). When helplessly drunk, their long red hair and blood is used for valuable dye.

Lacquer, a 'natural plastic', is the sap of a variety of sumach. Lacquered surfaces resist alcohol, various acids and boiling water.

The 'tessen' was a samurai's folding iron fan. The 'sensu', a paper fan, is widely used for 'Noh' drama, classical dances, maternity and ground-breaking ceremonies, and awarded for reaching seventy-seven.

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1 - Lacquer Inros. 18th and 19th Centuries
- 2 - Bronze Japanese Peasant, after 1868
- 3 - Porcelain Dish, Maple and Spider Web. About 1700-40
- 4 - Pottery 'Tiger Pattern' Teapot. About 1760
- 5 - Lacquer Suzuribako (Writing Box). About 1800

varied collection of Japanese sword fittings, netsuke, lacquer, books and prints which he gave to the Museum in 1924.

Japanese ceramics varied from fine, precisely decorated porcelain to textural, asymmetrical pottery for use in the tea ceremony ritual. Lacquer, a decoration built up in layers, was used for a variety of utilitarian objects from 'inro' (small, multi-tiered boxes) to furniture. Ornate ceremonial armour

was made of braid-linked



iron plates. Swords, an important status

symbol amongst the samurai and merchants, were made of iron with a hard steel core and used in fashionable private feuds.

Art of the Edo period encompassed novelty, sophistication, bawdy humour and poetic intellect. Western makers have continually derived inspiration from Japan since the 1870s, when paintings, fashion and interior decoration went 'Oriental'. 20th Century potters especially have responded to the creative glazes and textures of tea ceremony ware. Today, any cleanly-designed, well-engineered 'hi-tech' object is almost certain to have its design roots in Japanese art.



5

Japan's Edo (Tokyo) period from 1600 to 1868 was a peaceful era following civil war, controlled by a Shogun's dynastic reign. Apart from a few Dutch traders, foreigners were totally excluded, and the Japanese impounded.

Decorative art flourished under a wealthy merchant-dominated society.

Flamboyant styles based on the natural world, and 'new arts' like porcelain and wood

block printing developed alongside traditional practices like lacquering.

Japan has been a collector's paradise since the mid 19th Century, when the American navy forced the Shogun to open Japan to foreign trade. As Japan modernised and Westernised, the indigenous art was sold off cheaply to foreign collectors and tourists. Makers rushed to produce new, more commercial versions, debasing the traditional styles.

In Maidstone, the Hon. Henry Marsham retired from the army in the 1870s to collect ceramics in Japan, which he bequeathed to the Museum in 1908. The Hon.

Walter Samuel (son of Lord Bearsted, founder of 'Shell') had by the 1920's built up an excellent



3



MAIDSTONE
MUSEUM
& Art Gallery