It’s surprising but perhaps appropriate that the exhibition “Kyoto: Capital of Artistic Imagination” (on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art through January 26, 2020) begins with a contemporary sculpture. *PixCell-Deer#24* (2011), by the artist Kohei Nawa, is built around the taxidermied body of a deer, an animal that is, according to Shinto belief, the sacred messenger of the Gods. The pose of this deer in particular echoes the Kasuga Deer Mandala—a subject prevalent in the religious painting of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Japan. But in Nawa’s creation, glass bulbs covered the animal’s fur—magnifying and distorting its appearance.
The sculpture’s synthesis of tradition and modernity serves, we’re told, as a metaphor for the story of Kyoto’s art. Kyoto, the seat of the Japanese imperial court from 794 to 1868 and a hub of culture, politics, and trade, was the incubator of a uniquely Japanese artistic style. Monika Bincsik, the Diane and Arthur Abbey Associate Curator of Japanese Decorative Arts, has arranged the exhibition to not only celebrate traditional Japanese art, but also to acknowledge global influences on Kyoto’s—and thus Japan’s—artistic development.

Western ideas began to seep into the city (and Japanese culture at large) when Buddhism was introduced to the island in the sixth century A.D. The small statue of a Female Shinto Deity (ca. 1000–1200) demonstrates, for example, how Japanese artists depicted their gods in human form in much the same way that Greek and Roman sculptors humanized their gods and deified their emperors in the ancient era. As the Japanese aristocracy began to resemble a western one, Buddhist sculptures in Japan also adopted a number of Greco-Roman mannerisms, according to the scholar Tsukamoto Zenryu. Here at the Met we find a pair of statues of the Guardian Kings of the Four Directions (twelfth century)—Hindu demigods that were eventually absorbed into the Buddhist pantheon. Although so central to Japanese Buddhist culture, these figures reflect
Western sculptural tradition in their adoption of both an exaggerated contrapposto and defined musculature.

![The Rebellions of the Hogen and Heiji Eras](image)

The Rebellions of the Hogen and Heiji Eras, seventeenth century, Ink, color, gold, and gold leaf on paper. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund.

Just as these guardian kings once “protected” Japanese Buddhist temples, here they stand on guard around the doorway into the following gallery, a latter-day holy site of high culture. This next room, however, confronts us with the dark political realities of twelfth-century Japan. *The Rebellions of the Hogen and Heiji Eras* (seventeenth century), a painting that depicts social uprisings of the time, has no focal point; instead, we are overwhelmed by expansive chaos—samurai in chariots, warriors waging battle within villages, courtiers in ox-drawn carriages. The mountains and rivers—typically the focus of Japanese landscape painting—are dwarfed by the violent conflicts that ultimately facilitated the samurai’s rise to power in 1185.

The exhibition then covers the Muromachi period (1392–1573), during which time much of what is now considered “traditional” Japanese culture arose: *ikebana* (flower arrangement), tea culture, ink painting, and Noh theater, for example. Soami (1472–1525), an artist and adviser to the Ashikaga shoguns, typified the art of this time. In his *Landscape of the Four Seasons* (early sixteenth century), Soami depicts the transition of the seasons on two six-panelled folding screens—from spring on the far right to winter at the painting’s bottom. In doing so, he fuses the Heian and Shinto artistic preference for seasonal imagery with the landscape format of southern China’s Song Dynasty (as best exemplified by the compositions of Xia Gui). This cultural exchange helped shape the Muromachi period and also, as we now know, Japanese high culture for centuries.

Japan became involved in more formal global exchange (and, crucially, with European merchants) during its “Golden Age”—the Momoyama period (1573–1615). *Willows and Bridge* (early seventeenth century), a glittery six-panel screen that features a copper moon beaming down on a golden bridge and gentle waves of silver, epitomizes the artistic style of the time. In surveying other contemporary pieces, it becomes evident that lacquer furnishings, heavy-handed use of precious metals (especially copper and gold), and dramatic contrasts in colors and medium
dominated the arts of this period.

It’s likely that Japanese artists modified their art to appeal to a global market. *The Nanban Coffer with Animals and Landscapes* (late sixteenth century), for example, displays tigers, peacocks, and cattle—animals that didn’t exist in Japan but did in China, India, and Europe, respectively, thereby appealing to each demographic within their customer base. Similarly, the locks on the front of the coffer feature European-style angels, and decorative vertical bands in mother of pearl create the illusion of European metal enforcing strips.

While Japan’s “Golden Age” produced stunning art, the highlight of the exhibition was the series of *Kamigata* woodblock prints, which were created towards the end of the Edo period (1615–1868) in order to advertise local *kabuki* theater. While some *kabuki* plays were complex and dramatic love stories, the *kabuki* on display at this exhibition are bold and action-packed. The woodblock prints look like cartoons: the characters’ faces distort into caricature, and protagonists are frequently pictured conducting various feats of athletic prowess.

In the context of the earlier art on display, these prints are shocking. Their cartoonish focus on individual emotion and their blatant commercial intent are startling departures from traditional Japanese artwork and, moreover, reflect the modernization and westernization of Japan during the Edo period.

After the Meiji Restoration of 1868 moved the capital from Kyoto to Tokyo, (thus ending the Tokugawa Shogunate and instating Emperor Meiji), the Japanese writer Natsume Soseki wrote in his diary that Japan was awakened by a firebell and jumped out of bed. It was not a genuine awakening but a totally confused one. Japan has tried to absorb Western culture in a hurry and as a result has not had time to digest it.

It’s true—Japan modernized their military, industry, and political system rapidly in the nineteenth century; the artistic transition towards a global modernity, however, had far earlier beginnings, as this exhibition persuasively establishes.

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