THE AGE OF EDO

A new exhibition illuminates one of the richest eras in the history of Japanese art
By Kenneth Baker, *Smithsonian*, December, 1998

We live in a culture thick with signs and messages, but we are free to decide which messages speak to us, which to ignore, which to contradict. How would we feel if all the everyday messages we got--the design and materials of the clothes we wore and objects we used, even the foods we ate--reaffirmed the rigid facts of a social order in which our place was fixed? That was the dream of the military rulers who unified Japan for the first time, early in the 17th century.

But the stability these rulers imposed had consequences that were very different from what they envisioned--consequences that started to turn Japan from a feudal realm into a modern society. The magnificent exhibition "Edo: Art in Japan 1615-1868" at the National Gallery of uses artworks to make that transformation vivid.

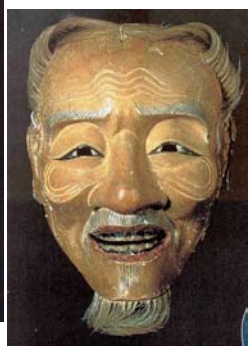
Dazzling color wood-block prints such as Toshusai Sharaku's 1794 portrait of actor Otani Oniji III (above) and Utagawa Kuniyoshi's rendering of Miyamoto Musashi subduing a whale were innovations of the Edo era

With paintings, sculptures and screens, textiles, weapons and fine porcelains, the show traces the era when Edo--known to us as Tokyo--first became Japan's seat of power, and demonstrates how traditional symbols and new design ideas collided across the whole spectrum of material culture.

Scroll paintings contrast the staid landscape images made by scholars with the dashing eccentricity of pictures by samurai and Zen monk amateurs. Gilded screens detail the daily activities of working people and give us panoramic views of urban life and seasonal festivals--cross sections of society unprecedented in Japanese art. Robes and costumes are almost overwhelmed by the boldness of their designs, writhing with appliquéd dragons or rocking with waves; one remarkable costume (p. 64) has a target embroidered on its back with an arrow piercing the bull's-eye. Wood-block prints--the Pop Art of their day--celebrate the spectacle of Kabuki and other plebeian pleasures of Japan's suddenly citified Edo-period culture.

The diversity of urban life and work are elaborately portrayed in this detail from a pair of mid-18th-century screens titled Occupations and Activities of Each Month.

The world evoked in "Edo" is remote from ours in language, history, institutions and beliefs. Yet through the art assembled here we can recognize in that world early stirrings of modern life: different strata of society mixing as never before; newly centralized political power; business gaining in prestige and social impact; the reorientation of the whole society toward its cities; and good design filtering into every level of material culture, not just the elite.



The bold design of the 19th-century Kabuki costume (below left) typifies Edo style. Exaggerated wrinkles define a 17th-century No mask of an old man (lower middle). The strikingly modern-looking porcelain dish with radish (upper middle) was made c.1680.Rabbit ears embellish a 16th-century helmet (bottom).

Until the early 17th century the islands of Japan were divided into numerous provinces controlled by contending regional warlords, known as daimyo, and their private armies.
In the early 1600s, after years of epochal warfare, Tokugawa Ieyasu emerged as Japan's supreme military leader and assumed the title of shogun. The Tokugawa clan would remain in power for more than two centuries; in fact, the Edo period is sometimes called the Tokugawa era. Ieyasu made the garrison town of Edo his capital. The elaborate sumptuary laws he instituted were part of an effective scheme to keep former military men busy with self-cultivation, civilian ritual and costly displays of obedience. These included the edict that all daimyo and their samurai retainers spend alternate years in Edo and in their own local fiefdoms. The frequent processions of daimyo estates to and from the city made the display of available power--manifest in numbers and accouterments--into civic spectacle. The elaborate armor and helmets on view in the "Edo" exhibition may have been functional combat gear, but their use under the Tokugawa regime became increasingly ceremonial. The less practical they had to be, the more fantastic the helmets became. One example in the show takes the shape of an inverted lacquer bowl; another is surmounted by gargantuan rabbit ears.

Under Ieyasu and his successors, Japan enjoyed the longest period of internal peace it has ever known. During this time, the martial arts receded in importance and the patronage and practice of the civilian arts--painting, poetry, calligraphy, theater--flourished. A vibrant popular culture developed and new styles of artistic expression emerged. By the 18th century, the population of Edo had grown to one million, making it the largest city in the world, with an influence so profound that its name came to denote the culture of all Japan.

The exhibition includes an early 17th-century hanging scroll portrait of Ieyasu (right) possibly posthumous, in which he appears more religious than martial in aspect, reflecting the fact that many contemporaries regarded him as the incarnation of a Buddhist-Shinto deity. Even though he is seated on a platform we see from above, his imposing air and the steps at the bottom of the picture create the impression that we are looking up at the great shogun.

Although Buddhist temples remained centers of influence and the country's rulers espoused Neo-Confucian beliefs, to a large extent Edo society was an urbanized one. "Urban customs and fads spread throughout the land, traveling with daimyo and samurai as they returned from their attendance duties in Edo," scholar Herman Ooms notes in the exhibition catalogue. "In addition, rural men and women sought temporary employment in towns and cities during the slack agricultural season or after falling on hard times. This led to an environment where status distinctions were not observed as the authorities had wished . . .." Among the fads that spread from Edo and other cities were eye-catching color wood-block prints that promoted the new rage for Kabuki and other popular entertainments. "These works have come to represent Tokugawa ***art*** par excellence--and deservedly so," writes Ooms, "for this was the period when commoners put their mark on the world of culture for the first time in Japanese history."

The "Edo" exhibition has been organized in conjunction with the Japan Foundation and Japan's Agency for Cultural Affairs, the Bunkacho, which each year sends one major exhibition of Japanese art abroad. The show, sponsored by NTT (Nippon Telegraph and Telephone), is a two-part event because so many of the objects are too vulnerable to be exposed to light for more than six weeks a year. All are reproduced, however, in the show's lavish catalogue.

The Bunkacho is the authority that designates artifacts as National Treasures or Important Cultural Objects. The National Gallery show deliberately breaks with the Bunkacho custom of grouping artworks by a hierarchy of media: paintings, sculptures, ceramics and lacquer, textiles and prints. In that conventional framework, says the exhibition's guest curator, Robert T. Singer of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, "you can make points about different kinds of paintings or ceramics, for example, but you can't make points across various media." And that is just what Singer wanted to do in "Edo."

University Museum, faculty of letters, Kyoto University Tokugawa Ieyasu appears as a Buddhist-Shinto deity in this 17th-century scroll.

In feudal Japan, he notes, many artists worked in several modes, and little distinction was made between "pure **art**" and "functional art." In Edo-period society, he continues, "the increasing economic clout of the merchant class led to the transformation of cultural forms that were once the preserve of court and warrior elites, and the arts became accessible to members of all social classes." To track this shift, the show examines a range of media from the point of view of six emergent themes: Edo style, samurai, travel and landscape, religion, work, and entertainment.

No survey exhibition of Edo culture has ever been attempted in Japan. The two-and-a-half-century timespan is considered too long, the fund of significant artifacts, unmanageably large. "Probably 98 percent of the historic Japanese ***art*** still

extant is Edo," says Singer. In a sense America's distance from Japan made the National Gallery project feasible, even though there is an inevitable sacrifice of historical detail in presenting Japanese culture to a foreign public. Another problem is the justifiable reluctance of Japanese lenders to part with irreplaceable objects.

A mysterious, somewhat melancholy quality pervades the six-panel, gold-leaf Hikone Screen (c. 1620s-40s), a Japanese National Treasure and one of the highlights of the show. Although the demimonde figures in this "pleasure depiction" tableau are arrayed against a background nearly devoid of setting, their clothes and poses suggest a bordello scene.

The curator of a show such as this, says Singer, "tries to get one National Treasure that has never left Japan before and that makes everyone in the field gasp when they see it." In the present case, that object is in the "entertainment" section of the exhibition. It is known as the *Hikone Screen* (c. 1620s-40s), six panels painted on a gold-leaf ground depicting demimonde figures—perhaps a bordello scene—in old Kyoto. "It's a magnificent work," says Singer, "and many of the most serious scholars and collectors have never even seen it. Most people will be amazed to find that it's only three feet tall. The Bunkacho resisted sending it because they, understandably, hate to set a precedent for allowing such an important work to travel abroad. It is in Part II of the exhibition, which begins on January 13, and it has its own airplane and its own courier."

The Hikone Screen belongs to a genre newly favored in Edo-period art known as yurakuzu, or "pleasure depiction" screens. Its six panels, now separated for conservation reasons, appear to parody the traditional Chinese theme of the Four Accomplishments: calligraphy, painting, music and board games. The figures on the screen write love letters, pluck shamisen—three-stringed instruments associated with Kabuki theater—and play a board game that resembles backgammon. "The male youth leans on his long sword, an action far removed from the military spirit that dominated depictions of men a few decades earlier," writes art historian Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere in the show's catalogue. "The screen represents not just a parody of traditional Chinese accomplishments but a commentary on past and present. The youths are all clothed in the latest fashions but set against a gold ground with no indication of setting." The only background is a medieval-style landscape screen (a thing of the past used here to represent painting), which is folded in such a way as to enclose a blind musician. "The past is encapsulated," concludes Rousmaniere. "The present concerns revolve around fashion and ornament. A new age of leisure has arrived."

In conjunction with the exhibition, the National Gallery is offering an extensive program of events that demonstrate the living legacy of Edo culture. Among them are historical dramas from Japanese cinema, performances of Kabuki and marionette theater, traditional Japanese dance, taiko drumming and acrobatics.

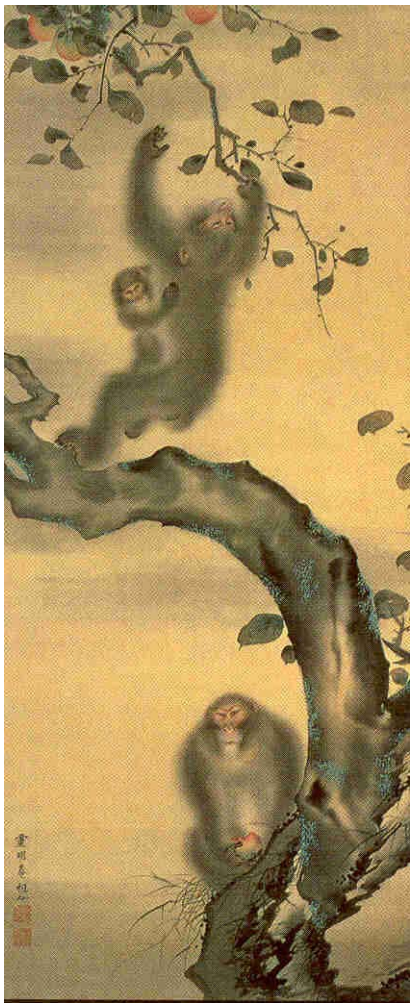
Singer's first triumph as the show's organizer was securing loans of such priceless objects as the Hikone Screen and a recently discovered pair of 17th-century six-fold screens with a panoply of images thought to be the earliest depictions of Edo. The paintings, titled Scenes of a Festival in Edo, portray a religious procession snaking through the city, bearing portable shrines past the shogun's castle. These screens, shown publicly for the first time in Washington, are such a recent discovery that scholars have only begun to decode their meaning. Singer's other major accomplishment was convincing the Bunkacho to accept as representative of Edo-period art the paintings and calligraphy of Zen masters such as Hakuin Ekaku and Sengai Gibon. Sengai's Frog in Zen Meditation (p. 68) is an exemplary Zen ink painting. The frog is little more than a doodle, but it fixes its gaze on us and wears a riveting smile. "If by sitting in Zen meditation a human becomes a

buddha..." the painting's inscription reads. But we do not know whose thought this is—the frog's? the artist's?—nor how to complete it. Perhaps its very incompleteness, and the work's easy spirit, are all that Sengai can show us of the enlightenment the Zen practitioner hopes to attain.

"Hakuin has only recently gained limited acceptance in the official canon of Japanese art history, and Sengai is still an outsider," says Singer. "You won't find their work on display in the Tokyo National Museum or in the Kyoto National Museum. They were a real hard sell. I'm grateful to the Bunkacho for allowing me to expand the envelope."

From the 6th to the 16th century, Japanese art had been essentially religious in character. But in the Edo period, explains Singer, "constraints on the production of religious art began to loosen . . . and the audience became increasingly diverse." Evidence of that process can be discerned in such images as Ito Jakuchu's irreverent Vegetable parinirvana (c. 1780), another eccentric ink painting, which re-envisions the scene of the Buddha's death as a still life. The supine Buddha appears in the center as a long white radish. All around him are attendant deities and aggrieved disciples: turnip, eggplant, melon, persimmon, bamboo shoots.

The requirement that all daimyo march repeatedly between capital and provinces meant that roads had to be well maintained. Better roads, under the new political stability and consequent prosperity of the lower social ranks, enabled people to visit famous scenic or sacred places that they had once known only in poems or paintings. The call for reminders of those visits helped fuel the traditional artistic fascination with landscape, which burgeoned during the Edo era. The exhibition features a number of landscape scenes, including several prints from Katsushika Hokusai's popular series "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji," done in the 1830s, and a stylized, ambiguously allusive painting by Sakai Hoitsu titled *Maple Trees in Spring and Autumn*, from 1818.



By the mid-19th century, near the end of the show's chronology, we can recognize the new popular demand for art in a wood-block print such as Utagawa Kuniyoshi's *The Warrior Miyamoto Musashi Subduing a Whale* (c. 1847-50). The three-panel print depicts the legendary swordsman Musashi astride a thrashing whale, about to administer a deadly thrust. Musashi was a real historical figure of the early Edo period--an invincible samurai who later became a masterly painter. (Two works by him are in the show.) But Kuniyoshi has turned him into a superhero who also personifies the bygone grandeur of Japan's feudal age.

Visitors will leave this exhibition with a kaleidoscopic vision of Edo culture and fresh questions: Was the fading of religious belief something common to the modern era in East and West alike? Are the beautiful things we see here really windows on an unfamiliar way of thinking, or just exotic pleasures?

The Tokugawa regime would continue until several years after Commodore Matthew Perry sailed into Edo harbor and forced modernity on the Japanese through new forms of international trade. But as the exhibition argues, despite its self-imposed isolation, Japan by then had in its own way already begun to join the modern world.

Left: A hanging scroll by Mori Sosen (1747-1821) captures a family of macaques in a persimmon tree with unsettling verisimilitude. Above: Economy of line characterizes Sengai Gibon's *Frog in Zen Meditation*.

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By Kenneth Baker, art critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*.
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