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JAPAN

QUICK GUIDE
ARTS & CULTURE

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ARTS & CULTURE

Japanese culture is complex and profound, distinct from most other cultures around the world—a perfect blend of ancient traditions blended seamlessly with cutting-edge modernity. From centuries-old Noh theatre to the futuristic digital installations of teamLab, Japan's cultural landscape is as diverse as it is mesmerizing. Whether you're drawn to the elegance of classical crafts, the dynamism of performing arts, or the energy of sporting events, Japan's arts and culture is an unmissable journey.

TRADITIONAL PERFORMING ARTS BUGAKU

Bugaku is the traditional dance repertoire of the Japanese Imperial Court, divided into four main genres: civil dances, warrior dances, running dances, and dances for children. This style was influenced by dances from China and Korea, refined over centuries to create its own unique courtly style. It first became popular in the seventh century in Nara, though continued to flourish in the Heian period, when the imperial court moved to Kyoto.

Bugaku consists of two main styles: *sahō no mai* (dances of the left, which came from China, featuring red costumes), and *uhō no mai* (dances of the right, which came from Korea, which feature blue or green costumes). Performers often wear wooden masks, hiding any facial expressions that might take away from the dance.

BUNRAKU

Bunraku, Japanese puppet theatre, features life-sized puppets controlled by skilled puppeteers—typically three manipulating a single character. The puppets are intricately crafted and maneuvered with precision, while narrators and musicians tell stories of love, betrayal, and folklore. Puppeteers dress entirely in black to blend into the background and become invisible.

Bunraku demands tremendous skill to master the puppet's subtle movements, creating harmony between the story, doll, and puppeteers. Fifteen years of intense training is needed to make foot movements appear human, followed by another fifteen years to skillfully control the left hand. Only then can a puppeteer attempt the head. This challenging yet sophisticated theatre form dates back to 1684, first performed in Osaka.



KABUKI

Known for its elaborate costumes, makeup, and exaggerated expressions, *kabuki* theatre emerged in 17th century Kyoto, with a shrine maiden performing a new dance-drama style. After gaining royal attention and formal recognition, rival troupes of female entertainers emerged, competing for the spotlight. Though traditionally performed by women, *kabuki* later became an all-male art form, with male actors specializing in female roles (called *onnagata*). Today, *kabuki* uses dynamic poses and expressive movements, telling stories about romance, historical events, and moral conflicts, accompanied by traditional music.

NOH

The oldest existing form of Japanese theatre, *Noh* is a classical Japanese dance-drama with origins dating back to the 8th century—it became formalized in the 14th century by playwrights Kannami and Zeami. *Noh* flourished during the Edo period but quickly lost favour during the Meiji era. In post-war Japan, it regained popularity as part of the efforts to preserve cultural heritage.

Noh is a highly stylized form of theater, using masks, slow movements, and symbolic gestures. Often solemn and meditative—combining classical dance with Shinto rituals—*Noh* theatre traditionally consists of five play categories: gods, warriors, women, miscellaneous, and demons.

VISUAL ARTS & CRAFTS

CALLIGRAPHY (SHODO)

Japanese calligraphy, or *shodo*, is the writing of Japanese characters in an artistic way. More than just beautiful penmanship and writing, *shodo* is considered art and a form of meditation, as it requires intense concentration, fluid movement, and mastery of brush strokes to create balance and harmony. In Japanese there are three different alphabets used, including *Hiragana*, *Katakana*, and *Kanji*—both *Hiragana* and *Katakana* have 46 characters each, while *Kanji* has approximately 20,000 different characters. There are also a variety of scripts, from regular block lettering, to semicursive and cursive (called *kaisho*, *gyosho*, and *sosho* respectively).

Today, teenagers form *Shodo* clubs where they write with oversized brushes to create large block letters, all in time to music, while children and adults alike take formal classes and workshops to improve their techniques and stylings.

IKEBANA

Ikebana is the Japanese art of flower arrangement, focusing on balance, harmony, and simplicity. Unlike Western flower arrangements that emphasize colour and fullness, *Ikebana* uses space, lines, and asymmetry to reflect the seasons and a deeper spiritual connection to nature. At its simplest, *Ikebana* is a composition of only three elements, though the styles have changed over the years, with new schools of *Ikebana* following different style principles. The *moribana* style from the Ohara School, which was born in the Meiji period, takes flowers and piles them up in flat containers to create representations of natural landscapes. *Ikenobo* is the oldest school, and focuses on the use of standing flowers

KINTSUGI

Rooted in the principle of *wabi-sabi* (beautiful in the broken), *kintsugi* is the art of repairing broken pottery with gold (or silver) lacquer. Rather than discarding broken objects, they can be transformed into something more beautiful and precious—a symbol of healing and resiliency.

ORIGAMI

Origami, which is the art of paper folding, is considered both a craft and a form of meditation. In Japanese elementary schools, children are taught the art of origami to improve their attention spans and ability to follow instructions, while many adults will practice origami as

ORIGAMI (CONTINUED)

a way to focus their mind and create a sense of calm. Traditional shapes and designs include cranes (symbolizing peace, health, and longevity), butterflies (displayed at weddings as a symbol of the bride's journey), and lotus flowers (symbolizing resurrections, self-enlightenment, and purity).

Origami was first written about in *How to Fold a Thousand Paper Cranes*, published in 1797, but the art form—which requires patience and careful folding—became popular during the Edo period as sturdy washi paper became more readily available.





POTTERY AND CERAMICS

With a history dating back to Japan's Jōmon period (14000–300 BCE), pottery and ceramics have remained an important and defining craft in Japanese culture, valued both domestically and internationally. Starting with rope-patterned pottery crafted by early Japanese settlers, over the centuries the Japanese developed unique styles and techniques, many of which are still revered today. From *raku ware* (hand-molded ceramics associated with tea ceremonies) and *arita ware* (porcelain with intricate blue and white designs) to *bizen ware* (unglazed and rustic-style stoneware) and *kutani ware* (iron-rich stone in opulent hues). Other historical styles include *shigaraki ware*, which is identifiable by its use of *tanuki* (raccoon-dog statues) and *echizen ware*, which is famous for its simple texture, fired without decoration or enamel.

Today, Japanese kilns and craftsmen continue to create traditional ceramics, often blending in modern aesthetics and techniques.

UKIYO-E

Ukiyo-e, meaning “pictures of the floating world,” is a woodblock printing style that flourished during the Edo period (1603-1868). Famous artists like Hokusai and Hiroshige depicted landscapes, celebrities (such as royalty or *kabuki* actors), and everyday life—later influencing western artists like Van Gogh and Monet. One of the most internationally recognized *ukiyo-e* works is *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* from Hokusai's *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*.

A complex process, *ukiyo-e* requires multiple stages from conception to creation. The artist dictates the colours and design, followed by a woodblock carver and then a printer.

YOSEGI ZAIKU

Yosegi Zaiku is a traditional Japanese marquetry technique that creates intricate geometric patterns by assembling different types of natural wood. These patterns decorate trays, furniture, and secret puzzle boxes (*Himitsu-Bako*), which require specific moves to open, making them both secure and entertaining.

Instead of dyes or paints, *Yosegi Zaiku* relies on the natural colours and grain of wood, resulting in detailed designs. The process demands precision, skill, and patience.

Dating to the Edo period (1603-1868), *Yosegi Zaiku* originated in Hakone, Kanagawa Prefecture—a mountainous region known for its rich tree variety. As Hakone was a popular Tōkaidō road stop, many travelers purchased these decorated wooden items as souvenirs. Over time, the craft became synonymous with Hakone craftsmanship, which remains the capital of *Yosegi Zaiku* production.



AESTHETICS & CONCEPTS

IKI

Understated elegance is the core tenant of *iki*—a design principle that values restrained stylishness dating back to the 17th century. In the Edo period (1603-1868) the merchant class were prohibited by law to flaunt their wealth, causing many to find ways around the restrictions by having superior quality items appear simple. Today, the concept can apply to fashion and style—a simple T-shirt made of prima cotton, hand-crafted leather shoes, etc.—as well as home goods, housewares, gastronomy, and even personalities.

KAWAII

The *kawaii* style and aesthetic is generally defined as cute, young, innocent, and childish—the word coming from a phrase that describes blushing. Common motifs and characteristics of the style includes manga and anime, bright outfits, excessive pastel, hearts and stars, cartoonish faces with exaggerated facial expressions and wide eyes, anthropomorphic animals, and more. Famous examples include *Sailor Moon*, *Pokémon*, and *Hello Kitty*.

Within the *kawaii* aesthetic, there are different styles and subcultures. For instance, *Shibu-kawaii* focuses on an everyday-wear approach and uses soft pastel tones with an overall focus on understated cuteness. *Yume kawaii* also uses pastel colours, but is more dreamlike, with a nod to fantasy.

MONO NO AWARE

An underlying principle of *wabi-sabi*, *mono no aware* is a Japanese idiom with origins dating back to the Heian period (794-1185). Translating to “the pathos of things” or “the beauty of things passing,” it is used to construe the concept of impermanence—a driving force behind Japanese appreciation for the transient and ephemeral. The philosophy of *mono no aware* encourages people to find meaning in the ever-changing world and beauty in the fleeting moments—cherry blossoms blooming briefly before dying, fruits ripening then rotting, stormy skies giving way to vibrant sunsets, melting snow, etc.

WABI-SABI

Both a design principle and philosophical approach, *wabi-sabi* is the concept of beauty in items that are in some way imperfect, whether broken, chipped, or worn in by time and/or natural elements.

WABI-SABI (CONTINUED)

The concept of finding beauty in the old and broken dates back to the 16th century, when a Japanese tea master decided to bring the traditional tea ceremony reserved for the upper echelons of society to the masses.

ZEN

A design philosophy derived from Zen Buddhism, this aesthetic emphasizes simplicity, mindfulness, and natural beauty. It is characterized by minimalism and an appreciation for imperfection, reflecting the core Zen principles of meditation, inner peace, and harmony with nature. This aesthetic is deeply embedded in Japanese art, architecture, gardens, and daily life.

Zen is not just an aesthetic style but also a philosophy to be applied to ways of thinking and approaching life. It encourages an appreciation for emptiness or minimalism over excess, quiet over noise, and natural imperfections over artificial perfections. Zen encourages people to admire the beauty of the moment, with respect for the simple and transient.



SPORTS & MARTIAL ARTS

AIKIDO

Developed in the early 20th century, *aikido* is a Japanese martial art focused on self-defence and redirection, with a concentration on throwing, joint locks, and traditional Japanese weaponry. While the goal is to disarm the opponent, ending conflict non-violently, many of the moves come from *jiu-jitsu* and *judo* and can still be deadly. At the core of its creation there is an emphasis on spirituality, with many of the principles and philosophies of aikido rooted in Shintoism and Zen Buddhism.

JUDO

Judo is a grappling-based martial art and Olympic sport focused on throws, joint locks, and pins to subdue an opponent. Emphasizing balance and using an opponent's force rather than strength, it fosters discipline, self-control, and resilience. Meaning "gentle way," judo demands respect for opponents.

Founded in 1882 by Kano Jigoro, judo emerged from his study of *jiu-jitsu* after witnessing bullying at an English boarding school. Jigoro removed dangerous elements, shaping judo into a structured martial art centered on personal development and self-improvement.

KENDO

Similar to fencing, *kendo* is a Japanese martial art that requires excellent physical skills and mental discipline, with an emphasis on awareness, control, and respect. Dating back to the Kamakura period (1185-1333), *kendo* was formed as a way for samurai to practice their swordsmanship. However, over the years, steel swords were swapped for bamboo ones (called *shinai*), and thick armour was introduced to protect practitioners.

KYUDO

Kyudo, meaning "the way of the bow," is the Japanese martial art of archery. Both a martial discipline and spiritual practice, it has a long-respected history in Japan. Once a samurai weapon, it is now a means of self-development—the energy and focus required resemble standing meditation, demanding control of mind and breath. A core principle is self-awareness, teaching practitioners to clear their mind and react calmly for precise shooting. The art of shooting, called *shagi*, requires study of etiquette (*rei*) and formalized movements (*taihai*).



SUMO

The unofficial national sport of Japan, sumo has deep cultural roots dating back over 1,300 years. Once a ritual dance to entertain deities, it evolved into professional wrestling. Yet, many elements remain tied to Shinto rituals, from using salt to purify the ring to the shrine-like roof.

Sumo matches feature two wrestlers called *rikishi* tripping, slapping, and pushing to force their opponent out of the *dohyo* or make them touch the ground. Wrestlers wear only loincloths, and rounds typically last seconds, though some exceed 30 minutes. Sumo tournaments (*basho*) occur every two months in Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, and Fukuoka.

YAKYU

Baseball (called *yakyu*) was introduced to Japan in 1872 and has since become one of the country's most popular sports, both to play and watch. Professional leagues emerged in the 1920s, with Nippon Professional Baseball now serving as the highest level, divided into the Central and Pacific Leagues. High school baseball, especially the nationally televised Summer Kōshien tournament, holds significant cultural importance. Reflecting Japan's values of teamwork, discipline, and respect, *yakyu* tends to have a more structured and intense atmosphere than Major League Baseball. Its unique cultural approach to the sport has often made it more difficult for international players to transition when playing in Japan.

JAPANESE LITERATURE AND POETRY

LITERATURE AND NOVELS

Japan's role and influence on modern literature is far reaching, starting with *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu—the world's first novel. Written in the 11th century at the peak of the Heian period (794–1185), it is considered a literary masterpiece. The novel follows Hikaru Genji—the son of an emperor—who leads a life filled with romantic escapades and political intrigue in Kyoto's imperial court, despite being removed from the line of succession. The author was a lady-in-waiting and noblewoman.

While the creation of novels grew rapidly over the following centuries, it was the influx of foreign writing during the Meiji period (1868–1912) that saw a modern rebirth of Japanese literature. Internationally renowned contemporary authors include Haruki Murakami, Banana Yoshimoto, Sir Kazuo Ishiguro, and Keigo Higashino.

MANGA

Manga, the term for Japanese comics and graphic novels, is a popular storytelling medium known for its distinct art style, unique narratives, and diverse genres. Unlike Western comics, traditionally full-colour and superhero-focused, it is typically black and white and serialized in magazines before being compiled into collected volumes (*tankōbon*).

Its roots trace back to the Edo period (1603–1868) through woodblock prints and illustrated scrolls, but modern manga emerged post-World War II, influenced by American comics and animated films. This led to the creation of *Mighty Atom* (1952)—known as *Astro Boy* in North America—widely considered the start of modern manga.

Expressive art styles feature exaggerated expressions, dynamic panel layouts, and theatrical action. Style varies by genre and demographic: *shōnen* (boys') manga often has high-energy battles, *shōjo* (girls') emphasizes elegant designs and emotional storytelling, while *seinen* (adult men's) leans toward darker, detailed artwork. Common themes include coming-of-age, cyberpunk, sci-fi, fantasy, supernatural, psychological thrillers, horror, and romance.

Manga gained international traction in the late 20th century with *Akira*, *Dragon Ball Z*, and *Sailor Moon*. The rise of anime adaptations and English translations fueled its popularity, turning it into a multibillion-dollar industry. By 2021, it had surpassed American comics in global sales. With expanding digital distribution, streaming services, and Hollywood adaptations, its worldwide influence continues to grow, cementing it as one of Japan's most significant cultural exports.



POETRY: HAIKU

What stemmed from the opening verse of a poem, haiku poetry is Japan's most famous form of poetry and is taught at schools around the world. Short and sweet, it consists of three lines with a 5-7-5 syllable pattern. Other elements of a traditional haiku poem include images of nature—often with reference to a season (this is called *kigo*)—and a cutting word that creates an emotional effect or changes the stream of thought (called *kireji*).

POETRY: TANKA

An older form of Japanese poetry, tanka follows a 5-7-5-7-7 syllable structure. Influenced by the concept of *wabi-sabi*, tanka poetry traditionally uses imagery and symbolism to tell a story and evoke feelings—the imagery often reflective of seasons and natural beauty.

JAPANESE POP CULTURE

ANIME

Anime refers to Japanese animated television shows and films, known for their distinctive visual style and complex, diverse storytelling. Becoming synonymous around the world with Japanese pop culture, anime's influence and popularity extends beyond Japan, with many of its franchises now global phenomena—going from a niche domestic medium to a global entertainment powerhouse.

Anime first became popular in post-war Japan, with the adaptation of the manga series *Astro Boy*—this was Japan's first animated TV hit. Following its success, anime began to take hold in Japanese cinema and series, solidifying itself as a staple and growing more common with the continued rise of manga. However, while popular in Japan, anime exploded internationally in the 1990s, following the release of *Akira* (1988) and with hit series like *Pokémon*, *Dragon Ball Z*, *Sailor Moon*, and *Naruto*. *Akira* (1988) is credited with inspiring films like *The Matrix* and *Inception*.

Stylistically, anime features highly expressive characters with exaggerated facial expressions, unique camera angles, dynamic action sequences, and vibrant visuals that often push the boundaries of animation. Unlike Western animation, which traditionally targets younger audiences, anime is not solely marketed toward children, with content for all age groups, covering a wide range of genres, including action, romance, horror, fantasy, science fiction, drama, and stories about everyday life.

CINEMA

Japan's film industry is one of the largest and most successful in the world. Its influence is far-reaching, though not always obvious, including pioneering modern filmmaking techniques that continue to shape global cinema today.

Though Japanese cinema covers all genres, historical dramas (*jidaigeki*)—particularly samurai films (*chanbara*)—remain one of the most popular subjects. However, Japan has become most known internationally for its horror and animated films. Japanese horror, or *J-horror*, first gained international recognition with *The Ring* (1998), a film that redefined psychological horror and suspense, leading to the successful American remake by Gore Verbinski. Meanwhile, Japanese animated films, from *Akira* (1988) to the works of Studio Ghibli and Makoto Shinkai, have become household staples with Western audiences—these films combining stunning visuals with emotionally compelling narratives.

CINEMA (CONTINUED)

The influence of Japanese cinema on international filmmaking is vast, ranging from subtle stylistic inspirations to direct remakes. Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) laid the groundwork for many Western films, including *The Magnificent Seven* and even elements of *Star Wars*, with George Lucas openly acknowledging its impact. Similarly, the cyberpunk aesthetic of *Akira* helped shape the gritty, dystopian style seen in modern Hollywood sci-fi films. Japan's entertainment formats have also shaped international television, with American shows like *America's Funniest Home Videos* and *Iron Chef* originating from Japanese concepts and series.

GODZILLA

Godzilla, an international pop culture icon and the titular character of one of the world's most recognized film franchises, is a fictional monster that first debuted in the eponymous 1954 film. However, since the original film, there has been countless Godzilla movies—more than 30 in Japan and an additional five American adaptations.

Traditionally depicted in a reptilian or dinosauric form, Godzilla has been characterized various ways, from destructive monster to anti-hero. Awarded a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, Godzilla has starred in a total of 38 films, though has made appearances in various other formats, including crossovers into other franchises, like DC Comics and Marvel Comics. In 2021, the American film *Godzilla vs. Kong* was released, bringing together two famous monsters and franchises.



JAPANESE POP CULTURE

HELLO KITTY

Hello Kitty—a classic representation of Japanese *kawaii* culture and aesthetics—is an international cultural icon, created by Sanrio in 1974. An anthropomorphic white cat with a red bow, Hello Kitty is depicted as a cute British girl who lives in a London suburb with her family, including her twin sister. Since her creation, she has been a global phenomenon, adorning over 50,000 products sold in more than 130 countries (the successful mass marketing of Hello Kitty bringing in billions of dollars of revenue for Sanrio).

The enduring popularity of Hello Kitty can be seen by her continuous presence around the world, from Hello Kitty cafés in the U.S. and Canada to EVA Airways launching an airbus completely decked out in Hello Kitty livery. In 2008, Hello Kitty was named Japan's tourism ambassador to China, and in 2022 she threw the opening pitch at Dodgers Stadium. In 2024, Hello Kitty celebrated her 50th birthday, which was acknowledged by King Charles and Queen Camilla when Emperor Naruhito visited Buckingham Palace.

Despite Hello Kitty never smiling, always expressionless and without a mouth, she has a distinct personality, with details about her life shared to help humanize her. For instance, Hello Kitty is a Scorpio who loves to bake cookies, though her favourite food is her mother's apple pie.



OTAKU CULTURE

The term *otaku* refers to individuals passionate about anime, manga, and gaming. While it once had negative connotations in Japan, the rise of anime conventions and online communities has helped reshape its image. Today, *otaku* culture is a major part of Japan's economy, influencing everything from tourism to fashion.

POKÉMON

Pokémon—short for “Pocket Monsters,” which was the original full name of the franchise—was created by Satoshi Tajiri in 1996 as a video game. Debuting as *Pokémon Red* and *Green* on Nintendo's GameBoy, players could catch, train, and battle Pokémon. It quickly expanded into a global franchise, including anime movies and series, trading cards, toys, and branded merchandise. In recent years, it has also grown to include augmented reality games like *Pokémon Go*. Today, Pokémon is ranked as the most successful media franchise in the world, with an estimated \$100 billion in total revenue.

Pokémon takes place in a universe where humans co-exist with a variety of creatures and species that are endowed with special powers—these creatures are called Pokémon. As of 2024, there were over 1,025 Pokémon species introduced to the franchise. Many of the Pokémon created are inspired by real-world animals or mythical creatures from folklore.

The anime series, which was launched in 1997 in Japan (1998 in North America), was largely responsible for the success of Pokémon with global audiences, following on the heels of other successful anime shows like *Sailor Moon*. The series followed Ash Ketchum, a young Pokémon trainer, and his partner Pikachu as they travelled the world, capturing new Pokémon and competing in battles.

JAPANESE POP CULTURE

SAILOR MOON

Sailor Moon, created by Naoko Takeuchi in 1991, is one of the most influential manga and anime series to come from Japan, becoming a hit sensation with international audiences, as well as local ones. It started as a manga series for a girls' magazine called *Nakayoshi*, running for over five years, and was adapted into an *anime* show the same year. The series follows Usagi Tsukino, a young teenager who transforms into a magical warrior named Sailor Moon to fight evil, often with the help of her close friends. In her everyday life, the titular character struggles with being bullied, pressure to succeed and get good grades, and a crush on a popular boy—struggles the creator introduced to make her more relatable to the audience.

Sailor Moon had a massive international impact, introducing people worldwide to Japanese anime, creating billions in revenue. After airing in Japan in 1992, the anime series quickly became popular in Europe. Its immediate ability to resonate with international audiences led to a North American adaptation.

The series was highly progressive for its time, revolutionizing the “magical girl” genre and embracing feminist themes. Critics commended it for its inclusions of different characters, representing various struggles and backgrounds. The series even included gay characters and relationships, something that was uncommon in Japanese mainstream media—it was the main reason for delaying the Anglicized adaptation. Rather than simply making characters good and evil, both the manga series and anime adaptation delved into the various villains' backgrounds, exploring themes such as abandonment and loneliness—with Sailor Moon always becoming sympathetic to her enemies. The series has also been lauded for its portrayal of strong female friendships.

STUDIO GHIBLI

Studio Ghibli is an internationally renowned Japanese animation studio, known for creating visually stunning animated films. Founded in 1985, it has become a global symbol of high-quality, hand-drawn animation with rich storytelling and emotional depth, suitable to audiences of all ages. Led by directors Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata, the studio has created countless staples, including *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *Spirited Away* (2001), *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), *Ponyo* (2008), and most recently *The Boy and the Heron* (2023).

STUDIO GHIBLI (CONTINUED)

Spirited Away was the first non-English language film to win an Oscar for Best Animated Feature in 2002—the only other film to win this award was Studio Ghibli's *The Boy and the Heron* in 2024. Other Studio Ghibli films that have garnered Oscar nominations include *Howl's Moving Castle*, *The Wind Rises*, *The Tale of The Princess Kaguya*, *When Marnie Was There*, and *The Red Turtle*. The Ghibli Museum opened in Tokyo in 2021.



VIDEO GAMES

Japan has been crucial in shaping the global video game industry, from the arcade boom of the 1970s to the dominance of home consoles and handheld gaming. While video games first emerged in the United States, Japan quickly became a powerhouse in the industry, revolutionizing gaming with technological innovations and iconic franchises.

In the 1980s, Japan revitalized the gaming market with the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES)—originally known as the Famicom in Japan. This system introduced high-quality games that could be played at home and helped establish the foundation for modern gaming, selling over 61 million units worldwide. It marked the beginning of Nintendo's rise to dominance and introduced beloved franchises like *Super Mario Bros.* and *The Legend of Zelda*.

VIDEO GAMES (CONTINUED)

The 1990s saw Japan's continued dominance with the release of the Super Nintendo (SNES)—which offered improved graphics on its original system—and the introduction of the Sony PlayStation in 1994. The PlayStation revolutionized gaming with CD-based games, instead of cartridges, allowing for better graphics, storytelling, and audio. It was the first home console to surpass 100 million units in sales. The PlayStation 2, which is often considered the best-selling console of all time, was released in 2000.

Other popular gaming systems include Nintendo 64 (N64), Game Boy, Nintendo Switch, Sega Dreamcast, Nintendo Wii, and the PlayStation 3, 4, and subsequent consoles. Franchises include *Pokémon*, *Final Fantasy*, *Resident Evil*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, and the aforementioned *Super Mario Bros.* and *Legend of Zelda*.

With companies like Nintendo, Sony, and Sega continuously pushing the boundaries of gaming—producing some of the highest-grossing games and consoles in history—Japan remains an industry leader and innovator, and one of the most influential gaming nations in the world.



THE QUINTESSENTIALS OF TRADITIONAL JAPAN

CHANOYU (JAPANESE TEA CEREMONY)

The Japanese tea ceremony, known as *chanoyu* or *sadō*, is a highly ritualistic and spiritual practice centered around the preparation and serving of tea—traditionally using matcha, a powdered green tea. While the proper tea ceremony is no longer a daily practice for most Japanese people, it remains deeply embedded in cultural traditions, often performed during special occasions, weddings, and cultural festivals.

Rooted in Zen Buddhist principles, every element of *chanoyu* reflects mindfulness and an appreciation for simplicity, from the layout of the tearoom, careful selection of cups and utensils, to the very specific gestures and etiquette expected. The main equipment includes the tea whisk (*chasen*), tea container for the powdered green tea (*natsume*), tea scoop (*chashaku*), tea bowl, sweets container or plate, and the kettle and brazier. Each movement in the ritual of preparing and serving tea is performed with precision, intention, and respect, emphasizing simplicity, grace, and mindfulness. The tea ceremony is seen as a way to cultivate *wabi-sabi*—an appreciation for the beauty in imperfection and transience.

FUROSHIKI (JAPANESE CLOTH WRAPPING)

An example of Japan's *mottainai* concept—meaning nothing should be wasted—*furoshiki* is the act of wrapping important items in Japanese cloth. A traditional craft, it began in the Nara period (710–794) as a way to repurpose old fabrics rather than discard them. Originally called *tsutsumi*, these cloths were used to wrap temple items. Over time, *furoshiki* evolved into a multi-purpose wrapping tool. During the Edo period (1603–1868), merchants widely used it to wrap goods and personal belongings. With the rise of department stores in the Meiji period (1868–1912), *furoshiki* functioned much like modern shopping bags.

A household staple until post-World War II, *furoshiki* declined as plastic bags and paper wrapping became common due to Western influence. Recently, however, it has regained popularity with sustainability efforts. Promoted by the Japanese government as an eco-friendly alternative, many stores now wrap purchases in contemporary *furoshiki*, and luxury brands have incorporated it into their designs and packaging.

GEISHA

Geisha—also referred to as *geiko* in Kyoto—are traditional female Japanese entertainers known for their refined skills in the performing arts, including dance, classical Japanese music, and conversation. Seen as guardians of Japanese cultural refinement, *geisha* train extensively to perfect their craft and provide sophisticated companionship. *Maiko* (students and apprentices) train for years before they can become a fully-fledged *geisha*. Despite popular misconceptions, *geisha* are not courtesans, as they focus on artistry and grace rather than romance.

Geisha's performances are celebrated for their authenticity and cultural significance, showcasing the graceful dances and music integral to Kyoto's—and Japan's—heritage. Performances are traditionally held in *ochaya* (teahouses) or at annual public events, like the *Miyako Odori* (Cherry Blossom Dance).

ONSEN

Onsen are natural hot springs found throughout Japan, known for their therapeutic properties and deep cultural significance. Due to Japan's geography and volcanic activity, the country is home to thousands of *onsen*, from outdoor thermal baths in the mountains to luxurious indoor facilities in *ryokan* (traditional Japanese inns).



ONSEN (CONTINUED)

Tourists from around the world flock to Japan to try this authentic bathing experience, though many are surprised by some of the rules and practices still enforced, known as *nyūyoku* (bathing etiquette). Rules include removing shoes and replacing them with slippers, washing thoroughly before entering the bath, keeping towels away from the *onsen* waters, tying long hair up (though its best practice to keep one's head above water), and maintaining silence for relaxation. Bathing etiquette also includes full nudity, with tattoos forbidden. There are some *onsen* that are a little more accommodating, offering options for modesty and/or allowing tattoos, but they are few and far between.

The use of *onsen* dates back over 1,000 years, with samurai and commoners alike using them for healing and relaxation. Historically, *onsen* were believed to have medicinal properties, able to heal skin conditions, muscle pain, fatigue, and migraines. The oldest *onsen* include *Dōgo Onsen*, *Hakone Onsen*, and *Kusatsu Onsen*.

SAMURAI

Considered political and military elites, samurai were a warrior class in feudal Japan. Once provincial warriors, samurai rose to power under the rule of *shoguns* and *daimyō* (feudal lords), serving as military nobility from the Heian period (794–1185) to the Meiji Restoration in 1868—the samurai class was abolished with the Meiji Restoration, many transitioning into new roles in society.

More than just warriors, samurai were often strategists, scholars, and poets—trained in the arts to reflect their social status. They were equally skilled with weapons as they were in calligraphy and literature. To distinguish rank, samurai would carry distinctive weapons, including the *katana*—the Japanese long sword.

Samurai were expected to uphold a strict code of ethics, called *Bushidō*, which means “the way of the warrior.” This strict code emphasized seven main values that all samurai must embody, including honour, discipline, and loyalty. Despite the abolishment of samurai, their code of ethics that defined the samurai spirit remains ingrained and integral to Japanese corporate culture today.

FESTIVALS AND SEASONAL TRADITIONS

AWA ODORI

Held during the *Obon* week—when spirits of the deceased are believed to visit the world, causing families to reunite and celebrate their loved ones—this annual dance festival held in Tokushima sees thousands of dancers dressed in traditional attire parade through the streets, accompanied by music and lively chants of “*yatto, yatto*”.

GION MATSURI

One of the largest and most famous festivals in Japan, *Gion Matsuri* is a large parade held in Kyoto, featuring massive, beautifully decorated floats, some over 20-metres tall. This annual festival dates back to the ninth century AD, reflecting the deep historical significance of the city.

JIDAI MATSURI

This historical parade takes place in Kyoto, celebrating the more than 1,000 years where Kyoto served as Japan's capital. Starting at the Imperial Palace and ending at the Heian shrine, it is a spectacular parade held annually in October, with more than 2,000 people dressed up as historical figures.

OBON FESTIVAL

This week-long Buddhist event in August honours deceased ancestors, and involves traditional dances and the lighting of lanterns. People often return to their family homes, making this a time of both remembrance and celebration.

SAPPORO SNOW FESTIVAL

This wintertime festival features massive snow and ice sculptures illuminated at night in a beautiful and breathtaking display. Held in Sapporo, this February festival is a winter wonderland, perfect for artists and tourists alike.

TANABATA FESTIVAL

Tanabata celebrates the reunion of two celestial lovers separated by the Milky Way. During this summer festival, people write wishes on colourful strips of paper and hang them on bamboo branches.



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