

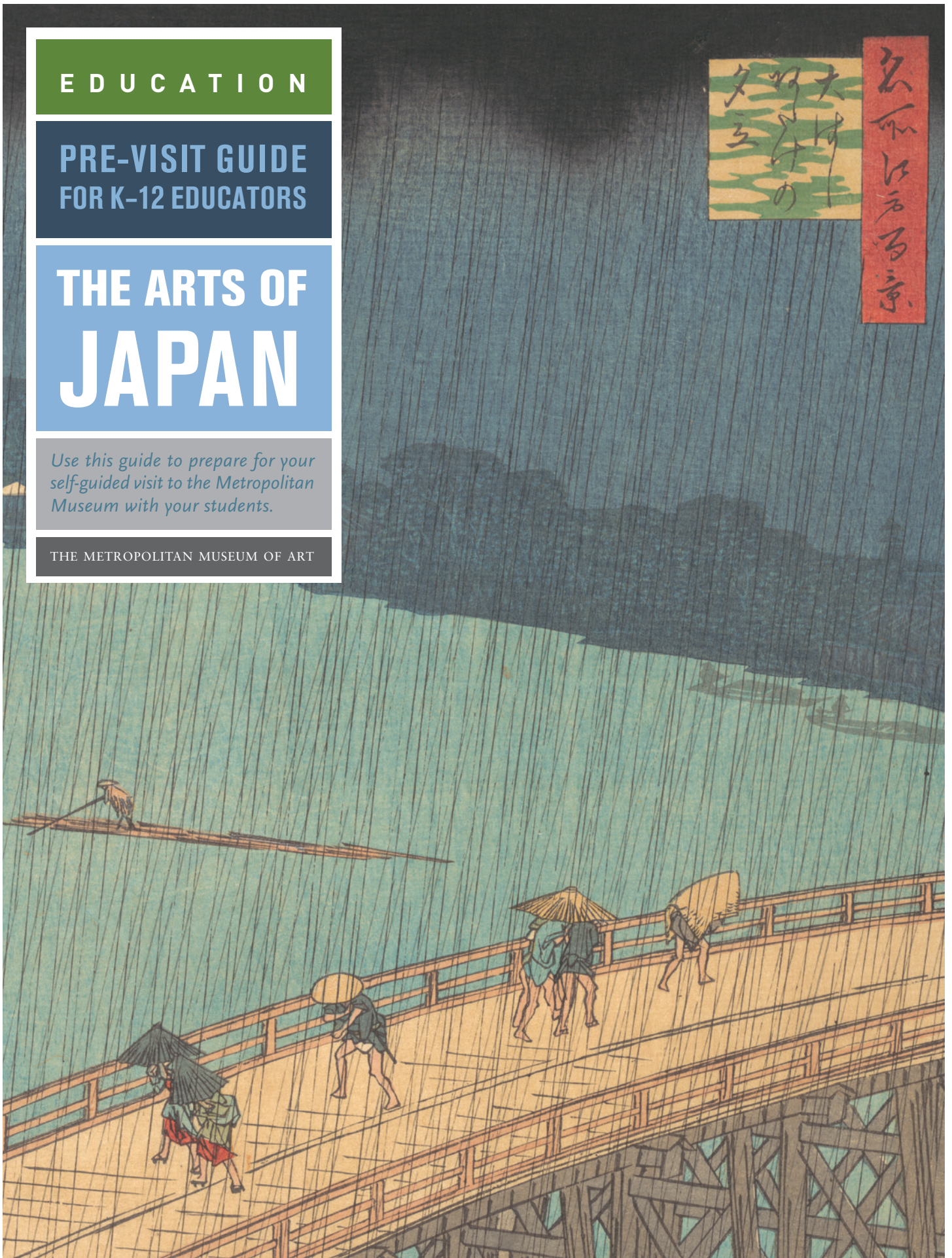
EDUCATION

PRE-VISIT GUIDE  
FOR K-12 EDUCATORS

# THE ARTS OF JAPAN

*Use this guide to prepare for your self-guided visit to the Metropolitan Museum with your students.*

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



*Introduce students to the range of styles, formats, and subjects that have characterized Japanese art over the centuries.*

*Use this guide’s collection and gallery overviews, tour-planning tips, recommendations for engaging students, suggested themes and works of art, and list of resources to make the most of your visit to the Museum.*

## The Collection

The Museum’s collection of Japanese art includes over 15,000 paintings, sculptures, ceramics, lacquerware, decorative arts, textiles, and woodblock prints created between the second millennium B.C. through the twenty-first century. While some works of art are extraordinarily delicate and subtle in form and execution, others are bold, powerful, and audacious.

Clay figurines and decorated cooking vessels dating from four to five thousand years ago represent two key types of artifacts from Japan’s earliest cultural phase, the long [Jomon](#) period (10,500–300 B.C.). Other early-period highlights are ornamental ritual objects of the [Yayoi](#) period (300 B.C.–300 A.D.) and haniwa tomb figures from the [Kofun](#) period (300–710 A.D.).

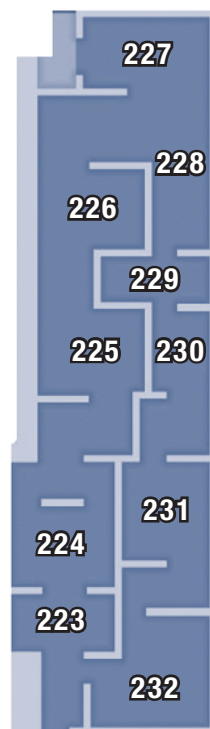
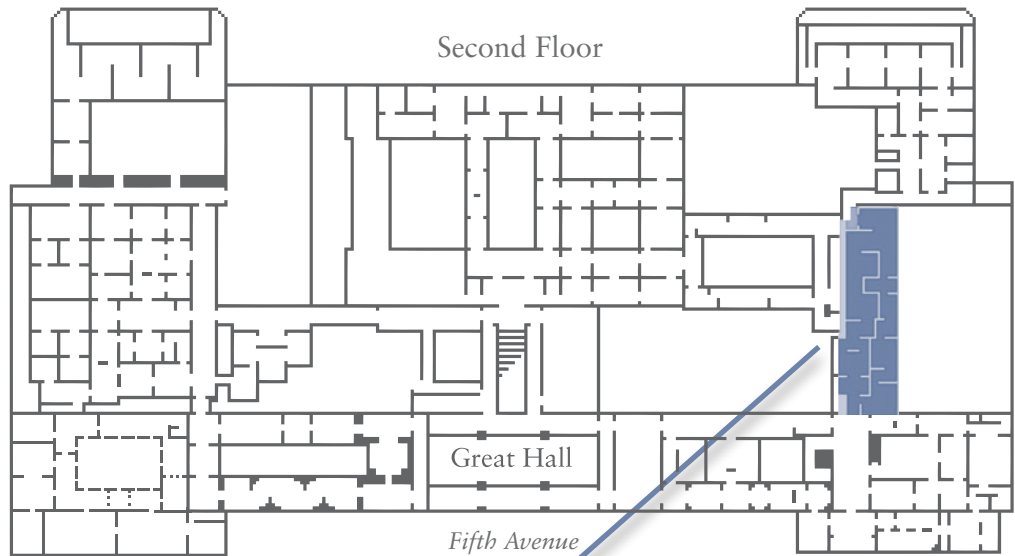
A wide variety of sculpture, painting, calligraphy, and objects, as well as architectural elements based on a Buddhist temple, convey the rich artistic traditions of Japan as it developed, beginning in the [Asuka and Nara periods](#) (538–794), in conjunction with exposure to the cultures of continental East Asia. Painted folding screens and hanging scrolls (many of which were created during the [Muromachi](#) [1392–1573], [Momoyama](#) [1573–1615], and [Edo](#) [1615–1868] periods), along with a re-creation of a traditional room for entertaining guests, demonstrate the decorative and structural functions of paintings in interiors. Works from many periods associated with burials, tea ceremonies, and tribute to rulers represent Japan’s robust earthenware, stoneware, and porcelain traditions, while garments created through a great variety of weaving and dyeing techniques reveal the beauty of Japanese textiles. Prints and albums from the Edo and Meiji (1868–1912) periods allow close inspection of the techniques characteristic of Japan’s sophisticated woodblock printing tradition and capture the growth of urban centers and rise of popular culture during that time.

The “Teaching Themes” section of this guide will help illuminate some of the common threads that unite the rich and varied traditions of Japanese art.

Cover: Utagawa Hiroshige (Japanese, 1797–1858), [Sudden Shower over Shin-Ōhashi Bridge and Atake](#) (Ōhashi Atake no yūdachi), from the series [One Hundred Famous Views of Edo](#) (Meisho Edo hyakkei) (detail), Edo period (1615–1868), 1857; Japan; polychrome woodblock print; ink and color on paper; 14 3/8 x 9 9/16 in. (36.5 x 24.3 cm); Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1918 (JP644)

## The Galleries

The Sackler Wing Galleries for the Arts of Japan (Galleries 223–232) comprise ten spaces that incorporate Japanese architectural features.



Use the following links to see what is on view in each gallery:

[Gallery 223](#)

[Gallery 228](#)

[Gallery 224](#)

[Gallery 229](#)

[Gallery 225](#)

[Gallery 230](#)

[Gallery 226](#)

[Gallery 231](#)

[Gallery 227](#)

[Gallery 232](#)

Because many works of Japanese art are made of materials that will fade or darken if exposed to light and impurities in the air over extended periods of time, paintings rotate twice and prints and textiles rotate four times annually. The displays in the following gallery spaces remain relatively consistent throughout the year and provide a useful starting point for further exploration.

- The first space, Gallery [223](#), often features prehistoric [earthenware ceramics](#) both richly decorated and simple in form as well as [haniwa](#), ceramic figures that were placed on top of burial mounds. It also generally includes early Buddhist works, as well as sculpture and painting of the Shinto tradition.
- Gallery [224](#) features an altar platform, pillars, and coffered ceiling modeled on a Buddhist temple in southwest Japan. The central image is a twelfth-century [Dainichi Buddha](#), of the Esoteric Buddhist tradition, flanked by two Guardian Kings ([1975.268.164](#) and [1975.268.165](#)) from the same period. The arrangement suggests the sculptural program of a functioning worship space. Also on view is an [Amida Buddha](#) of the Pure Land Buddhist tradition, and a sculpture of the Buddhist deity [Fudo Myō-ō](#), one of the Five Wisdom Kings of the Esoteric Buddhist tradition.
- Nearby in Gallery [226](#) is a copy of a late sixteenth-century reception room inspired by one at Onjoji, a Buddhist temple outside Kyoto. The room's architectural style originated in fourteenth-century Zen Buddhist temples where alcoves were set aside first as places of study for monks and later as display areas for art objects. The room's sliding doors are reversible, with the color schemes chosen to reflect the appropriate season.
- Gallery [229](#) features a site-specific work by the Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988). The sculpture, [Water Stone](#) (1986), is evocative of traditional Japanese gardens. This work captures the Japanese respect for nature, expresses the aesthetic principles of form and balance, and demonstrates the subtlety of artistic choice and practice that characterizes many aspects of Japanese art and culture.
- Gallery [231](#) is typically dedicated to the display of woodblock prints and books.
- In addition to the galleries on the second floor, a large collection of Japanese armor is on view in Gallery [377](#) on the first floor; you can also see a selection of Japanese musical instruments in Gallery [681](#) on the second floor.

The Museum also presents works of art from its own Japanese collection, together with those from other public and private collections, in thematic exhibitions. The online [Exhibitions](#) page can help you identify current and upcoming exhibition topics and dates.

We recommend that you either visit the Museum prior to your class visit, or use the online [Search the Collections](#) tool to verify that each work of art you want to see is on view.

## Planning a Tour

When visiting the Metropolitan Museum with your students, prepare your tour with the following in mind:

- Less is more. Select up to five works of art to discuss over the course of an hour in the galleries.
- Choose works that are located away from doorways and areas that are heavily traversed by visitors.
- Include works that are visible to all students in your group for purposes of discussion and viewing, or design the experience so students can engage in independent or small group work.
- Make sure that there are enough chaperones in your group to divide the students into smaller groups for gallery discussions.
- While touring the galleries, please give priority to lecturers wearing Museum IDs who are guiding groups. If they are discussing a work that you would like your students to see, please select another work to view and discuss in the interim.

## Recommendations for Engaging Students with Works of Art in the Galleries

- Allow your students to look closely at an object *before* discussing the work.
- Ask questions and facilitate open discussion about the fundamentals of the work of art—line, shape, color, texture, form, subject matter, and composition. Challenge your students to articulate and describe what is right in front of their eyes.
- Encourage students to consider an artist’s choices when creating a work of art. Consider how composition, size, style, function, and medium shape your experience of the work.
- Finally, discuss when the work of art was created and how historic events, patronage, literature, science, or technology may have shaped or influenced its production.

*The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s school tour program is made possible by the generosity of Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman.*

## Teaching Themes

Use the following thematic entry points to the collection as a framework to support a range of subject areas and student explorations. Relevant essays in the [Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](#) listed for each theme include thumbnail images of numerous works in the Museum's collection that align with the given topic. Each image links to further information about the work and confirmation as to whether it is on view.



Unidentified Artist, [Su Shi \(Dongpo\) in a Straw Hat and Sandals](#) (detail), Muromachi period (1392–1573), second half of the 15th century; Japan; hanging scroll; ink on paper; overall with mounting: 74 1/2 x 17 5/8 in. (189.2 x 44.8 cm); The Harry G. C. Packard Collection of Asian Art, Gift of Harry G. C. Packard, and Purchase, Fletcher, Rogers, Harris Brisbane Dick, and Louis V. Bell Funds, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, and The Annenberg Fund Inc. Gift, 1975 (1975.268.39)

## Cultural Encounters

Japanese artists have a long tradition of absorbing, transforming, and assimilating elements of foreign cultures to complement their own aesthetic preferences and needs. Many aspects of Japanese art demonstrate Japan's deep engagement with the culture and aesthetics of continental East Asia. Trade, conflict, and diplomacy with China and Korea have also brought both art and artists to Japan over the centuries. The introduction of Chinese calligraphic forms and the exchange of information about Buddhism played important roles in the history of artistic exchange between Japan and the Asian continent. In addition, for a brief period from the mid-sixteenth century to the first quarter of the seventeenth century, Japanese artists had access to European culture through Portuguese missions, and later through Dutch traders operating from an island near the port city of Nagasaki. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, when Japanese ports reopened to trade with the West, the art and culture of Western countries has remained an important source of inspiration for Japanese artists.

- [Chinese Calligraphy](#)
- [Art of the Edo Period \(1615–1868\)](#)
- [Buddhism and Buddhist Art](#)
- [Design, 1950–75](#)
- [Edo-Period Japanese Porcelain \(1615–1868\)](#)
- [Kofun Period \(ca. 3rd century–538\)](#)
- [Muromachi Period \(1392–1573\)](#)
- [Momoyama Period \(1573–1615\)](#)
- [Shoguns and Art](#)
- [Yayoi Culture \(ca. 4th century B.C.–3rd century A.D.\)](#)
- [Zen Buddhism](#)



Ogata Kōrin (Japanese, 1658–1716), [\*Iris\*](#)  
[\*at Yatsuhashi \(Eight Bridges\)\*](#) (detail), Edo  
period (1615–1868), after 1709; Japan; pair of  
six-panel folding screens; ink and color on gilt  
paper; overall (each screen): 70 1/2 in. x 12 ft.  
2 1/4 in. (179.1 x 371.5 cm); Purchase, Louisa  
Eldridge McBurney Gift, 1953 (53.7.1, .2)

## Materials and Formats

The Museum's rotations of Japanese art typically feature integrated presentations of painting, calligraphy, and sculpture along with a wide variety of applied arts, such as ceramics, textiles, and lacquers. Many of these multimedia ensembles celebrate the changing of seasons or mark a special occasion. Artists create work using a wide variety of materials, such as paper, silk, ink, natural pigments and dyes, and applied gold and silver. The range of formats includes albums, handscrolls, hanging scrolls, sliding doors, folding screens, and woodblock prints. These formats encapsulate the rich and diverse nature of Japanese painting, calligraphy practice, and design from the early medieval period through modern times.

- [Painting Formats in East Asian Art](#)
- [Woodblock Prints in the Ukiyo-e Style](#)
- [Interiors Imagined: Folding Screens, Garments, and Clothing Stands](#)
- [Lacquerware of East Asia](#)
- [The Japanese Tea Ceremony](#)
- [Netsuke: From Fashion Fobs to Coveted Collectibles](#)
- [Noh Costume](#)
- See also [Chinese Calligraphy](#)



Attributed to Kano Sansetsu (Japanese, 1589–1651), [The Old Plum](#) (detail), Edo period (1615–1868), ca. 1645; Japan; four sliding door panels (*fusuma*); ink, color, and gold on gilded paper; overall (all four panels): 68 3/4 x 191 1/8 in. (174.6 x 485.5 cm); The Harry G. C. Packard Collection of Asian Art, Gift of Harry G. C. Packard, and Purchase, Fletcher, Rogers, Harris Brisbane Dick, and Louis V. Bell Funds, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, and The Annenberg Fund Inc. Gift, 1975 (1975.268.48a–d)

## Art and the Environment

Nature is often a central subject for Japanese artists. The cycles of nature have historically played a leading role in the literary, performing, and visual arts of Japan. For example, birds and flowers of the twelve months and the four seasons are popular subjects, as are annual celebrations and events at famous scenic places. The association of specific animals or plants with auspicious characteristics informs Japanese representations of nature. Further, Japanese aesthetics often underscore an appreciation for the imperfection of natural materials or celebrate an accidental quality that occurred during the creation of a work of art. In some Japanese ceramic traditions, for example, the clay itself and the generally unpredictable forces of the firing process determine the character of the completed bowl or container.

- [Seasonal Imagery in Japanese Art](#)
- [The Japanese Tea Ceremony](#)
- [Shinto](#)
- [Yamato-e Painting](#)
- [Zen Buddhism](#)





*Dainichi Nyorai (Mahavairocana)*, Heian period (794–1185), 12th century; Japan; wood with gold leaf and lacquer decoration; figure with base: H. 63 3/4 in. (161.9 cm); W. 38 3/4 in. (98.4 cm); D. 39 1/8 in. (99.4 cm); Rogers Fund, 1926 (26.118)

## The Art of Belief

For hundreds of years, the religious traditions of Shinto and Buddhism have influenced aspects of art and culture in Japan. Shinto is an ancient belief system based on the idea that divinity is within nature itself. Through rituals, practices, and attitudes, Shinto expresses the Japanese relationship with the land and the lifecycles of the earth and its inhabitants. Buddhism is a religion and philosophy that encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs, and practices generally based on teachings attributed to Siddhartha Gautama, who is commonly known as the historical Buddha. The Buddha lived and taught in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent sometime between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C. Buddhism arrived in Japan via the Korean archipelago in the early sixth century A.D. Shinto and Buddhism have each had an effect on the making and reception of art by shaping aesthetic sensibilities, providing subject matter, and requiring the production of specific objects for ritual.

- [Asuka and Nara Periods \(538–794\)](#)
- [Buddhism and Buddhist Art](#)
- [Shinto](#)
- [Zen Buddhism](#)



Underpainting attributed to Tawaraya Sōtatsu (Japanese, died ca. 1640); calligrapher: Hon'ami Kōetsu (Japanese, 1558–1637), [Poem by Kamo no Chōmei with Underpainting of Cherry Blossoms](#) (detail), Momoyama period (1573–1615), dated 1606; Japan; poem card (*shikishi*) mounted as a hanging scroll; ink, gold, and silver on paper; overall with mounting: 53 x 14 3/4 in. (134.6 x 37.5 cm); The Harry G. C. Packard Collection of Asian Art, Gift of Harry G. C. Packard, and Purchase, Fletcher, Rogers, Harris Brisbane Dick, and Louis V. Bell Funds, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, and The Annenberg Fund Inc. Gift, 1975 (1975.268.59)

## Literature as Inspiration

For centuries, Japanese visual artists have sought inspiration from the great literary tradition of Japan, which encompasses court intrigues and romances, tales of saints and heroes, descriptions of the founding of shrines and temples, narratives of epic battles, and poetry compilations. Japanese artists have also drawn heavily upon the literary culture of continental East Asia and Chinese classical learning in their selection of both subject matter and artistic styles. Examples of literary influences include courtly tales of the [Heian](#) period (794–1185), Chinese themes typically associated with works produced in the context of Zen Buddhism, and stories related to Confucian learning.

- [Art of the Edo Period \(1615–1868\)](#)
- [Art of the Pleasure Quarters and the Ukiyo-e Style](#)
- [Chinese Calligraphy](#)
- [Heian Period \(794–1185\)](#)
- [Japanese Weddings in the Edo Period \(1615–1868\)](#)
- [Netsuke: From Fashion Fobs to Coveted Collectibles](#)
- [Rinpa Painting Style](#)
- [Seasonal Imagery in Japanese Art](#)
- [The Kano School of Painting](#)
- [Yamato-e Painting](#)

## Selected Resources

These and many more resources are available in [Nolen Library](#) in the Ruth and Harold D. Uris Center for Education.

Addiss, Steven. *How to Look at Japanese Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996.

Barnhart, Richard M. [The Metropolitan Museum of Art: Asia](#). New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987.

Deal, William. *Handbook to Life in Medieval and Early Modern Japan*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Ford, Barbara Brennan. [The Arts of Japan](#). The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin 45.1 (Summer 1987).

Guth, Christine. *Art of Edo Japan*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996.

Hickman, Money L., et al. *Japan's Golden Age: Momoyama*. New Haven: Yale University Press in Association with Sun and Star; Dallas Museum of Art, 1996.

Levine, Gregory, et. al., *Awakenings: Zen Figure Painting in Medieval Japan*. New York: Japan Society, 2007.

Mason, Penelope. *History of Japanese Art*. Upper Saddle River, N.Y.: Pearson Education, 2005.

Murase, Miyeko. *Bridge of Dreams: The Mary Griggs Burke Collection of Japanese Art*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000.

Murase, Miyeko. *Masterpieces of Japanese Screen Painting: The American Collections*. New York: George Braziller, 1990.

Shirane, Haruo. *Japan and the Culture of the Four Seasons: Nature, Literature, and the Arts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Shimizu, Yoshiaki. *Japan: The Shaping of Daimyo Culture 1185–1868*. Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1989.

Watt, James C. Y. and Barbara Brennan Ford. [East Asian Lacquer: The Florence and Herbert Irving Collection](#). New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991.

Wilson, Richard. *Inside Japanese Ceramics: A Primer of Materials, Techniques, and Traditions*. New York: Weatherhill, 1995.