The art of Japan p64
The art of Japan

Nowhere else can you find so many Japanese art forms in one place as in the ancient capital of Kyoto. Step inside to meet six people working to pass on its artistic heritage, in new ways and old

WORDS RORY GOULDING  PHOTOGRAPHS JONATHAN GREGSON
CALLIGRAPHY

The oldest surviving examples of Chinese characters are more than 3,000 years old, and were already ancient when Japan learnt the art of writing from its neighbour, which occurred between the 5th and 7th centuries AD. By then, the characters had evolved into a standard form—a crisp but elegant style which continues to set the benchmark today, much as the marble inscriptions of Ancient Rome still do for Western scripts. Yet writing is more than just communication of information: a brush picks up the subtleties of the writer’s movements, while the written characters reveal the writer’s own character.

OPPOSITE Hiroko Harada writes her name with a small brush alongside her calligraphy.

Below from left

Adding seals with red ink, brushes, ink and inkstone

UNLIGHT SHINES THROUGH the paper in the sliding doors, casting latticework shadows on the tatami mat floor in the room where Hiroko Harada arranges the tools of her art: paper, brush, ink and inkstone. These were known as the ‘four treasures’ by scholars, in the centuries when calligraphy was held to be the highest of the arts. Japan began to adapt the Chinese writing system for its own use around 1,500 years ago, and it is still something of a mixed blessing. There are 2,136 different kanji—complex Chinese characters with meanings like ‘dog’, ‘eternal’ and ‘to be intoxicated’—that students have to learn by the end of high school, and thousands more for the truly dedicated.

Yet kanji have a strange power, which comes out clearly when Hiroko stands over the paper and bends to write the characters as large as she can, in black brushstrokes that are sometimes firm and sometimes sinuous, as the smell of fresh ink fills the room after each new movement. ‘Before I begin,’ she says, ‘I have an image in my mind of the final shape—the balance between white and black. The white is more important, as it brings out the black.’ Across Japanese arts, the untouched part—called ‘ma’—is significant, whether it’s a canvas largely left blank or the silence between drumbeats. Emptiness has a value of its own, not least in a country where many people must live without the luxury of space.

Hiroko’s formal-looking kimono looks ill-suited at first to working with brush and ink, but posture is everything in calligraphy, and the long sleeves are thought to instil a feminine style of calligraphy. She has written a pair of kanji meaning ‘cloud dragon’—the latter in homage to the Chinese zodiac animal of 2012. I also ask if she would mind writing the character ‘michi’ at its simplest. It means a road or path, but more symbolically it stands for the way. In Chinese it is pronounced ‘dao’, and, altered in Japanese mouths, this sound became the ‘do’ part in judo and aikido, and indeed in shodo—which means calligraphy, or the ‘way of writing’. What others might describe as an art or a skill or even a hobby, is in Japan a way to follow.

DISCOVER MORE ABOUT
CALLIGRAPHY

• Hiroko Harada teaches at the Kempo Cultural Center, just to the east of Heian Shrine. The centre is named after the style of calligraphy founded by her father-in-law, Kempo Harada, who taught hundreds of thousands of students during his life. As well as callingigraphy courses, the centre also holds regular half-day events mixing calligraphy and flower arranging (kempo.co.jp).

• Local company Windows to Japan offers the opportunity of seeing a calligraphy master at work as part of its customised tours (windowsjapan.com).

• The Kyoto National Museum will hold an exhibition on the calligraphy of Japanese emperors from 13 Oct–25 Nov 2012 (kyokoku.go.jp). Temples around the city are also good places to see examples of the art on display.
WEAVING

People have known since ancient times how to create cloth on a loom by weaving together lengthwise warp and crosswise weft threads. Before the Industrial Revolution, warp threads made of softer fibres were likely to snap when stretched out, but silk is strong enough for long threads to be held taut, and Japan has long excelled in silk weaving. Kimonos are its best-known products, and even while most Japanese rarely wear them today, many women visiting Kyoto will put one on especially to look the part in this guardian city of traditional culture.

HE SOUND OF AN old-fashioned loom is dependable. First there is a low whoosh as the hanging heddles raise and lower alternating sets of warp threads to create a space for the shuttle to draw the weft through. And then comes a satisfying wooden thump as the warp threads fall back to parallel, the fabric now one line nearer completion. Repeat thousands of times and the result is a piece of silk brocade that almost glows.

Weaving in Kyoto has traditionally been concentrated in the district of Nishijin — a place dotted with types of old-fashioned neighbourhood shops that have disappeared from most Japanese streets, including one where locals can bring their own rice to be polished.

One of weaving’s finest practitioners, however, is found north of Nishijin. Amane Tatsunaga is the fourth generation in his family to produce silk brocade, in the Koho workshop named after his father. ‘I do weave myself, but my role is more like that of a movie director,’ he says. ‘More than 70 different processes go into making the finished fabric.’ He points out the shuttles they use, made of red oak, with the hole for the thread lined in local Kiyomizu-yaki ceramic. Koho is also unusual in continuing to use punch cards. These strings of cards with patterns of holes in them help to control the heddles which move the warp threads. ‘This was the beginning of IBM,’ Amane says, only half-joking. Weaving was just as important in Japan’s Industrial Revolution as it was in Britain’s, and Toyota and Suzuki both started out as loom manufacturers.

The punch cards, like the shuttles, are made by only one person in the whole country. The multitude of parts and processes that go into weaving helps to sustain dozens of artisans, almost like an ecosystem.

‘Time for the magic show,’ enthuses Amane before holding up a silk sash of intricate design in front of a succession of pieces of coloured cloth. When the cloth is purple, the purple threads in the sash seem to light up. When the cloth is green, the eye sees the green silk stand out. Blue, yellow, black and salmon-pink all follow in turn. Knowledge like that can only be acquired after generations.

DISCOVER MORE ABOUT WEAVING

• The Koho workshop displays some of its signature pieces, such as the wave design pictured on this page, and a wall hanging showing a small deer that appears and disappears as you walk past. Visitors can sometimes watch weavers at work, by appointment only (koho-nishiki.com).

• In the traditional silk-weaving district of Nishijin, the Orinai workshop has an early-20th-century feel, apart from the odd digital display (orinaiokai.com). Visitors can book sessions to learn the basics of weaving, making multi-coloured table settings. Five minutes’ walk away, Shoukaku is a beautiful old house showing virtuoso works in silk (shoukaku.jp).

• Windows to Japan can arrange visits to Kyoto’s quieter silk-weaving workshops as part of its Behind the Veil tours (windowsjapan.com).

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MANGA

In the world of comics, three great cultures exist. American comics have been dominated by superheroes ever since the man in blue and red spandex first hoisted a car above his head in 1938. The Franco-Belgian tradition brought us the likes of Tintin and Asterix. Yet Japan's comics culture is stronger on its home turf than any other country's — manga, together with its screen sibling anime, is worth as much as 3 trillion yen (£29 billion) a year to the Japanese economy. Manga strips are read from right to left, but that isn't the only reason for their distinctive look.

F JAPAN HAS ITS OWN
Metropolis or Gotham City, the neon tangle of Tokyo's Shinjuku district would seem a likelier candidate than Kyoto, with its modest skyline and quiet suburbs dotted with temples. Kyoto lost its status as the country's centre of real power in 1603, and when the largely symbolic figure of the emperor moved to the new capital in 1869, Kyoto was left with the feeling that it no longer had a role to play in modern Japan.

The Kyoto International Manga Museum is one of the city's efforts to prove the contrary. The museum's deputy director Toshio Kosaka hopes Kyoto can encourage its young manga artists to stay after their studies. 'Many artists move to Tokyo when they become successful,' he says. 'But we think maybe they could be inspired more by Kyoto.'

Eiyu Kojima has certainly found his spark in the city. He has just completed a series of tall folding screens drawn in manga style, based on a famous work by the 17th-century artist Tawaraya Sotatsu showing the dramatic encounter of the wind god and the thunder god. 'He only drew their meeting, and not the story behind it,' says Eiyu. 'So I wanted to draw the story right up to the moment they met.'

He is a regular at the museum's weekend open manga studio, and he demonstrates some of the stylistic differences that give manga its impact. In one panel, for example, you see only the thunder god's teeth. 'Hiding part of the scene gives a stronger impression,' Eiyu says. 'The space which hasn't been drawn is what the reader imagines.'

This is textbook manga, but it is also straight out of the playlist of Japan's great woodblock printers.

Manga artists on the whole shun wordy speech bubbles and captions in every panel, believing it is tiring for the eye to have to switch constantly from pictures to small text. The strip moves fluidly from panel to panel, mixing different viewpoints, with a few manga 'special effects' thrown in, such as visible sighs and bursts of light to show sudden realisation. Manga's already cinematic style makes for an easy jump to on-screen animation.

And as Eiyu Kojima shows, it is one new art form in which Japan's artistic heritage can live on.

DISCOVER MORE ABOUT MANGA
- The Kyoto International Manga Museum is housed in a former primary school near the busy downtown crossroads of Karasumadori and Oike-dori. Six years after the museum opened, local people still use its playing field for baseball and come here to vote in elections. In addition to its exhibitions and collection of around 50,000 manga titles, the museum runs a studio on weekends and holidays where visitors can watch artists at work (kyotomanga.jp).
- Manga tends to be divided by age group and gender — shonen and shoujo manga for boys and girls respectively, and seinen and joshi manga for men and women. Fantasy and sci-fi are always popular subjects, but manga is very broad; one series, Kamio no Shonkou — which is beginning to appear in English translation as Drops of God — is devoted to wine tasting.
PORPHYRY

It takes a special artistry to
have perfection at your
fingertips and yet consciously
turn back from it. Even as
Japanese kilns produced the
finest export porcelain in the
17th and 18th centuries, the
country’s master potters were
creating rough-textured, oddly
shaped bowls in humble colours
—and being praised for it too.
This pendulum swinging between
rough and smooth, between
gorgeous decoration and shy
understatement is one that has
played out for centuries, not
just in pottery but across the
breath of Japanese aesthetics.

OR LOVERS OF
functional beauty, of rough textures
and things unfinished—for many
Japanese in fact—Jun Kawajiri’s
workshop is deeply satisfying. It
isn’t just the eclectic mix of glazed
and unglazed pottery crowding
every shelf that appeals, but the
corrugated iron walls and roofs,
and the wires snaking across the dusty
floor to odd bits of machinery.

Jun is the 14th generation in a
family of potters, a lineage that is
not unfamiliar in the world of
Japanese arts. ‘I strive to do new
things,’ he says. ‘But in the colours
and glazes that I use, I am informed
by the tradition of my family.’ He is
equally at home creating smooth-
finished vessels as he is making
deliberately imperfect ones. For the
first approach, he shapes a wetted
cone of clay on a fast-spinning
wheel, gradually turning a small
dimple in the top into a bowl shape,
which he smooths with a deer-skin
cloth and releases from its base with
one quick draw of a taut wire. For
his second work, however, he builds
a bowl by hand from the base up
with rings of clay, smoothed only
a little with a wooden spatula.

In pottery, there is a delicate line
between the unevenness of a beginner
and the evenness of a master.
‘When people try to make a pot
unbalanced, it looks too unbalanced,’
Jun says. ‘It has to be a natural
process. If you do it a thousand times
rather than ten, you understand the
way the clay wants to react.’

He is particularly interested in the
role that Zen Buddhism played in
developing this style of artful
imperfection, since its teachings
came to Japan from China in the
12th century. ‘You can see elaborate
objects made for kings the world
over,’ he says. ‘But Zen came in and
shook things up, and allowed for an
opposite end to balance this. It was
a new kind of beauty.’

From the 16th century on, this idea
found its greatest expression in the
design of bowls used in the ritual
of the tea ceremony, which rejected
grandness in favour of calming
simplicity. In a room decorated
with little more than a single
arrangement of flowers and a
seasonal piece of calligraphy, guests
sit on the floor, sipping thick green
teas from bowls of rustic appearance,
and forget the world for a while.

DISCOVER MORE ABOUT POTTERY

- Jun Kawajiri’s kiln is located in Kyoto’s
  hilly eastern fringes (teitan.jp). Most of
  the city’s kilns were traditionally
  concentrated here, near the temple of
  Kiyomizu-dera, which is famous for
  being partly built out on stilts from
  the hillside. Kyoto’s pottery
  style is named Kiyomizu-yaki after
  the neighbourhood temple.
- Plus Alpha Japan can arrange
  programmes for groups in the art of
  traditional ceramics (plus-alpha.jp).
- The Raku family has been making
  some of the most prized bowls used in
  the tea ceremony since the 16th century.
  The Raku Museum is a few blocks west of
  the old
  Imperial Palace (raku-yaki.or.jp).
- Shops selling pottery are common in
  the streets below Kiyomizu-dera, and the
  section of Teramachi-dori between
  Marunouchi-dori and Oike-dori.
WOODBLOCK

In the Japan of 200 years ago, the woodblock print brought art to the masses. A striking design would be copied in the thousands, and people could buy prints, it is said, for the same price as a bowl of noodles. Famous landmarks such as Mount Fuji and the likenesses of actors and courtesans were the best-selling designs. Later in the 19th century, these prints even influenced Western artists such as Toulouse-Lautrec.

ONE OF THE JOYS of Kyoto is the number of cottage industries dotted throughout the city. The woodblock printing workshop of Takezasa-do is one such place. Down a dog-leg alleyway off a nondescript stretch of busy Shijo Avenue, and up one of the narrowest flights of stairs I have ever climbed, I meet the fourth and fifth generations of the Takezasa printing family.

The division of labour runs thus: the younger Takenaka, Kenji, chisels the cherry-wood blocks to old designs and new ones of his own invention, while his father Seihachi runs off the prints by hand, one by one. Kyoto’s woodblock workers have produced prints in the thousands in low-ceilinged rooms like this one for centuries.

The printing is done in stages: black outlines first, then pink for some cherry blossoms, and blue for the Hozu River running past. Each has to be aligned exactly on the block — one millimetre out and the effect would be spoiled.

The scene is the forested foothills of Arashiyama in the northwest of Kyoto — a tourist magnet even in the 1830s, when the prolific woodblock artist Hiroshige drew the master design for the first edition of this print. Most of the woodblock prints that are popular today were not considered high art in their time. Each colour impression adds a little more to the cost of a finished print, so the cheaper designs kept the number of colours low and the style as bold as possible. In Japan these prints were for ordinary people, but in the West it was the connoisseurs who bought them, says Kenji.

The original woodblocks have long since worn out and been destroyed. Generations of carvers and printers have always been able to make faithful copies, however, and like many popular designs, Hiroshige’s cherry trees are still in print nearly two centuries on.

FROM ABOVE Seihachi Takenaka peels off a print to a design by Hiroshige. The peel by his right knee is used to press the paper down. A block for pink impressions sits behind him; Kenji Takenaka chisels a fresh woodblock.

DISCOVER MORE ABOUT WOODBLOCK PRINTING
- The alleyway leading to Takezasa-do is a left turn off Shijo Avenue, west from the crossing with Shinnan-chō-dori and before the crossing with Nishinomote-dōri. Take a look at the Takezasa website for a map and examples of prints sold at the workshop (takezasa.co.jp).
- The Kyoto Handicraft Center stocks a huge range of woodblock prints in different style and runs classes where visitors can try making their own prints from two designs (kyotohandicraftcenter.com).
IKEBANA

The name ‘ikebana’ means living flowers, and yet Japan’s flora only merits this title once it has been given the snap and arranged artfully indoors. Japan takes ephemeral beauty to its heart, and there can be no better example of this than an artwork that lasts just a few days. Ikebana can often appear stylised, with its deliberate asymmetry, but it asks its followers to appreciate the natural qualities of a plant.

Yumi Ikushima gently corrects me when I call her ‘sensei’ (‘teacher’). She is still learning the art of Ikebana from a Buddhist monk, no less. ‘My teacher always tells me: “Do it half right, half wrong.” He means half of the arrangement should follow nature, and half is what you create yourself.’

Ayumi first demonstrates a more formal style of flower arrangement, called moribana, and begins by choosing the tai—the main diagonal line. One of the fundamentals of Ikebana is taking away unnecessary elements, and so a large sprig of witch hazel is reduced to the ideal branch. Two smaller sprigs are added to create an asymmetrical triangle, along with some feathery pinks, a couple of closed irises and a single peony just beginning to open. In proportional terms, Ikebana is often more ‘leaf and branch arrangement’ than ‘flower arrangement’.

The second style, keshiki, is more naturalistic. In it, Ayumi seeks to evoke the feeling of a landscape, in this case a marsh with irises. Like all Ikebana, it is only meant to be seen from one side, in contrast to Western-style 360-degree arrangements. The thought that goes into it is a marvel: some irises are just coming into bloom and others are fading, and by running her fingers repeatedly over one of the long leaves, Ayumi makes it bend slightly to create a sense of gentle breeze. For her, making an arrangement is always an immersive experience. ‘Now I feel like I’m in the mud,’ she declares happily.

The arts of Japan cross paths in both predictable and unexpected places, from the tea ceremony to Kaho’s ceramic-lined shuttles. Yet all ways have this in common: they begin and end in the mind.

Rory Goulding is sub-editor of Lonely Planet Traveller. He studied Japanese at university but is yet to master Ikebana.

FROM ABOVE
Ayumi Ikushima adds Ipomoea purpurea, a type of morning glory, to an arrangement of irises designed to evoke a marshy pond. Dianthus superbus is a variety of pink known in Japan as ‘nadeshiko’.

DISCOVER MORE ABOUT IKBANA
- Ayumi Ikushima teaches Ikebana to guests staying at restored townhouses, known as machiya, rented through Windows to Japan (kystomachihaistay.com). The company also organises garden tours in Kyoto, which can include an Ikebana demonstration (windowstojapan.com).
- Ikebana is divided into a number of different schools. Hanko is the oldest, dating back more than 900 years (hanko.jp), while Ayumi works in the Saga Goryu style (tagagoryu.jp), with information in English at ikebanahq.org. ©

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MAKE IT HAPPEN

Kyoto

The art of Japan

From its thousand-odd temples to its refined traditional cuisine, Kyoto has a special place among Japan's cities. Find out how to see a side to this ancient capital that is often kept hidden.

ESSENTIALS

+ Getting there

Partners Air France and KLM fly to Kansai International airport from the UK via Paris and Amsterdam (from £540; airfrance.com). Other airlines with non-direct flights include Lufthansa and Emirates. From the airport, the JR Haruka Express train takes 1½ hours to reach Kyoto's main station (returns £59; westjr.co.jp).

T Getting around

Public transport consists of local buses, two subway lines and suburban trains. You can find information in English at city.kyoto.jp together with a bus map and details of travel passes. Most site journeys in town will cost you ¥200–260.

Further reading

Try Lonely Planet’s Kyoto guide (£14.99), and find out more at jnto.go.jp and kyoto.travel.

Climate

-10 0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100 110 120 130 140 150 160 170 180 190 200 210 220 230 240

Temperature

Rainfall

WAYS TO DO IT

See

Heian Jingu is a Shinto shrine and a scale replica of Kyoto’s 9th-century Imperial Palace (admission free to main buildings; heianjingu.or.jp).

Venerable Myoshinji (above) is less visited than many of Kyoto’s Zen temples. Within the huge complex, Taiko-in is a sub-temple with a beautiful pond garden (admission ¥44; taiko-in.com).

Sleep

The Capsule Ryokan Kyoto brings a touch of the ryokan (traditional inn) to space-saving modern surroundings (from ¥650 ext breakfast; capsule-ryokan-kyoto.com).

Friendly Ryokan Shimizu has a loyal non-Japanese following. Guests sleep in the usual ryokan manner, on futons laid out on the tatami-mat floors (from ¥1000; kyoto-shimizu.net).

Eat

For quality ramen noodles, try the Kyoto branches of Japanese chains Santouka (above), or Ippudo, which also does great fried dumplings (noodles from ¥550; santouka.co.jp; ippudo.com).

Homely Daruman serves obanzai yori – a typically Kyoto-style buffet of vegetable and fish dishes, as well as buckwheat soba noodles (buffet: ¥125; daruman.com).

Shop

A short walk from the Shijo-Karasuma crossing, Morita Washi sells a fabulous variety of traditional paper and a selection of greeting cards (paper and cards from 80p; mori-ta.co.jp).

The covered street of Nishiki Market is a walk-through guide to Kyoto cuisine. Souvenir and snack shops are dotted along its length (box of sweet dumplings from ¥68; nishiki.or.jp).

Budget

Mid-range

Luxury

Take in mountain scenery on a boat ride down the Hozu-gawa river, from the town of Kamikochi to Arashiyama in Kyoto’s leafy outskirts (flat-bottom boat rides from ¥132; hozugawakudari.jp).

The Hyatt Regency Kyoto (above) works elements of traditional craftsmanship into an attractive contemporary design (from £200; kyoto.regency.hyatt.com).

Tempura is the speciality at Yoshikawa. Enjoy a posh dinner in a traditional private room, or save by eating at the counter (multi-course kaiseki dinners from ¥950; kyoto-yoshikawa.co.jp).

Since 1960, Artisugu has made some of the finest kitchen knives in the world, and other kitchenware too (knives from £40; east end of Nishiki Market).
THE KNOW-HOW

Kyoto made easy

Kyototettes have a reputation even among other Japanese for being reserved. In some smaller or more traditional establishments, staff might be nervous to serve customers who don’t speak Japanese. That said, you will also find people who go out of their way to help, even if they don’t speak much English.

High-end hotels, such as the Hyatt Regency, are particularly well geared to helping their guests around the language barrier, and most hotel staff in Kyoto are happy to make restaurant reservations.

Specialist tour companies such as Windows to Japan and Plus Alpha Japan are often your best option to see the city’s private side, and can tailor itineraries to themes including geisha, tea ceremony and Noh drama. Prices start at around £200 per group for half-days (windowsjapan.com, plus-alpha.jp).

3 steps to find your way

1. Kyoto’s streets run on a loose grid plan in the city centre, so it’s handy to know your compass points and carry a map to count off the streets if you want to explore Kyoto on foot.

2. English signage is good on public transport and at big road intersections, but rare in backstreets. You may find it helpful to look up your destination on Google Maps beforehand: most of Kyoto’s streets have Street View imagery, so you can visualise your route beforehand.

3. Ask someone at your hotel to write out the address of your destination in Japanese. Taxi drivers can use this for their satnav, and it’s also useful if you get lost on foot and need to ask for directions from shopkeepers or police at a koban (police box). Don’t be shy to ask for help—even locals have to do it on a regular basis!