

Discover...

JAPANESE COLLECTIONS

Introduction

Many Westerners have an idea of Japan based on the images of prints, ceramics and armour they see in art museums. Visit the Pitt Rivers Museum and you are presented with a much broader picture. It is not an art museum in the conventional sense but a museum of the ordinary and the everyday.

Japan has always been well represented in the collections. When General Pitt-Rivers donated his collection of 18,000 artefacts to the University of Oxford in 1884, only 300 were from Japan. However, the Japanese part of the collection contained both ordinary and extraordinary objects. It included not only many examples of everyday Japanese artefacts--such as a bamboo hair-pin, a grass snow-cloak and a lacquered humming top--but also samurai armour and a remarkable set of Noh masks, said to be the finest in Europe.

The collections have continued to grow since the Museum's foundation and it now cares for more than a quarter of a million items. The Japanese parts of the collection have also increased in breadth and size. The most significant recent addition came in 1996 when John Lowe donated more than 600 artefacts, including both unique works of high aesthetic value and everyday objects he had bought to furnish his homes in Japan.

In his words, he was 'tipping into the Museum's lap the contents of four Japanese households'. Many of the collections are particularly rich. For example, the photographic collections include a set of portrait photographs of the Japanese ambassador and his delegation taken in Paris in the early 1860's (below; 1951.11.63.108), whilst amongst the music collection is a koto once played by the celebrated Japanese actress Sadayakko.



Everyday Objects

It has become fashionable in recent years for museums to collect ephemera. What is remarkable is that the Pitt Rivers Museum has been doing it for more than a century. The fan shown below right (1989.44.2), appears at first glance to be a modern item, but the writing shows that it was in fact made before March 1909.



Amongst the clothing collections is a rain-cape made of palm-fibre now displayed with a hat of grass leaf and stalks, collected in 1825. The cards depicting crests from noble families used in a game similar to dominoes (shown below; 1917.53.499) are part of an exhibit of toys and games in the Lower Gallery. In the same case you can see a miniature toy pillow, one of 58 Japanese model toys given by J. Edge Partington in 1892, providing



an intriguing insight into the games played by children in Japan in the 19th century.

One of the most significant collectors of Japanese material on behalf of the Museum was Basil Hall Chamberlain, Professor of Japanese and Philology in the Imperial University of Tokyo. From 1888 to 1908, Chamberlain acquired for the Museum everyday artefacts, musical instruments, kites and several hundred religious items, including a 'charm for the security of cattle' and two large funeral urns from the Ryukyu (Okinawa) Islands: the large and elaborately decorated one intended for the bones of the rich contrasting with the simple unglazed urn for the bones of the poor. Chamberlain also commissioned Revd J. Rousseau to make a collection from the Ainu, a minority people living on the Japanese island of Hokkaido, amongst whom he was working as a missionary. Within this extraordinary collection is a decorated bear-skull memorial pole. The charm, urns and memorial pole are displayed in the Court of the Museum.

Noh Masks

Amongst the founding collection given by General Pitt Rivers were 52 masks for Noh theatrical performance, now displayed near the Museum shop. They were all made in the northeast of Japan during the Edo Period, with dates ranging from the early 17th to the early 19th century. It is believed that they comprise a set used by a Noh theatre in the mid-19th century. There are very few such sets in existence.

The collection includes cloth pouches used for storing the masks and made of textile fragments from fine old costumes.

The masks are wooden and variously decorated with gilding, gesso, hair and paint. They include portrayals of demons (see right; 1884.114.56), heroes, dragons and emperors in a style which combines realism and a 'vacant' expression. Each mask has been signed on the back by the maker, so it has been possible to identify several by the renowned mask-maker Deme Zekan, who worked in the early 17th century. The ancient art of Noh performance combines theatre with music. The masks would have been worn by men in elaborate costumes.



Netsuke

Traditional Japanese clothing has no pockets. Instead, personal belongings such as tobacco-pouches were suspended from cords attached to a sash. Netsuke are small intricately carved toggles fixed to the other end of the cord to stop it slipping through. Most of the Museum's netsuke are from the collection of Herman Gunther, which came to the Museum in 1944. The variety of materials and themes for these intricate carvings is astonishing. Among the 800 netsuke displayed in the Lower Gallery are ceramic seashells, lacquered figures, ivory animals (shown left; 1980.34.705) and oval figures of Daruma, the founder of the Zen Buddhist sect, who is said to have meditated for so long that his legs withered away.



Arms and Armour

The samurai armour shown above is part of the collection of Japanese arms and armour displayed in the Upper Gallery of the Museum. It dates from around 1750 and is remarkably complete, including gloves, shoes, undergarments, a banner and even the box used to transport the armour on a servant's back. In the same display are miniature sets of Samurai armour, probably made by armourer's apprentices. (Click on the samurai image for an enlarged view.)

The arts of the sword were highly developed in Japan. The blade of the sword and its 'furniture', that is the hilt, scabbard and other fittings, were made by different specialist artists. The blade was the most valued part and the whole sword was designed to come apart. This enabled the owner to change the 'furniture' as necessary for different occasions, while retaining a prized blade. Samurai swords were worn in pairs, one being longer than the other. A fine 17th century Daisho pair with scabbards of black lacquer decorated with crayfish in silver-grey lacquer are on display.

Some objects considered more appropriate to an ethnographic museum were transferred from the Ashmolean Museum to the Pitt Rivers in 1886. One such is a two-and-a-half metre long bow decorated with lacquer and cane strips. Next to it in the bow display is a quiver of basketwork, paper and leather with six bamboo arrows, the arrows sitting flight downwards in the Japanese manner. On the opposite side of the gallery is a lacquered trident-shaped sheath, picked up on the battlefield of Utsunomiya on the morning after the battle of 1868.



More Information

If you would like to know more about Japanese arms and armour see:
<http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/arms.html>

If you would like to know more about weapons in general see the Arms and Armour virtual collection: <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/weapons/>

Further Reading

R. Faulkner, *Japanese Studio Crafts*, London: Victoria and Albert Museum (1991).

O. R. Impey, *Japanese Netsuke in Oxford*, Oxford: Ashmolean Museum (1987).

J. Lowe, *Glimpses of Kyoto Life*, Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum (1996).

W. J. Rathbun (ed.), *Beyond the Tanabata Bridge: Traditional Japanese Textiles*, London: Thames and Hudson (1993).

L. Smith et al., *Japanese Art: Masterpieces in the British Museum*, London: British Museum Publications (1990).

J. Stanley-Baker, *Japanese Art*, London: Thames and Hudson (1995).

W. Watson (ed.), *The Great Japan Exhibition: Art of the Edo Period 1600-1868*, London: Royal Academy of Arts (1981).

The objects featured in this Introductory guide can be found at the following locations:

Court (ground floor)

Case no. C4A Masks

Lower Gallery (first floor)

Case no. L89A – »Playing Cards (back right right corner)

Case no. L12A – Fans

Case no. L93B –Netsuke (Fifth shelf from the bottom)

Upper Gallery (2nd floor)

Case no. U6A – Samurai Armour

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