

# JAPAN

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

*Hans Sautter*

*"More thorough nonsense must be spoken and written about Japan than any other comparably developed nation."*

Alan Booth

This is not a travel book. One purpose of this book is to shed light beyond the surface and expose the chasm between pretense and authenticity. The other, to illustrate how present-day Japan is fused to the hereditary code of Japan's ancient past.

The gap between perception, aspiration, and reality in Japan is omnipresent. What one sees is not always what is. Which is true anywhere, but much more so in Japan, where public and official appearance are inscrutable.

Photographs were not selected from an archive collected over the years, but subjects and locations were chosen deliberately, after in-depth research, and most photos conceived before shooting with a detailed concept in mind. Photos of every chapter are linked to each other, and the arrangement illustrates the interconnections of themes. Many photos are metaphors and not just images of specific sites. Locations are named when thematically relevant.

The first chapter, Metropolis, contains photos from the metropolitan areas of Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya, where about 70 million (of 127) Japanese live. The introductory essay is mainly about Tokyo, but Tokyo is representative of every large cities in Japan, which on the macro level are indistinguishable.

The Nature chapter includes the seasons and characteristics of Japanese geography, the sea, and the mountains which are mostly of volcanic origin. The chapter also illustrates the pervasive use of concrete to control the forces of nature.

As seen in the Costume chapter, to dress up for specific professions, activities, or events is a conspicuous characteristic: Japanese think they must look the part before they can act the part. Cosplay is liberation from rigorously enforced conformism. People can embody the characters of their phantasy, if only for a short time.

The Costume, Ritual, and Sacred chapters are closely related. Sacred rituals are performed in distinct costumes. But in a strictly socially engineered and therefore highly ritualized society like Japan, not every ritual has a spiritual context. Fire and water are elemental themes in Ritual and Sacred.

The Sacred chapter centers on myth, Shinto, and

Shugendo, the latter an ancient ritual practice by mountain ascetics drawn from pre-Buddhist mountain worship, local folk-religious practices, Shinto, Taoism, and Vajrayana Buddhism.

Aesthetics, the final chapter, references elements from all the preceding themes and mixes the serene with the profane and earthy simplicity with the garish, as commonly experienced in Japan.

Hans Sautter, April 2020

## FOREWORD

*Hans Sautter*

My first night in Tokyo ended in a love hotel – alone. I had assumed it was a hotel called Love. The room was exotic, a mixture between traditional Japanese elements, large mirrors, and garish decor. There were condoms and tissues on the night table, and the weirdest surprise, German porno movies with pixelated genitals on the hotel channel: a trace of home in a kinky room. I had arrived in "the city at the end of the world."

Japan was never my destination, but it became my destiny. Just graduated from the College of Photography in Munich, I landed with a one-way ticket on a December day in 1972. A life of turmoil incited my getaway to the other side of the planet. Japan was to be the first stop on a mainly overland journey to Australia, but I didn't know then that Tokyo would be much more distant than imagined. On my arrival in Haneda Airport, the first clue that Japan was out of this world appeared in the signs at Immigration separating "Aliens" from "Japanese."

The choice to stop in Japan was not for visiting temples or gardens, or for Zen meditation. A year before I had seen Shuji Terayama's film, *Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets*, an unhinged, provocative, wild, and rebellious exemplar of Japan's avant-garde. Terayama's intoxicating creative outburst plus films by Kurosawa and Teshigahara had triggered my interest in Japan.

Metropolitan Tokyo immediately clashed with the images of elegant wooden houses and smiling, kimono-clad ladies evoked by fantasies of Japan. I staggered into a dense, chaotic urban jungle, an endless sprawl of concrete and steel, seemingly held together by a tangled net of overhead wires. The cacophony around huge frenetic railway stations was eerily silenced when train doors closed and I was squeezed between stoical, taciturn Japanese in dark suits. There was no chatter, a voiceless quiet punctuated only by the click-clack of the rails and the moans of squashed people when the train swayed.

Tokyo seemed a restless, dispiriting place, an industrial city, much like the bleak worker's underworld in Fritz Lang's visionary 1927 film *Metropolis*. I wandered about in the urban maze of Tokyo, lost track of time and space, and the impulse to continue my journey faltered. Finally, I ran out of money. Carpentry work paid for my first home in Tokyo, a three-tatami mat room (180 x 270 cm). For provisions, I pawned my camera (and never got it back). Dire straits led me to begin training as a German language teacher at the Goethe-Institut in Tokyo. And I fell in love.

The allure of passion in an exotic land I knew nothing about cemented my fate. I stayed for almost three years.

In September 1975, I finally continued my journey to Australia, as originally planned. I arrived in Darwin in August 1976, after a year's odyssey via Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

Two years later, I found myself working at a high steel construction site for an iron ore processing plant in the remote outback of Western Australia. After eight months of walking on lofty steel beams, I contemplated my next move. I sent job applications to the Goethe-Instituts of East Asia. Yogyakarta was my top choice, but the Goethe-Institut in Kyoto offered a government contract. Within weeks, I was transported to a desk, back to Japan on a diplomatic visa, a tailored suit in my luggage. My container-room home in the rough environment of an 800-man desert camp transmogrified into life in a refined teahouse surrounded by a moss garden in a lush grove. A large pond with prized Japanese carp completed my Kyoto picture-book home. This was the "real" Japan I had seen in brochures and coffee-table books.

Despite being stuck for three years in Tokyo, I was ignorant about what is perceived as Japanese culture; had never experienced a tea ceremony; or heard about the enigmatic aesthetic of wabi-sabi. But I had learned to speak adequate Japanese and absorbed Japanese manners. My own home was so enchanting that it left me with no desire to join the crowds in Kyoto's tourist attractions. When I finally decided to return to photography, ten years after pawning my camera in Tokyo, my first subject was consequently not Kyoto's sights but chindon-ya. These outlandishly dressed groups of street performers advertise for local shops and are often perceived as social outcasts.

Finally I moved back to Tokyo and started a career as freelance photographer. I also found the perfect Tokyo home: less than an hour from the city center, in the heart of a rural valley, with rice fields, bamboo groves, plum and cherry trees, all surrounded by a jungle-like forest. This green sanctuary of isolated serenity within the raw and cluttered cityscape of a seemingly limitless megalopolis remains my base in Japan to this day.

Japan is a tribal society, fiercely territorial and protective of the group. This may have to do with rice cultivation in a mountainous country with limited

land for paddies. Rice is central to Japan's culture and customs, and growing it demands cooperation and coordinated irrigation. Dependence on others fosters a less individualistic and more collectivist mindset that emphasizes consensus. It may therefore take decades to be adopted into the collective fabric of a group, neighborhood, or village.

The break into my rural community came by way of funerals. I had photographed the seasonal life of the valley – rice growing, harvesting, and the local shrine festival. For ten years I was largely ignored, but one day a neighbor knocked on my door, asking if I had a photo of her recently deceased relative. Portrait photos are necessary for Japanese funerals. This happened again, and again. By contributing portraits for funerals, I finally was part of the community.

My first years as a freelance photographer in Tokyo were focused on offbeat projects: long-distance truck drivers, and the Takarazuka Revue. But it was pachinko, most of all, that would occupy me for ten years, with requests from magazines worldwide. It is gambling in a country where gambling is illegal. But pachinko was then Japan's premier industry, with more revenue than all Japanese automakers combined.

From the mind-numbing amusement of pachinko, I went on the lonesome road with long-distance truckers and spent many nights cruising through endless semi-industrial landscapes. "Lonesome Road: Trucker Life in Japan" was published as a photoessay in a Japanese magazine and nearly ended my fledgling freelance career. The head of a yakuza group called my publisher and demanded €50,000 for allegedly unauthorized use of his truck on the magazine's cover. A friend's intercession resolved the "misunderstanding." Instead of compensation, I was to supply large-format photo prints to decorate a yakuza office.

After the macho trucker milieu, I plunged into the all-female fantasy world of Takarazuka, Japan's most popular theatre company. The Takarazuka Revue lavishly produces gaudy musical extravaganzas where young women embody female and male roles who "sell dreams" to an all-woman audience.

Moving into corporate photography in the mid-'90s, I came face to face with Japan's leaders: CEOs and executives of Japan's flourishing auto, airline, banking, and securities industries, as well as academic thought leaders, researchers, and two future prime ministers.

Unlike the often-flamboyant postwar company founders and entrepreneurial mavericks like Soichiro Honda (Honda Motor), Konosuke Matsushita (Panasonic), Akio Morita and engineering genius Masaru Iruka (both of Sony) who defied the rules in a nation of conformists, later generations appeared more risk-averse, careful not to rock the boat, which led to less vitality and, ultimately, stagnation.

Although based for over 40 years in Japan, my feelings about home are shifting and elusive. My

sentiments are most eloquently described by Japan's celebrated 17th-century poet, Basho: "Moon and sun are travelers of eternity, and the years coming and going are wanderers, too. Drifting life away in a boat or growing old leading a horse by the bit, each day is a journey and the journey itself home."

Hans Sautter, September 2020

## AN INSIDER'S GAZE

*Peter Tasker*

I'm lucky. I've walked through this book many times before. I've strolled through the backstreets of Shibuya on the way to work, past pastel-hued love hotels with fake ivy running up the façade to balustrades that look like they are made of icing sugar.

I've seen the dawn come up in Golden Gai, the souk of tiny ramshackle bars that stands as a living monument to the heyday of Japan's counter-culture in the nineteen sixties and seventies.

My retina have been blasted by ten thousand fizzing, scrolling invitations to hedonistic excess in the neon wonderland of Kabuki-cho, the largest pleasure district in the country that invented pleasure districts.

I've watched a man clutching a briefcase ascend an escalator in a deserted station, as isolated as a figure in an Edward Hopper painting. I have been that man. I've stood in the Tokyo Stock Exchange and watched the flashing stock prices – red for gains, green for losses – signal the latest tidal flows in the enormous, ever-restless ocean of finance.

I've watched the tancho cranes strut and preen like tango dancers in the Kushiro marshland and inhaled the sulphurous fumes belching from Mount Aso's caldera. I've not only admired the vermilion maple leaves that symbolize autumn, but eaten them fried too.

I've handed over elaborately designed envelopes containing banknotes at weddings and funerals. I've sat in front of hundreds of smartly-suited young men and women being inducted into the life of a corporate employee. I've gazed at their bright eager faces and then at the pouched eyes and lined cheeks of the senior executives to either side of me who are their future selves.

In our flattened, networked world of incessant digital babble and information overload, there is a rarity premium for the polar opposite – high quality work born of craftsmanship, long experience and intimate knowledge. Hans Sautter has spent the best part of five decades in Japan. He is an insider looking around him, not an outsider looking in. He sees what is there and makes it fresh. Even those of us who have walked through these photographs before see the scenes as if for the first time.

*"The whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such place. There are no such people."*

So declared Oscar Wilde, the Irish playwright and wit, in his essay "The Decay of Lying." To Wilde, invention, artifice and lying were the essence of art

itself and to be celebrated, whereas grubby reality was to be deplored.

Writing in 1905, the year in which Japan defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War, he maintained "that the actual people who live in Japan are not unlike the general run of English people; that is to say, they are extremely commonplace, and have nothing curious or extraordinary about them." This is why he advised his readers not to "behave like a tourist and go to Tokio," but to stay at home and enjoy Japanese art instead.

Wilde's aestheticism was deliberately extreme, but hardly unique. Arthur Waley, the famed translator of *The Tale of Genji* from eleventh-century Japanese into modern English, never visited Japan. When asked why, he replied that it would spoil things for him. Many decades later a similar response came from a very different writer. In a 1984 interview, Eric Van Lustbader, author of *The Ninja* and several other best-selling thrillers set in Japan, admitted that he had never been anywhere near the country. "I don't want to go there," he stated. "I don't want to confront the crowds and pollution and industrialization. That's not the Japan I fell in love with in Japanese art."

Westerners who refused to visit the actual Japan in order to preserve an idealized mental image were at least honest in their assessment of what they required from Japan: which was to be a fiction. Those that did visit the country usually portrayed a zone of indecipherable Otherness, an alternative reality where superficial similarities merely accentuated radical inner difference.

Lafcadio Hearn, one of the earliest and most influential Japanologists, describes his arrival "in a world where land, life and sky are unlike all that one has known elsewhere" as like entering "the old dream of a world of elves." The incomprehensibility of written Japanese was a key factor. Hearn – like film critic and writer Donald Richie a century later – never learned to read or write Japanese. For him, the kanji characters that adorned the streets were a form of abstract art rather than a communication system conveying often quite ordinary messages.

Many different Japans have been conjured up by the needs of the Western psyche, from the quaint lotus land of Madame Butterfly to the weird, alienating neon playground of Sophia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*; from the sinister aggressor of the "yellow peril" journalism of the early twentieth century to the ruthless industrial competitor of the 1980s as depicted in the novel and film *Rising Sun*. Japanese citizens have been likened to ants by French Prime Minister Edith Cresson. To Albert Einstein, they were "pure souls, as nowhere else amongst people."

Britney Spears was equally straightforward: "I've never really wanted to go to Japan. Simply because I don't like eating fish. And I know that's very popular out there in Africa."

For most of its history, modern Japan has been an

object of fear, admiration, delight, lust, amusement, curiosity, flattery, condescension and ignorance. But always an object of the Western gaze, examining the scenery from the outside, with an implicit agenda of comparing and contrasting rather than seeing things in their own terms. There are good historical reasons why that should have been so and why that phase is now over.

The Meiji Restoration of 1868 marked the point when Japan officially kicked off its modernization program, which was the only way to preserve its independence from the marauding and territorially acquisitive Western powers. From then until relatively recently, Japan was the only large non-Western country to achieve Western standards of living and technology. From the Western perspective, it was superficially becoming more like “us”, while retaining a deeper “non-usness”, which delighted and disturbed. Hence the old travel-book cliché that Japan is a blend of the modern and the traditional. That could be said of any Western country too, but the specificity of a culture is largely invisible when experienced from the inside.

Japan was also remote geographically and protected by barriers of language and cost. Few Westerners had direct experience of everyday life in Japan and ability to operate smoothly in the Japanese language. The mystery and exoticism remained intact and was often actively promoted by Western media and experts. In the 1980s when corporate Japan seemed invincible, there was a whole genre of books that purported to analyze the wonders of Japanese management in cultural terms – for example, referencing the fighting strategy of legendary samurai Musashi Miyamoto. Journalists who covered Japan were incentivized, in career terms, to report items of bizarre trivia and keep returning to the old standby of the Second World War – essentially variations on Hearn’s “world of elves,” with added sex and brutality.

In the past few decades, these particular conditions that created the Western gaze on Japan have disintegrated. Many non-Western countries are modernizing rapidly, to the extent that the “us but not-us” population now overwhelms the population of the West in numbers. Nor is Japan any longer inaccessible to all but a tiny group of elite Westerners – diplomats, academics, journalists, and aesthetes – who could create their own Japans and control the presentation to their domestic publics. The internet has made information on Japan available to everybody. In the past twenty years, the number of visitor arrivals in Japan has risen from four million to thirty million, of which the overwhelming majority are from other Asian countries. Other Asians see other Japans.

Oscar Wilde got one thing wrong – and it is an important thing. The commonplace and the extraordinary do not have to be polar opposites. The extraordinary is present in humdrum, everyday life if you know where and how to look. Hans Sautter does. In this volume, he has organized his images into

six broad themes – Metropolis, Nature, Costume, Sacred, Ritual, and Aesthetic. Within the categories, you find propositions and equally valid counter-propositions. Within Metropolis there is the structured calm of the Kyu Shiba Rikyu garden and also the pandemonium of the Shinjuku nightlife. Within Nature, you see the twisted roots of a primeval forest in Yakushima and also a mountainside covered by an anti-landslide wall that looks like a huge concrete waffle. Within Aesthetic, you can find austere beautiful ceramic bowls, ten foot tall transformer robots, the chalky-white neck of a geisha, family crests that have been in use for the best part of a millennium and Hello Kitty, the mouthless feline icon that appears on all kinds of goods, from pencil cases to vibrators.

Costume is a way of telling stories about ourselves, which is a deep-seated human need; the fashion industry is based on it. Hans shows us Japanese people formatting their identity in ways that are light-hearted and deadly serious, as ephemeral as this year’s pop sensation and as long-lasting as Shinto myth. Rituals remind us that we are individuals but also social creatures linked to what came before us and what will come after. They are conducted in special places like temples and tea ceremony rooms, but are also part of the ordinary routines of life such as morning calisthenics and ceremonies at school sports days. The Sacred is there to balance the profane. We need them both.

The reality of Japan, like the reality of life everywhere on the planet, defies simplification, categorization and generalization. Almost everything you say about it is both wrong and right. To quote a current phrase, “it is what it is” – polymorphic and inexhaustibly dynamic. From this stream of events, Hans Sautter has captured moments and patterns, people and objects and natural phenomena in a mosaic of images that will dwell in your mind long after you have put the book down.

## **METROPOLIS**

*Stephen Mansfield*

In Maurice Rheims’s book, *La Vie étrange des objets*, a character, offering a collector a handful of sand mixed with crushed marble and porphyry, suggests, “Take this to your museum and say: ‘This is ancient Rome.’” The Japanese equivalent of this episode might be a handful of gray, post-war cement dust, its best effort at antiquity.

Like all cities, the human societies inhabiting Japanese metropolises are far greater than the sum of their historical pasts or the physical components and materials that constitute their archeological strata. In the pullulating, demographically engorged hives of cities like Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya, host to endless cycles of birth and death, the forces of renewal and replenishment are primary.

As they engage in ongoing experiments in architecture, town planning and lifestyle, Japanese cities

create a circulation of ideas, empirical metaphors and paradoxes based on the effects of passing time. The sense of regret, even bereavement, attached to the loss of heritage buildings in Europe, is less acute in the Japanese urban milieu, which is driven by disintegration, interruption, ruptures, and creative metamorphosis represented as progress. Every new city structure, in this view of metro evolution, is an opportunity to redefine the urban scape, to improve on older archetypical forms. The visitor savors the strangeness of these cities in fleeting, incomplete moments, akin to allowing the mind to freely navigate images contrived by an over-ingestion of psychotropic drugs. And like a powerful chemical infiltration, your own perception will determine whether you experience the city as a wonderland or nightmare.

The rectilinear boulevards of 19th-century Paris, designed in part to supersede a cobweb of medieval alleys easily barricaded by the Communards, and the formal grid of urban planner Ildefons Cerdà i Sunyer's Barcelona are models of important urban centers that have adapted well to the imperatives of the modern age. It would be a simplification to say that Japanese cities, once defined by a relatively formal order, have succumbed to entirely formless disorder, but this is invariably the first impression. Unlike the calculated irrationality of Surrealist art, in which the omission of logical co-ordination between objects and the collapse of spatial assumptions ignite the imagination with limitless possibilities, Tokyo's jumble of structures and signage is apt to merely baffle. Compounding the dissonances is a stylistic fondness for the kitsch. Donald Richie went so far as to assert that Japan was "a kingdom of kitsch and Tokyo is its kapital. Mt Fuji ends up as a tissue dispenser, and the Buddha's sandals – three meters high – adorn a ferro-concrete temple pretending to be timber." In the end, the infidelities of style are so prodigious you cease to even notice them.

It wasn't always like this. In photographer Felice Beato's 1865 Panorama of Yedo from Atagoyama, a monochrome image consisting of five combined albumen prints, we see a singularly ordered, carefully zoned city. Japan's Edo era (1603–1868) was micro-managed and class stratified to a degree that edicts and proscriptions were issued on everything from the materials used in building a house, the quality and type of food permissible for consumption, how language, to the usage of grammatical modifiers, verbs and pronouns could be employed, to the deployment and striking of facial and gestural expressions, the colors and type of fabrics that could be worn, and even the type of material that could be utilized in footwear straps. The planning of Japanese cities and castle towns was based on a preconceived matrix of auspicious geomancy, social hierarchies and delineated trade districts, a formal space defined and managed by an intrusive, unassailable authoritarian order. With the dissolution of the totalitarian state, the feudal city prototype, a political as much as social

blueprint, was hastily disassembled in favor of an anti-systemic model characterized by subversive freedoms.

Today's supercharged urban centers, fueled by unbridled consumerism, illuminated by garish, fitfully kinetic neon, and masses of signage, have created a landscape akin to urban bricolage. In the contemporary Japanese city, a traditional preference for the discreet, the modestly obtuse, is replaced by a craving for maximum visibility. In acquiring the added function of advertising props, Japanese urban centers have been transformed into surfaces of running commercial text and scroll. In cities like these, where pedestrians for the most part only ever see one side of a building, the one overlooking the street, views are flattened into two-dimensional planes. This sequential, episodic experience of the city is narrative set on constant replay, or re-write, the text as fresh, or shallow, as urgently produced as the script for a TV advertisement. With one set of commercials trying to scramble contiguous signals, style can subsume substance. The result is architecture that, buried under a morass of text messages and images, runs the risk of becoming secondary. In the contemporary Japanese city, it is not heritage buildings but electronic screens that embody the flow of time.

The downside of perpetual change are cities with no memory, or at best, accuracy-prone collective retention. Few of the structures in Japan's most prominent cities are historically original. Like literature and film, often requiring a voluntary suspension of disbelief, to fully appreciate architectural reconstructions in Japan, the viewer must enter into a suspension of attachment to the authentic. From the Japanese perspective, replicating the past is a means to understanding the process of tradition. The reconstructed castles of Nagoya and Osaka, with their ferroconcrete buttresses and elevators, are admired for their progressive additions rather than ostracized as adjuncts to architectural duplication.

If European cities, with strict preservation laws and zoning regulations, are models of controlled order and surveillance in the higher cause of heritage, Japanese cities epitomize creative anarchy driven by economic imperatives, novelty, and a thirst for renewal. This presupposes the risk of mediocrity, and yet these cities represent some of the most electrifying urban spaces on earth. Ultimately Tokyo, with its economic ascendance and cultural dynamism, is the most visible touchstone for change. As its memory landscapes are lost, however, the creed of impermanence becomes a catalyst for psychic instability in an amnesiac city.

Contemplating the wonders and caprices of the fictive metropolis of Eutropia, Italo Calvino wrote, "Mercury, god of the fickle, to whom the city is sacred, worked this ambiguous miracle." Tokyo also has its presiding deities. Ebisu, the god of commerce, is a prominent figure, but so too is Ben-

ten, female patron of music and the arts, a sensual, counterbalancing presence, radiating higher aspirations, tempering venality. If Tokyo has renounced a material past that consolidates memory, the spirit and supernatural worlds endure. One need look no further than the capital's countless temples, shrines, mortuary halls, Buddhist home altars, ancient tombs and sarcophagi, to the primacy of ceremony, ritual and community festivals, or to the shadows of corporate towers, where faith healers, numerologists, palmists, and fortune-tellers ply their trade, to sense the spirit in the machinery of modern life, to feel time bending backwards. These concrete cities, we must conclude, pulsate with supra-natural forces, their shape-shifting forms supporting a spiritual cosmology that forms a power grid of semi-invisible, but palpably sensed forces. Extending the metaphor of a city devoted as much to the spiritual as the commercial, we find in the relentless superimposing of buildings, each new structure usurping the previous, a cityscape embodying the Buddhist notion of *mujo*, impermanence.

The common contention that Tokyo is less a city than a series of villages may seem implausible in the contemporary context, but when you move from the corporate central districts of the city, the icy beauty of their buildings, the air perceptibly changes. A warming takes place. The human temperature rises. It would be a mistake, therefore, to characterize Tokyo as a machine, a centrally controlled mechanism, as one prominent writer did. Cities are not machines, though well-lubricated ones like Tokyo possess mechanisms to forestall lassitude, indolence, decline. Far from being an industrial fabrication, the city, in its radical unorthodoxy, is a model of creative evolution, perpetual mutation. Arguably, Tokyo is the prototype of these cities of temporality, metro-scapes that prioritize attachment to ideas over form, that attempt to forestall the decomposition of time with persistent facial surgery. Tokyo's greatness rests not in an august past, of which there is scant evidence and little interest, but in an endearing optimism about the future, a conviction that the best is yet to come, that the present is a preliminary for something truly extraordinary.

The powerful electromagnetism of the city generates an exuberance, an effervescence of largely unfettered ideas and experimentation that, ultimately, accelerates the dissolution of antiquity, confirming Tokyo's preference for deliquescence and regeneration. In its ingenuous anarchy, a creative formlessness that is fluid rather than rigid in its refusal to bend to an overarching plan, lies its essential humanity and originality.

Home to the highest nocturnal concentration of light on the planet, one senses the air filling with electrons, thunderheads of impending change massing behind this most existential of cities. How you respond will depend on whether the city liberates or incarcerates you.

## NATURE

*Holly Thompson*

Japan is a precarious, ever-shifting island world. Geologically, this volcanic mountain landscape lies at the meeting of Eurasian, North American, Pacific and Philippine Sea Plates. An entire archipelago under constant tectonic stress, the country is prone to tremors that generate landslides, subsidence and tsunamis. Of Japan's more than 100 active volcanoes, including iconic Mount Fuji, some erupt every few decades, others lie still for ages then violently erupt, rendering swaths of land uninhabitable for years. In Japan, the earth is always in motion.

The country stretches diagonally southwest to northeast, comprising six main islands with over 6,000 smaller islands. The climate ranges from subtropical to subarctic, with altitudes higher than 3,000 meters, creating diverse ecological habitats. More isolated islands contain unique ecosystems, particularly Ogasawara, Izu, and Ryukyu islands – all designated endemic bird areas.

Anywhere in Japan, the sea is never very distant – just 114 kilometers away at its farthest points. The meeting of currents creates rich marine life and abundant fisheries. Squid are caught under isaribi lights; seaweeds are cultivated and dried along beaches; and shellfish are brought up by divers, some in the old *ama* tradition. The seas have always been a sustaining resource yet can also become a destructive force. On islands so prone to eruptions, undulations and tsunami, and assaulted by monsoons and typhoons that turn quiet rivers into insatiable dragons, inhabitants are cognizant that towns and entire coastlines can be undone in a moment. An abiding awareness of transience imbues this country so vulnerable to nature's whims.

Since ancient and classical times, nature and culture have been closely connected. Early guiding myths and belief in *kami* spiritual forces evolved into Shintoism. Buddhism arrived from continental Asia in the sixth century, and the two religions assimilated into Japanese culture, with sacred spaces located by natural elements - trees, water, mountains, stones. Both religions became integrated into daily life, interwoven with the natural world. In Shintoism, foods are offered, chants spoken and sprigs of purifying sacred *sasaki* trees waved in ritual attempts to appease *kami* and influence nature – for abundant rice harvests, safe births, calm seas. In Buddhism, one strives for harmony with all beings, and Zen practice includes ongoing examination of the natural world. Ancestor worship includes harvest offerings, fires to guide spirits during *Obon* observance, and spring and autumn equinox ceremonies to venerate family ancestors.

High annual precipitation – nearly 1,700 millimeters – impacts the ecology and psyche of this umbrella-wielding country. Rainy season hits in early summer, greening rice paddies and deepening

hydrangea hues. Typhoons arrive in summer and fall. Snow falls heavy in northern Japan, alpine areas and along the Japan Sea coast. Spring snowmelt courses down steep slopes. Mist catches in valleys. All this dampness means vegetation thrives, and the landscape grows lush, quickly.

Some 70 percent of Japan is covered by forest, half of it natural. While old-growth massive specimens like the Jomon sugi cedar on Yakushima Island have mostly disappeared, logged centuries ago, they still dot the archipelago – protected and revered on temple and shrine grounds, in village centers, or hidden in deep forest. Ancient solo giants of ginkgo, camphor and other species offer glimpses of what had been common features.

Human settlements have clustered along river deltas or coasts, in flatlands or valleys. Rural satoyama – cooperatively managed agriculture and forest areas where humans and nature coexist in balance – have been features of Japan's landscape for centuries. In satoyama villages, flooded rice fields in flatlands or on contoured hillsides were home to frogs, fish, and insects that attract water birds and small mammals; tea and citrus were cultivated on terraced slopes; reeds and grasses provided roofing material and livestock fodder; hardwood forests provided leaf litter for fertilizer plus wood for cooking and heating; bamboo groves yielded durable material for implements. Until the 1950s, Japan's largely agrarian population lived where life followed seasonal agricultural rhythms and rituals interwoven with growing cycles. The old Japanese lunar calendar divided the year into 72 micro seasons, such as "fish emerge from the ice" in early spring or "deer shed antlers" during winter solstice.

But rural perspectives toward nature have been eclipsed. The number of farmers has dropped precipitously, young people have migrated to metropolises, and labor shortages intensified. Decrease in vegetated land has caused plants and animals to become isolated. Unmanaged, abandoned farm villages have created ecological shifts, enabling bamboo and invasive plants to spread and large mammals like wild boar, Japanese macaque, and Asiatic black bear to proliferate. The once-agrarian nation has turned nearly 80 percent urban.

Urban lifestyles have tilted Japan's population away from interacting directly with nature. Seasons are now highly commercialized affairs marked by department store, supermarket, restaurant and travel campaigns. Seasonal blooms – plum, cherry, hydrangea – are visited en masse, and seasonal foods are big business.

Most Japanese today experience nature in cultivated forms at public parks and gardens, temples and shrines, theme parks and aquariums. Foliage and blossom illuminations draw huge crowds, some turning into garish spectacles.

In Japanese gardens, nature has a long history of being contained, trained, imitated and culturalized – in Zen gardens, where plants, stones, and water

represent mountains, seas, islands, or symbolic turtles and cranes; in humble tea house gardens, with rough stone paths alluding to distance; in tiny tsubo-niwa courtyard gardens, with elements creating the illusion of space; and in strolling gardens, with carefully grouped and pruned trees, borrowed scenery, imitated mountains, waterfalls, lakes, and islands in reduced scale. While many strolling gardens have become de facto miniature wildlife sanctuaries – some as rookeries for herons and egrets – most formal Japanese gardens include artful tree pruning or niwaki training; what may appear natural is actually art with nature as medium.

Since classical times, nature has been evoked indoors via traditional Japanese arts – with seasonal flora and fauna depicted in decorative fusuma sliding doors, folding screens, ink paintings and woodblock prints; painted onto kimono silk; and in ceramics glazes. Within a receiving room's tokonoma alcove, nature is referenced through seasonal hanging scroll, flower arrangement, or pottery. Interior and exterior spaces used to be linked via engawa verandas but now rarely feature them. New homes and urban high-rise apartments may still have tokonoma alcoves, but garden spaces may exist only between glass walls or in pots on small terraces.

In literature, since the eighth century, Japanese nobility have composed poetry of seasonal topics. Literary forms such as waka court poetry, tanka, and haiku have vividly limned nature and its cultural connotations. Now kigo dictionaries offer easy access to seasonal words – references to insects, birds, flowers – to evoke nature in poems and everyday communication. Greetings to neighbors include comments on the weather; city dwellers open formal emails with seasonal references.

Perhaps nature's greatest threat in Japan is construction. While limited arable, stable land has always led to dense settlement pockets, postwar rapid urbanization combined with the rise of a powerful construction industry has resulted in transformed landscapes. Concrete tetrapods, breakwaters, and other artificial structures now line at least 50 percent of Japan's coasts. Typhoon and tsunami walls rise high, blocking out the sea. Valleys are submerged to dam rivers for electricity and water control. Highways obscure waterways beneath, and rivers are reshaped with concrete embankments. Instead of soil, new urban homes are surrounded by concrete collars. Tidal flats and marshlands are reclaimed, and cities are built far out into bays. Tunnels are bored, hills sliced in half, and mountain slopes stabilized with intricate capes of concrete reinforcement. Nature is respected and revered – only so long as a construction project doesn't interfere.

In today's Japan, nature and culture are certainly more distant and estranged, far less interwoven than in the past. Yet nature often has the last say in Japan. The archipelago is in perpetual flux. Earth-

quakes, floods, tsunami and volcanoes can strike at any time. And afterward, when land, skies and seas settle, egrets wade back into the rice paddies, wag-tails flit alongside riverbanks, and bush warblers trill ho-ke-kyo into the morning.

## **COSTUME**

*Charles T. Whipple*

I'll never forget the first time I watched the opening ceremonies of the Japan National High School Baseball Championship. Forty-nine teams marched into the stadium in military-style lockstep, each interchangeable with any other. Uniforms spotless and in perfect condition, these young men were completely ready for the trial of their short lifetimes. There is a saying in Japan, "You must look the part before you can adequately do it."

Japanese children learn to wear uniform-like items early on – preschoolers never go outside without colored caps with flaps to protect their necks from the sun. The caps are most often yellow so motorists can immediately recognize them. Grammar schools vary in terms of uniform requirements, but most do not mandate them. In junior high, students are thrust into a society of strict uniformity – in dress requirements and comportment. Junior high society is rigid and vertical. The uniforms are usually dark trousers and white or light blue shirts for boys, plaid skirts and white or light blue blouses for girls – often in "sailor" modes. Blazers are common. Thus, when a student enters junior high, the nationally mandated molding process begins in earnest, continues for six years until entry to college or workforce. School uniforms end then, but no one gets away from dress codes.

At night, I often take walks around the neighborhood. My fellow walkers usually wear black tights, walking shorts, Under Armour T-shirts, windbreakers, and often a head sweatband. They dress the role. "Even the way people dress often appears stagey," writes Ian Buruma, "Japanese, on the whole, like to be identified and categorized according to their group or occupation, rather than simply as individuals."

Yoshimura is a fine Japanese restaurant in Kanazawa. Eating there is like partaking of a performance done just for you. Everyone behind the counter dresses alike, pristine white and pressed, in jacket and cap. Owner-chef Yoshimura's cap sports a tiny number 1. The other three also have theirs: Number 1 is for Itamae, the person who stands before the cutting board. Number 2 is Itamuko, standing across from Number 1 at the cutting board. Number 3, Itawaki, stands to the side of the cutting board, ready to lend a hand. Number 4 is the youngster, oimawashi, who runs around, obeying demands of the others. Watching those white-uniformed professionals flawlessly prepare food fit for a samurai lord is like watching a well-orchestrated ballet, each dancer moving separately but together in a culinary symphony. You see this in any traditional Japanese restaurant.

A few years ago, our house required remodeling to add private rooms for our aging parents. A professional in blue-collar work clothes inspected the house and declared it of excellent construction. When he came back with two other carpenters to start remodeling, he looked completely different. All three men wore woolen shirts, flaring tobi trousers, canvas and natural rubber jikatabi shoes with the big toe separated. With wooden toolboxes on their shoulders and tool belts around their waists, they were obviously traditional carpenters, and we knew that we could entrust our home to them.

Tobi trousers were adapted from the uniforms of the Japanese Imperial Army, which based theirs on English knickerbockers. Some four generations of carpenters have worn tobi trousers with pride; uniforms that portray their roles in life.

Shonosuke Okura is a 16th-generation Noh drummer. By day, he is a biker, dressed in black leathers and riding a big BMW machine. He parks the BMW at the back door of the National Noh Theatre hours before his performance begins. When Shonosuke changes into his Noh clothing, his face takes on a gravitas only centuries of tradition can produce. Travelers to Japan often see this transfiguration. A visit to shrines and temples shows people dressed in traditional robes. Shrine maidens. Priests. Pilgrims. "On the Noh stage, we find ourselves between a world of the present and a world of the past," commented Okura. "We must dress appropriately."

Shoryu and Yohji Hatoba, a father and son team that designs kamon family crests and other items, also dress carefully for their parts. Whenever they go outside their atelier or officially invite someone to visit, they don traditional Japanese kimono. "We put a great deal of thought into how we dress ourselves. You see, we want people to realize we treasure Japan's traditions and know how to wear kimono properly. That's important." Their grooming and dress are always faultless.

Before Japan opened its doors to the world in 1868, societal classes were samurai, farmers, artisans, merchants, in that order, and a fifth class of outcasts. Each class dressed differently, to be instantly recognizable. Only samurai had swords. It was a rigidly regimented life.

Traditional matsuri festivals were and are a way to break out of regimentation by dressing for another part. Young men and women dress up in happi coats and loincloths to carry the shrines, and this wear seems to release them from the confines of social conformity. How unlike the constricting dress of maiko and geisha and oiran, who can only walk with mincing steps.

Some traditional festivals are akin to costume parties. Fukushima's Soma-no-Maori Festival has been held for a thousand years, they say, and is based on a revolt against the Imperial throne in the 10th century. It may be the biggest costume event in Japan, with hundreds of people donning clothing and gear to transpose themselves

into another time and place: horse soldiers decked out in ancient armor or replicas, ladies of the court, tenders of the horses, and more.

Japan loves military cosplay, a word coined by Nobuyuki Takahashi in 1984. Kazuhiro Hiroi, better known as Duke, is not only a descendent of the Seiwa Genji military family but also a former Self Defense Force information officer and small arms expert. He produces mock battles. Dozens of aficionados gather in full combat gear, some arriving in WWII-era jeeps, to play their roles in mock battles he produces. "It's a 'Let's pretend' game," Duke says, "and I do my best to help participants have an extraordinary and satisfying experience." Cosplay at its finest. Costumes can be freeing. A dyed-in-the-wool businessman who daily dresses properly can don a military uniform from the past, allowing him to move beyond workday strictures to become a different entity. To cosplay aficionados, nothing is more thrilling than to make an appearance as a favorite character from a movie or manga book. Some of what originally may have been cosplay ultimately became fashion-changing trends that rebel against traditions. Lolita fashion, for example, begun about 1987, can still be seen in Harajuku. Gothic Lolita, usually consisting of black and dark colors, still shows up there. Other such fashion statements include gyaru, with its vanguard of ganguro dark makeup and decorated nails; decora, in which girls wear a plain hoodie and short skirts and decorate to their heart's content; and visual kei, inspired, they say, by glam rock. These trends allow people to put on a new persona that liberates them from everyday strictures.

A woman walks the halls of a huge shopping mall with a confident stride, neckerchief reminiscent of an airline cabin attendant, and uniform militaristic with epaulettes and collar piping. A metal nametag shows just above her right breast pocket, and a walkie-talkie hangs from a cord over her shoulder. She strides to a pair of doors that say "Off Limits," stops, does an about-face, places her brightly shined shoes over two footprints that face the busy mall. As shoppers rush and ramble by, she bows a strict 45 degrees, turns, and pushes her way into the inner sanctum. She works for the mall.

Similarly uniformed men and women keep watch, work information booths, hawk new credit card schemes, guide parties of tourist shoppers, and so on. They exemplify the Japanese penchant for uniforms. The Self Defense Forces are uniformed, as are police, fire brigades, Coast Guard, emergency rescue squads, private security company personnel, postal workers, junior and senior high students, to name a few. Even Japan's white collar workers wear uniforms – dark suit, usually navy blue, white or very light colored shirt, conservative tie, company badge in the lapel, well-shined shoes, and dark socks. According to the Japanese, writes Brian McVeigh, "dress uniformity disciplines the minds and bodies for the planned, coordinated, regulated, and organized accumulation of capital."

"Life is but a poor player," said Macbeth, and in Japan each role requires dress that signals its content. And for many, that dress is a way to escape a humdrum daily existence.

## RITUAL

*Eugene Tarshis*

Ritual sets the time signature and framework for the passing seasons as well as how we respond to each occasion in the turning year: sanctification, purification, or celebration. It connects us not only to elemental cycles of life and cosmic forces but also to social identity and conformation to group values. In this way, ritual liberates or subjugates the participant, resulting in heightened awareness of self and other or in modifying behavior and character to fit social values and cultural identity at the expense of individuality.

The latter is a ritualism that has always been important in Japan, playing a vital role everywhere as a bureaucratic ethos: home, community, school, company, and society. Ritualized content and context not only guarantee routine that establishes uniform rules of conduct in social interaction and at work but are key to smooth functioning and unity. Compulsive molding of behavior and development to conform to expected norms dominates Japanese life and can lead to repression and coerced submission to the group.

The size and type of ritual stage in Japan may differ – seashore or waterfall, parade ground or school ground, mountain shrine or city temple, boardroom or boulevard, firehouse or teahouse – but every rite has its actors, directors, set designers, stagehands, and maybe some musicians. Costume design is a priority, especially elaborate for shrine maiden, priest, or mountain ascetic; festive or sacred occasion, kendo match, or otaku cafe.

Shinto and Buddhist sects have their own rituals, occasionally practicing the same one with variation. This also occurs in mountain asceticism (Shugendō). Seated meditation in Zen Buddhism is practiced facing a wall by the Rinzai sect and facing outward by Soto Zen. The fire rite of goma-homa conducted by Tendai and Shingon Buddhists has its equivalent in Shinto purification and in symbolic rebirth of seasonal Shugendō austerities.

Local and countrywide folk rituals around Japan – arrow divination, demon exorcising, rainmaking – are countless.

Watch or join any rite in Japan and you find some cultural ceremonies have sacred nuance or origin and some sacred rituals have a cultural history and social value. The Buddhist-Shinto Festival of Broken Needles, for example, has been held across Japan for 400 years – begun by homemakers and seamstresses to honor their spent beloved tool – with roots in animist belief in the sacredness of all things and in the moral attitude of no waste.

Oto Matsuri, held in the town of Shingu, Wakayama Prefecture, goes back 1,400 years as an act of

purification to assure good harvest and more. The whole town is in a festive mood, and everyone works to make things ready. Women are not allowed to participate in the festival but cook and attend to matters like seeing their men and boys have all they need. Participants, known as noboriko (“those who climb”), eat food only of white color – symbol of purity – during festival day, February 6. Most are dressed by mid-afternoon: thin white robe and headwear; three or five or seven coils of straw rope (another purifying element) at the waist, finished in a vertical knot at the back; and lace-up straw sandals. The knot is for comrades or spirits to grab hold of the wearer falling into harm’s way.

The ceremony commences just after sundown, behind the red torii gate of Kamikura Shrine high up on a cliff, where legend says the gods first descended. Ascent to the shrine, which overlooks the coastal town below, is precipitous and dangerously dizzying – even by day – for the sheer verticality of the twisting path rising among ancient trees.

Some 2,000 males – young and oldish – will need a fiery spirit to climb the rocky trail of 538 steps in the dark to squeeze into position inside the precinct of the clifftop shrine and tensely await the priest who sets fire to their unlit meter-long torches of cypress, prayers or wishes written on the staves.

Noboriko then light one another’s torches and explode from the shrine to race down that tortuous 800-year-old path, a “waterfall of fire and flaming dragon” (says a local song), shouting in mad pursuit to reach the trailhead torii gate below. Family and friends await their return. Hours later, in the calm after the firestorm, burnt torches are saved for a New Year offering.

Torchbearers and their loved ones emerge from this baptism of fire with searing insight into the legacy that informs their lives, an awareness they say they share with generations past, present, and future.

Equally devoted are private ceremonies practiced in a quiet space conducive to reflection or meditation. More than a few homes greet the day with the chime of a brass bowl-shaped bell on a tiny cushion and the scent of incense emanating from the family altar dedicated to elders who have passed. It will be Buddhist or Shinto, with a photo of the departed, sacred statue, or mandala scroll present. Someone lights incense, chants a prayer for those “gone to the Other Shore” or asks for help or guidance, and lifts a small wood clapper to end with a quick strike of the bell.

Middle school is where future behavior in companies, families, and society is molded, methodically monitored by teachers and modelled by set rituals, many begun in elementary education. Morning homeroom meetings before the start of classes prefigure the morning company meeting before the workday. It is a time of announcements, behavioral prescriptions and proscriptions, prize awarding, opinion polling, and other matters.

Under the watchful eye of the homeroom teacher or section chief, the meeting is conducted

by a student or colleague who assumes responsibility for equals to follow school or company policy. Section chief or homeroom teacher will finish the meeting with remarks reinforcing a moral code instilled in employee or student from an early age.

The second Monday of January sees the year’s first rite of passage in the Coming of Age ceremony, which effects the wearing of elaborate kimono by women and traditional trousers or dark suits by men, all reaching the age of 20 in the previous year. Hosted by city or town office, Seijin Shiki, conceived in 1948 to denote entry to adulthood with its attendant responsibilities and standing in society, has also become an occasion to vie for best dress.

New adults today receive the legal right to drink alcohol, smoke, and vote. Some attendees at civic ceremonies heckle the guest speaker or attend to cellphone texting. Post-event celebration ranges from well-mannered to rowdy. Some ceremonies are held in theme parks like Tokyo Disneyland.

The ritual calendar in Japan begins with a feast of symbolic dishes and visiting family tombs and ends with “forget-the-year” parties recalling highs and lows of the preceding twelve months, cleaning house, and, conclusively, tolling a temple bell to ring out the old year and ring in the new with 108 strikes, each peal purifying an earthly desire or attachment. In the harsh north, on Oga Peninsula, serious ritual mischief erupts on New Year’s Eve. Among folk rituals possibly predating Buddhism, Namahage is surely one of the most vividly dramatic. Demonic figures in other-world straw costumes and ghoulish masks visit households at night, terrifying to all ages, petrifying children to behave and adult newcomers (brides, e.g.) to rise early and work hard. Origin theories of these figures include Shugendo ascetics and mountain gods.

One ritual held any time is the tea ceremony. The path to teahouse or tea hut is meticulously swept clean and then sprinkled with a few leaves and twigs at strategic points to appear natural and assure that sterility doesn’t mar a perfect plainness and the aesthetic of simplicity. This obsessive attention to detail is given to every moment of the tea ceremony, one of the most rigorously prescribed cultural pursuits in Japan: strictly choreographed from entry through the narrow square opening (requiring removal of swords) to bowing, preparing and serving tea, receiving and drinking it, gazing appreciatively at tea bowls, until departure. The etiquette and relation of host and guest are highly formalized, imprinting that behavior in attendees. Yet within this rigidity are symbols of yin-yang harmony – fire tongs set beside water vessels – and engaging with mindless mindfulness, the ultimate mode and motive of every traditional Japanese art, craft, and meditation.

The impact of ritual in Japan is on the body and mind of the participant. To witness such ceremony with feet on the ground – even from the sidelines – is to be in sync with those who have a stake in it.

## SACRED

*Eugene Tarshis*

Barefoot and belly-deep in a shallow confluence of the Mogami River, I stood fast in the third of six realms of being, as a Shugendo rite prescribes. Shugendo is a practice of mountain ascetics, and the cosmology is Buddhist. In the predawn cold of early autumn, a long-held note from a conch shell signaled the start of chanted homage to the deities of three sacred mountains in northern Japan. Thirty of us were there, palms together, chanting also for purification a la Shinto ritual. Waters from the past, when the poet Basho wrote nearby about silence and stone and cicadas, flowed gently from behind me into an uncertain future of where these austerities would lead.

The borders between Shinto, Buddhism, and Shugendo in Japan are fluid and natural and are crossed without a thought. Shinto is the native keeper of the flame, the original technician of the sacred. Animist belief, incantations, and divination figured into the folk practices, shamanism, and myths informing its origins. A continental import of the sixth century, Buddhism was a nonnative species of belief with lines of transmission, monastic rules, and sutras (texts on mindful living). And Shugendo grew from a seamless grafting of three roots: Shinto and sects of Esoteric Buddhism, along with a stem of Taoism.

Buddhism is about knowing where you are and, based on that knowledge, acting with awareness of yourself and others. Such understanding comes either from within or from without, in this lifetime or the next. Shinto is about knowing where you are and appreciating the numinous presences and kami (god, goddess, or spirit) inhabiting that place. Appreciation of the divine shifts from childlike devotion to awe and from capering nimbly in entertainment for the gods to immersion in wild, rugged nature.

Such sacred immersion is central to Shugendo, where there is respect and even devotion to a mountain or range. Only with extraordinary concentration and exertion can the ascetic perform rituals honoring the mountain to gain insight and power to heal or help others.

In the centuries after Buddhism arrived in Japan, cosmic buddhas and Shinto kami became mutually inclusive. Belief in their coexistence made for a syncretism that led to temples on shrine grounds and shrine structures on temple grounds. Late in the 19th century, these shrine-temple complexes were broken up by government edict, some eventually restored to their previous unity.

Everything held sacred in Japan is linked, directly or indirectly, to its creation myth. The intertwined threads of Japanese culture and nature are sourced there, as are some lineaments of mandalas laid out as sacred geography in Shugendo.

The seventh generations of gods to come after creation of heaven and earth were Izanagi and his sister-wife Izanami. After the siblings created Japan's archipelago, Izanami gave birth to the god of fire but died of burns. From her rotting body, she ma-

naged to birth the metal, earth, and water deities in her body waste. She passed into the underworld, pursued by her grieving husband. Izanagi found the decay of his wife amid maggots and other putrefaction so revolting that he expressed disgust and fled. Izanami, enraged and shamed, sent a brigade of Furies to kill him.

Before leaving the underworld, Izanagi placed a boulder at the exit. Escaping back into this world, he bathed in a river to cleanse himself of the pollution of death and impurities. While bathing, Izanagi washed his left eye, giving birth to Amaterasu, Sun Goddess; his right eye, birthing Tsukuyomi, Moon God; and, washing his nose, gave birth to Susanoo, Wind God. One day, after a prank by Susanoo led to the death of her attendant, the Sun Goddess withdrew indignantly to a cave, plunging the world in darkness. Getting her attention was the laughter of many gods at the obscene dance of Ama no Uzume, Dread Female of Heaven, flaunting her breasts and genitals. Curious to see what the ruckus was about, Amaterasu stuck her head from the cave and was confounded by her image in a mirror hung by Ama no Uzume to catch her out. A male deity pulled Amaterasu from the cave, and her warm light returned to the world.

That hinge moment in the creation myth – separation of death from life, vile from vital, and washing off defilement by decomposition and excrement – is the source of sacred and secular purification.

Other cultural legacies include the social stigma of shame; adapting to malevolent, generous, tricky, and playful aspects of the gods and goddesses to placate or please them; the three Sacred Treasures of mirror, jewel, and sword. The mirror and jewel are used by the sexually powerful and lascivious Ama no Uzume, Dread Female of Heaven, goddess of pleasure. Another legacy is kagura (“pleasing to the gods”), a ceremonial dance and the oldest of the performing arts in Japan. Kagura was later performed as a Shinto dance by miko shrine maidens, descendants of the Dread Female.

Perhaps the legacy most resonant in Japanese culture is characterizing the natural world as pure or primal, manageable or unmanageable. Response to this dynamic continues today in the glorification of orgiastic fertility in furious festivals and as the harnessing of water and fire for rites in Shinto, Buddhism, and Shugendo. Celestial fire would be tamed also for cultural pursuits like swordmaking, tea ceremony, and pottery.

Confrontation with beneficent or brutal divine forces – fair weather for crops or devastating earthquake – feeds respect and fear of wild nature. This drives the need to eliminate impurity, decay, and uncontrollable growth – including spontaneity – seen in tortuous shapes with ropes and splints of bonsai, ikebana, and the garden “craft” technique of tree bondage known as niwaki. Leaves and undergrowth vital to biomes are removed during forest clean-ups, thus removing the habitats and breeding grounds of birds, insects, and other life.

Even at school, cleaning of rooms, halls, and grounds after class is a highly disciplined ritual in which students learn to use brooms, rakes, and shovels carefully and conscientiously.

Ritual purification in Buddhism, Shinto, and Shugendō prepares body, spirit, and mind for approaching and experiencing the divine. Any body of water will do for misogi, primary mode of purification in Shinto and associated ritual cleansing, like bearing a portable shrine (mikoshi) into the sea.

In a mikoshi festival, the only rules of engagement are rousing an unbridled spirit to make the gods laugh. Everyone is intoxicated with festive bliss and exuberant joy. Class distinctions disappear when people of all ages and genders bear the weight of a god's palanquin and share the burden of the sacred. Festivals are a liberation from codified behavior and a valve to let off steam.

In daily life and in reciprocal relation with culture, the sacred plays a visible and elementary role in Japan – from fashionable Buddhist rosary beads to small shrines on street corners. The impact of religious influence on response to nature includes a virtual mapping of mountains and rivers: landscape as mandala and sutra as landscape. This Shugendō and Esoteric Buddhist practice creates a sacred geography inhabited by cosmic Buddhas and bodhisattvas, where enlightenment may be attained by one and all. Such mindscapes host a complex array of textual symbols and ceremonies, including asceticism and seasonal pilgrimages.

Two particularly notable regions of the mandala- and sutra-mapped regions in Japan are on peninsulas. Within Kii Peninsula, Wakayama Prefecture, the Diamond Mandala (in the west) and the Womb Mandala (in the east) are linked by a network of paths that wind along mountain ridges below cloudline and cross river valleys. Together, the Diamond and Womb Mandala Realms manifest such synergies as compassion and awareness that embrace Buddha mind and inhabit the illuminated landscape.

On Kunisaki Peninsula, Kyushu Island, are densely forested valleys surrounding a mountain where every character of the Lotus Sutra has been carved into rock sculptures of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. It is as though villagers had deliberately invoked what Dogen, a monk, poet, and founder of Soto Zen in the 13th-century, wrote: the path to awakening must incorporate reading the text of the universe – stones, grass, trees, sky.

In these mindscapes, the mythic separation of pure and unclean delineates high and low grounds of being, some excluding women. It is possible, however, to meet on such forbidden trails a hiking party of elder women who laughingly ask who would dare stop them.

Those who flout pious sanctions and dare to approach the gods in numinous places in Japan, mountaintop or street shrine, face the challenge of carrying over that experience into worldly life.

## AESTHETICS

*Azby Brown*

Shin, gyo, so. High, medium, low. In Japanese culture, aesthetics cannot exist without context and expectation, and both the sophisticated and the plebeian can be appreciated for the virtue and interest they present. Convention and rules of taste make innovation possible, even necessary, and establish how originality is measured. Today as in the past, this creative dynamic – high/low, conventional/revolutionary – manifests in an astoundingly rich, surprising, and diverse range of design and creative language. In an era when global influences are absorbed, shuffled, adapted, and endlessly recomposed, how can we say with any certainty what is or is not aesthetically “Japanese”? While in some instances our cultural experience explicitly tells us so, in others we simply sense it.

Carefully composed celebrations of nature are an important constant in Japanese visual culture. Muted color, paired with a dynamic composition highlighting nature's energy, captures an achingly evanescent and subtle beauty. This sensibility prizes misty gloom and timorous outlines, but rarely the eye-popping sunset. Though Japan has days of clear light and sharp shadows, since ancient times it has been a moist, misty place where the gods dwell in abundant forested shade. Small wonder that so much of Japanese visual art seeks to capture this sensibility and remind us of these ancient origins. In the Japanese aesthetic rule book, however, nature needs to be arranged and carefully framed, and is rarely appreciated wild. Though nature-derived art forms like garden design and ikebana – as well as most aesthetic activities developed in aristocratic contexts – have shin, gyo, and so modes, they're highly rule-based and dominated by convention even when informal.

It is said that at the Great Shrine at Ise, the home of the mother goddess Amaterasu is blocked from view not to hide her fearsome beauty from our sight but to conceal our shameful and uncouth ugliness from hers. Nature is untamed yet serene. In this context, humanity brings the wildness. This is perhaps why the Japan of subtle, subdued, clean lines and forms coexists with the noisily festive and garish, or the unabashedly prurient. To some degree, in the history of the arts we've inherited, the characteristically simple lines of Japanese teahouses, garments, or graphic design represent the “Japanization” of more elaborate forms introduced from the Asian mainland beginning in the sixth century. There is also a wild, robust sensibility that has persisted since before the continental East Asian culture of monks and aristocrats arrived. We see this easily in traditional festivals, talismans, dance, and humor, celebrating excess and joy at having enough when poverty is the most common state, and speaking truth to power. The manmade is bursting with energy and will, and to profane the sacred is almost a requirement, since many gods

have a raunchy sense of humor as well. The gaudy, sexual, and slapstick are definitely “low” but nevertheless knowing plays on context and expectation dependent on layers of visual language and meaning. The Japanese visual aesthetic we encounter today invariably exhibits these layers of history and reference, all available for cultural play. The kimono, for instance, is enmeshed in myriad rules of context and expectation, beginning with color scheme, matched to age and marital status of the wearer – bright colors for young unmarried girls, muted tones for the elderly. Choices of flowers and other motifs are to be suggestive of the season and the occasion. Is the wearer the bride’s mother? Is it a child’s name-giving ceremony? Celebration of the New Year? Accessories can be used to display wit and individuality. An obi may bear images which refer to a seasonal poem, a hairpin may recall a famous love story. The kimono is an eminently legible garment, and the wearer a walking story of femininity and its joys and trials.

This is not so different from the use of visual language in teen fashion trends like “Gothic Lolita.” Derived from lacy Victorian dolls and children’s books, it emerged in the late 1990s from Tokyo’s Harajuku, a hyper-energetic fashion center where people dress up to be noticed, as a transgressive and sexualized slap at modesty. Like a funereal Alice in Wonderland, where petticoats and childishness are paired with an adult sense of injury and impending doom, it is linked to a genre of sexualized manga and anime which invert the language of innocence into taboo erotic appeal. Like kimono, it has rules and appropriate places and occasions. Both celebrate – or lament – aspects of femininity as experienced by the wearers. Images of both can be found in the service of masculine identity as well, lending a sense of “grace” and the imaginary feminine ideal to the painted decoration of trucks or design of pachinko machines, along with a hint of nationalism.

A glance across any creative field, like architecture, tells a similar story. In Japan, the most sophisticated traditional dwellings begin as a frame of natural materials pulled together to provide a restful place to gaze on nature: a garden, often intended to suggest the tranquility of a simple mountain hut. The subdued harmony of simple components is classically beautiful: bare wood, clay walls, tatami mats, shoji screens. This way of building, known as *sukiya* style, was perfected centuries ago and is continually renewed even today but rarely encountered in daily life outside of historical settings and villas of the wealthy. By far the majority of buildings visible in cities and countryside can be described as “modern with Japanese features.” This hybridization has evolved with enthusiasm since Japan’s mid-19th-century opening to the West, sometimes in incongruous and awkward ways but increasingly with great creativity and panache. Japanese society has pushed modernism in architectural design to often eye-opening extremes, mating traditional sensibility

with cutting-edge technology. As in every other aesthetic sphere, “low” styles elbow their way into the cityscape with hybrid vigor. Garish love hotels tucked away in their accepted streetside contexts sell fantasies of the erotic, the luxurious, the amusing. Visual cacophony reigns in every advertising-embazoned commercial district, where suggestions of Europe or California jostle noisily side by side with Japanese nostalgia. Japanese commercial establishments have always enthusiastically deployed witty signage and eye-catching architecture, and so it will undoubtedly continue, as painted signs give way to animated displays and undoubtedly one day soon to something virtual and holographic. It’s not by chance that the futuristic cities in *Blade Runner* look Japanese.

Impossible though it is to pin down, we believe we know the Japanese aesthetic when we see it. But since context is everything for Japanese arts, we must allow that not all of it is equally exportable. Even the “low” and disposable domestically produced arts and design are experienced and understood here with a deep cultural resonance, whereas overseas imports, in fashion or product design, for instance, still carry a cachet of novelty. Conversely, Japanese aesthetics are appreciated outside of Japan largely because of a similar novelty value. But the situation is increasingly complex. Earlier periods saw a growing Western appreciation for the arts of Japan, but the explosion of overseas interest in Japanese popular culture such as manga and anime is really a turn-of-the-millennium phenomenon. The languages of these genres can encapsulate and re-encode much of the deeper aesthetics discussed above. Omnivorous, the subcultures of Harajuku and Akihabara and the *kawaii* imperative cannot touch an image without changing it. Stripped of its fundamentally defining contexts of personal relationships and group identity-building, this visual culture can easily deflate into lifelessness. Amusing to the outside world because of its “Japaneseness,” perhaps, but deprived of something essential.

Japanese society provides too much to engage with. Everything that deserves to be known and cared for, centuries of patrimony melded with whatever one’s friends are buzzing about, all washes over individuals like an exhausting deluge. More so perhaps than in other contemporary cultures, people must find a way to pick and curate their cultural touchstones, to learn to be Japanese at the same time they are finding themselves. With so much available and constantly being reinvented, it seems that the majority appears content to know that someone knowledgeable will be on hand when the time comes to help select an appropriate kimono for graduation or a wedding, that their beautiful Shinto shrines will move them in a special way, and when the occasion calls for it they’ll be able to choose interesting dishes on which to serve a special dinner, which might include finely interpreted ancient ceramic motifs as well as Pokemon. And each will tell its own story, and the story will be theirs.

## CAPTIONS

### METROPOLIS

**27** Tokyo is the largest metropolitan area in the world, with a population of 38 million, and with Osaka, Japan's second-largest city (previous page), totals about 50 million people. But Tokyo is a restless place of isolation amongst the swarm. Almost half of Tokyo's households are singles, many of them elderly.

**33** Megacities are similar to the combs of a huge bee colony. Tokyo's entire road network is about 25,000 kilometers long and crisscrosses one of the most densely built-up urban areas in the world. The enormous maze of greater Tokyo's rail network has 158 train lines and more than 2,000 stations.

**37** But pockets of comfort and pleasure are found even in the tangle of the concrete core. They exist in hole-in-the-wall joints, alleys of residential neighborhoods, and entertainment areas.

**38** Concrete is the most used substance on earth after water and synonymous with modern development. Cement has molded Japan's government and construction companies into a structure known as the construction state. Since 1985, an estimated 200 million metric tonnes have been poured into a mountainous country slightly larger than Germany.

**40** Above the rivers now cast in concrete flows the urban traffic on elevated highways. On the historic Nihonbashi Bridge lies the centuries-old center of Edo (now Tokyo). To this day, the starting point of several national roads is located here as kilometre zero. Hiroshige, the famous master of Japanese woodblock prints, immortalized the former wooden bridge in his famous series about the 53 stations of the Tokaido.

**41** The world's largest underground floodwater control facility, in Saitama Prefecture's Kasukabe, manages the overflow of Tokyo's rivers and waterways during heavy rains and typhoons. Its 6.3 kilometers of tunnels connect five containment silos, each one 65m high and 32m wide, and a gigantic water storage tank with 59 towering pillars.

**42** The mighty presence of repressive architecture set in concrete and steel recalls the prophetic imaginings of Fritz Lang and George Orwell. But moving from corporate central districts of the city, from the industrial chill of their buildings, the air perceptibly changes. A warming takes place. The human temperature rises.

**44** Millions of commuters in Greater Tokyo squeeze into crowded trains for an average of two hours every day – the subways alone transport almost seven million people every day. Tokyo has the world's largest urban economy, with a total GDP of about \$1.8 trillion in 2017.

**46** During the rush of the second industrial revolution from 1950 to 1980, Japan continued a frenzied transformation from an agricultural to industrial domain. As a result, industrial and residential districts are often side by side in metropolitan areas without regard to zoning.

**47** The unmatched growth of mass-production led to an exodus from rural areas to manufacturing centers and transformed the country to an urban society. This development brought acute problems of commuting, congestion, environmental pollution, and degradation.

**53** This 250-year-old private teahouse is in the center of Osaka, right in the middle of the main business district. Surrounded by high-rise office buildings, invisible from the street, it is a secluded oasis in the concrete jungle.

**57** Today's supercharged urban centers, fueled by unbridled consumerism and illuminated by garish, fitfully kinetic neon and masses of signage, have created a landscape akin to urban bricolage.

**58** In the contemporary Japanese city, a traditional preference for the discreet, the modestly obtuse, is replaced by a craving for maximum visibility.

**60** Buildings have a short life in Japan – Japanese cities are constantly changing. Most houses are built for a period of 30 years. Age is always negative. As old buildings have no resale value, they are torn down. Earthquakes, tsunami, and fire cultivate an acceptance of transience and permanent change. Reconstruction means innovation. From the point of view of urban evolution, every new building structure offers the chance to redefine the cityscape and improve older archetypal forms.

**63** If Tokyo has renounced a material past that consolidates memory, the spirit and supernatural worlds endure. One need look no further than the capital's countless temples, shrines, mortuary halls, Buddhist home altars, ancient tombs, and sarcophagi to the primacy of ceremony, ritual, and community festivals, or to the shadows of corporate towers, where faith healers, numerologists, palmists, and fortune-tellers ply their trade, to sense the spirit in the machinery of modern life, to feel time bending backwards.

**65** Extending the metaphor of a city devoted as much to the spiritual as to the commercial, we find in the relentless superimposing of buildings, each new structure usurping the previous, a cityscape embodying the Buddhist notion of impermanence.

### NATURE

**74** Japan lies at the seams of four continental plates, which float along the Pacific Ring of Fire on the lithosphere. With over 100 active volcanoes and more than 1,500 earthquakes per year, it is one of the most seismically active countries in the world.

**75** Like other volcanic regions of the world, destruction by nature's violent forces molds spectacular beauty: volcanoes shape mountains surrounded by fertile valleys, create rivers and lakes; and the chemistry of mineral-rich soil often leads to otherworldly results.

**79** Japan's high annual precipitation – nearly 1,700 mm – obviously impacts the ecology. Rainy season hits in late spring, filling the rice paddies with water. Typhoons arrive during the humid summer months and are endured until autumn.

**85** Mist catches in valleys and fog blows in from the seas. All this dampness means vegetation thrives, and the landscape grows lush, quickly.

**88** The Japanese archipelago consists of over 6,800 islands, about 430 of them inhabited. The long island chain stretches 3,000km, from subarctic to subtropical, with a rugged coastline of nearly 30,000km.

**91** No point in Japan is farther than 150 km from the sea.

**95** The ever-present fear of earthquakes and tsunamis, of catastrophic typhoons and floods is expressed in the unrelenting urge to tame the wild, unpredictable nature with all means and to protect the archipelago from its terrible elements. Concrete is used without restraint in the process.

**96** Typhoon Hagibis in October 2019 was one of the largest and most violent hurricanes in history, with wind speeds of over 240 kph. The photos show its impact near the southern tip of the Izu Peninsula in the afternoon before landfall. Hagibis caused devastating damage, especially in the Tokyo area. More than 100 people were confirmed as dead or missing.

**97** Almost half of Japan's coastal landscape is covered by concrete. Natural beauty and ecological systems are destroyed by vast amounts of breakwaters, seawalls, and cemented surfaces.

**98-99** In 2011 the country was hit by a massive earthquake of 9.1 magnitude. After the enormous tsunami hit the northeastern shores in March of that year, Japan's construction state decided to pour even more concrete into massive fortifications to protect the coastal areas. Those northeast fortifications include a towering 12.5-meter-high seawall, 400 kilometers long, that divides land from ocean and people from the sea.

**102** The deep-rooted compulsion to control, tame, and solidify nature is embedded in the Japanese psyche and characteristic of Japanese society, culture, and aesthetic, as seen in the remodeling of the natural world in Japanese gardens and the painstaking pruning of trees large and small. Nothing is left unconstrained, and everything is corrected. The persistent cliché of Japan's special love for nature is thus pervaded by

ambivalence. Love of nature is not for the untouched environment of the wild but mostly reserved for nature reshaped and controlled by human hands.

**104** Before the transient beauty of the Japanese sakura, the plum trees first blossom in February (left). Nevertheless, it is above all the cherry blossom that has been celebrated since the Nara period (710–794) and saturated over the centuries with complex, interwoven meanings.

**105** As the predominant icon of Japan and Japanese culture, the cherry blossom is revered for its splendor and enthused about in the arts, especially poetry. Sakura as symbol denotes matters of life and death, hope and renewal.

**106-107** It is not only a haunting metaphor for the fleeting nature of existence but also an aesthetic ideal that propagated the idea of Yamato-damashii, the Japanese soul or spirit, said to be an exclusive virtuous characteristic unique to the Japanese people. During the time of Japanese fascism and especially World War II, Yamato-damashii was used to foment Japanese nationalism and sense of superiority. The sakura flower was the coat of arms to fuse the nation and its people to totalitarian state militarism. The melancholy aesthetics of sakura were first mobilized and deployed by the samurai, who decorated their weapons with its emblems. This culminated in kamikaze planes adorned with sakura images and the piloted flying suicide bomb, Oka, or Cherry Blossom. The soldiers' deaths were to be like falling sakura petals sacrificed for the emperor.

**109** Japan's psyche is permeated by the aesthetic of the changing seasons. Conventional images like cherry blossoms in spring and maple leaves in autumn suffuse daily life, food, visual arts, and poetry.

**112** The islands of Japan are largely mountainous, with 21 peaks rising above 3,000m. Extended mountain ranges on all of the main islands leave only some 15 percent of its land mass suitable for agriculture and habitation. This dense topography, where people and arable land are crowded together, greatly impacted society and culture.

**114** At the southwestern end of the Japanese archipelago, Yakushima is a mountainous island rising almost 2,000m above sea level, known for its forests of ancient cedars, many over 1,000 years old. Its extreme climate ranges from cold temperate areas at the peaks to subtropical zones in the coastal areas and lush moss-covered montane temperate rainforests in-between. Precipitation is extreme. Yakushima has not only Japan's highest rainfall but is one of the wettest places on earth, resulting in a diverse and highly unique ecosystem.

**116** The island's sacred species of Japanese cedar (yakusugi) includes some of the oldest trees in the world. Yakusugi was once worshipped as a sacred tree until around 1600, when a Buddhist monk broke the islanders' faith and ultimately convinced them to harvest and market the woods of those huge cedars.

**118** The Japanese crane (tancho) is a majestic bird with a wingspan up to 250cm. Since ancient times, it has symbolized longevity, fidelity, and fortune. Its iconic image is a common motif in Japanese art and decorations and is the most familiar of origami figures. The tancho was used on a previous 100-yen bill, is a common element of design patterns for wedding kimonos, and has long been the logo of Japan Airlines.

## COSTUME

**125** This team of women fights sand erosion at Shonai Beach, on the windy coast of the far northeast. The attire varies from region to region according to weather and temperature, but the kappogi smock is common to all Japanese women doing manual work. The head wrap distinct to this area protects against strong wind and airborne sand.

**126** Firemen have several outfits, each matched to a particular duty: rescue squad differs from firefighting squad, for example, and they all wear different uniforms while on standby or for official events.

**128** Female staff in particular, who publicly represent a brand or the identity of a company, are neatly dressed and wear characteristic uniforms, often with seasonal versions. Their appearance is the pride of the company, and the care taken to dress is exceptional. The training is thorough, and the rules of conduct are strict. Every movement is practiced. Left, saleswomen in a Toyota car dealership; right, uniformed employees of Takashimaya, one of Japan's most famous and finest department stores.

**130** In the service industry, where style and fashion are crucial, staffers dress up to precisely project the image of their environment and vocation. A hair stylist in a beauty salon (left) wears a highly individual outfit – not a uniform – complete with tool belt, ubiquitous item among Japanese professionals.

**131** A “monster girl” (right) serves customers of the renowned Kawaii Monster Cafe, in Harajuku, Tokyo's center of youth subculture. Kawaii Monster Cafe, produced by DD Holdings, is designed by Sebastian Masuda.

**132** Markets are public spaces and thus require proper attire, from impeccably dressed vegetable sellers to the hatted-and-robed seller of traditional okashi confectionary offering treats on the street. Appropriate outfits are necessary from hat to gloves

for those packing natto, fermented soybeans, which is regulated with strict protocols for hygiene.

**133** A father-son design team making traditional family crests presents themselves in self-designed kimonos that clearly communicate the care and attention to detail of their work.

**134 (L)** High wooden geta clogs and a special apron signify the sushi master, while his wife, who hosts and serves customers, wears a working kimono and traditional sandals.

**134 (R)** Samue, traditional work outfit of Buddhist monks, has loose-fitting, comfortable trousers and jackets popular with other professions, like the two carpenters whose robes bear a crest suggesting blocks of wood.

**135** Two ladies at a fish market wear the usual apron and one of many bonnet styles for women working outdoors.

**136** Ama, “women of the sea,” are traditional divers who collect abalone, sea urchins, shells, and, above all, pearls. Once they wore only loincloths and traditional headscarves printed with lucky symbols. From the 1960s onward, they were fully dressed in white. Nowadays they wear diving suits when working in the sea but still wear the traditional headscarves. Back on land, in their restaurants they get back into characteristic ama clothing (left) to serve seafood. They start diving around age 14 to 15 and work until over 70.

**138** The kimono has had a renaissance in the last two decades, gaining popularity among young women with new styles and designs that are easier to wear, lighter, and less stuffy. The pair in perfectly matched Goth fashion are seen in Tokyo, the city where the Goth-Lolita style was born.

**141 (L)** The number of maiko, apprentice geisha of Kyoto, has been drastically declining for the past 20 years. Their training in classic arts like dance and playing traditional instruments is demanding and rigorous. The kimonos and accessories representing the finest in Japanese crafts are exorbitantly expensive.

**141** Monks, however, are modestly and simply attired, especially during takahastu alms tours on the street, single file or solo, chanting sutras for donors.

**142-143** At Motsuji temple, in northern Japan, a poetry reading from the Heian period (794–1185) is re-enacted every May. Participants dress in exquisite costumes of the time, also known as the Golden Age of Japan for its elegant court life and refined culture.

**144-145** There are tens of thousands, possibly millions, of anime and manga characters that inspire cosplayer costumes. The choice of characters to personify and

embody one's fantasy is unlimited. For some, cosplay is an escape from life's humdrum or from stringent social controls to conform with attire and conduct. For others, it's just a few hours of slipping into the illusion of being the character of their dreams.

**146** The practice of sports in Japan, like crafts, is a serious undertaking. The premise is the same: It can't be done well if you don't look the part. The proper attire projects commitment, striving for perfection, and in group sports, loyalty to and being part of a team and its esprit de corps. A cyclist couple in perfectly paired outfits (left) are at Tatamidaira, its 2,702m the highest point of the Norikura Skyline roadway. At right, the proud Isobe Sharks youth baseball team.

**149** Although commonly termed or considered as sports, Japanese martial arts are often also rituals with strong spiritual dimension, to mold not only the body but the mind. This is especially true for kendo, "the way of the sword." Kendo training is still widespread in Japan and a common component in school club activities. Sword master Hayashi used to be a tateshi, choreographer of sword fights and martial arts action for movies and television.

**150** Kendo practice at a dojo, "the place of the way," in northern Japan.

**154** A good place for time travel to Japan's samurai era is the Soma-Nomaio Festival of Fukushima. With its ancient history, the festival is also one of the biggest costume events in Japan, where hundreds of men on horseback in splendid samurai armor and gear parade through streets and perform breathtaking races and ceremonies, demonstrating great horsemanship while dressed in ornate period attire.

**156** Along with the hunger for novelty and enthusiasm for the futuristic is a longing for the nostalgic. The "Duke" (second from right) is not only the descendent of a historical military family but also a former Self Defense Force information officer who now arranges staged military battles. Dozens of aficionados gather in full combat gear to play their roles in mock battles he produces.

**159** Yosakoi is an extremely popular energetic style of street dancing with synchronized movements in similar costumes performed typically by large teams all over Japan.

**160** For matsuri, Japanese festivals, people dress up in costumes fitting the occasion. Some do so individually but more often wear happi coats of matched style and color that signify belonging to a neighborhood association or certain group.

**163** Oiran were high-class courtesans and cultural trendsetters in the 17th and 18th centuries, in the Yoshiwara entertainment district of Edo (now Tokyo).

**164** Wrongly identified as geisha, oiran and their kimono, hairstyles, accessories and general appearance are quite different. What's more, oiran, like samurai, have long ceased to exist and can only be found at festivals as re-enactment or reproduction of a tradition.

**166** Shichi-Go-San, "seven-five-three," is a rite of passage that Japanese people perform in mid-November for three- and seven-year-old girls and five-year-old boys (kimonoed celebrant, with older brother). For this occasion, the children are dressed in traditional costumes, often for the first time. The celebration includes a family visit to a shrine to pray for the children's well-being, healthy growth, and prosperity.

## RITUAL

**173** Atop Mt. Hiei, in Kyoto, a ritual to exorcise evil as embodied by four devils (oni) is held at Enryakuji temple in the evening of December 31. This ceremony comprises dances by oni acting out their negativity until punished and captured by monks.

**174** Also on New Year's Eve, but in the far northeast on the Oga peninsula, the drama gets darker and more sinister. Demonic figures make house calls to terrify children in other-world straw costumes and ghoulish masks. During the Namahage ritual, these dreadful deities petrify children to behave by calling out to those who may be lazy or bad-mannered and threatening to take them into the dark wilderness.

**176** Even in the center of Tokyo's Nihonbashi financial district, amid canyons of towering glass and steel, is a Shinto shrine devoted to the fox god associated with a rich rice harvest and prosperity. Fukutoku Shrine is favored by executives and salaried employees of the business district for making offerings for the New Year.

**180** Dainichido Bugaku are ancient sacred ceremonies and dances performed at Oohirumemuchi Shrine in the snowy mountains of northern Japan. At dawn on the second day of the year, 35 men and boys chosen from four villages proceed to that Shinto shrine after performing rituals in their communities.

**182** On a stage inside the shrine, they perform nine sacred dances to invoke the resident deity and pray for happiness, a rich harvest, and health in the New Year. These ceremonies have been handed down through local generations for more than a millennium.

**185** For every ritual there is a costume that not only confirms group identity but also how each participant fits into the group hierarchy. Changing into an outfit in Japan is to don a personality that differs from personal diurnal habits of character and action. To start off celebration of the new year, fire department members dress according to their group by color

and outfit – rescue worker, firefighter, dispatcher – and march in unison to proudly display what each does to serve the community.

**187** Ennen no Mai “longevity dances” held by the monks of Mitsuji temple in Hiraizumi go back to the eighth century and are performed after a Buddhist memorial service and samadhi walking meditation. The temple’s version of Ennen no Mai is a near-perfect preservation of the original form and has influenced later art forms like noh and kyogen drama.

**192** Oto Matsuri is a Shinto festival invoking both water and fire for purification. What starts at sunrise on a beach with loinclothed participants entering the sea to purify body and spirit in the shiogori ritual ends with high drama on a mountaintop shrine when torches held by some 2,000 male participants are lit. The elements come full circle by the end of the night when participants bearing the burning torches storm down the steep, precipitous trail in a mad rush.

**197** Above: Coming of Age Day is celebrated on the second Monday in January for men and women who were 20 years old in the previous year. The young women wear splendid kimonos, while most young men prefer dark suits to traditional clothing. The ceremony dates back to the eighth century and gives the new adults the legal right to drink alcohol, smoke, and vote.

**197 (L)** Two elemental rites of passage in the life of a Japanese are when they go to a shrine as three- and seven-year-old girls and five-year-old boys for their Shichi-Go-San ceremony and when they marry. At Shichi-Go-San, a family celebrates and prays for the healthy growth and well-being of their children.

**200** Formation of Japanese character begins with school, continues at the company, and is maintained at home. The entrance ceremonies for companies and schools are similar in form and content, comprising vows for diligence and working hard for the sake of the school or the corporation. The dark costumes of employees and students engender a sense of uniformity of body and mind.

**202** In a traditional Shinto wedding at a shrine, the priest performs ritual purification for the bride and groom, each taking three sips from three cups of sake. The ceremony ends with symbolic offerings to the gods.

**204** Traditional group photo after the wedding ritual. All close family members of the groom and the bride are placed left and right, respectively. Although Japanese weddings have changed considerably in recent decades, they’re still an alliance of two families, not just a union of two individuals.

**206** Almost all Japanese funeral rituals are Bud-

dhist, and almost all the deceased are cremated. During the otsuya ceremony or wake, a Buddhist priest is usually present, and relatives, friends, colleagues, and neighbors come to say goodbye with a prayer and offer incense. In another ritual, the urn of the deceased is usually buried in the family crypt after 49 days. This period derives from the Tibetan Book of the Dead and is regarded as an intermediate state in the transition of the deceased from death to rebirth.

**209** The tea ceremony, chado, or “the way of tea,” is a highly structured preparation of powdered green tea presented during formal or informal gatherings in designated teahouses or tea rooms. It involves every aspect of traditional Japanese culture and is deeply influenced by Zen Buddhism. Meticulous attention to detail is paramount to every element of the ritual. The formalized gestures of the tea ceremony flow into daily life as a code of manners and behavior especially for public appearance.

**211** A village ceremony assuring a good harvest or venerating a beneficent deity brings people of all ages together for a good time. Clothing can vary from festival happi coats to refined kimono for women and hakama, traditional attire, for men. Take no nobori (mountain flags) is a rare festival held to pray for rain, and participants walk from the top of a mountain to their village.

**214** The festive, exuberant atmosphere of the ritual carrying of mikoshi portable shrines through the center of a large city or into the sea makes the gods laugh and soothes their whims. As people carry the divine burden together, class differences disappear and community is strengthened. But in Japan, festivals are also a liberation from formalized behavior and an opportunity to let off steam.

**218** The Taimatsu Akashi fire festival goes back more than 400 years as a memorial to those who died in battles fought to unify the country. Twenty-two massive columns up to ten meters high and weighing three tons are lit one by one to the sound of taiko drums.

## SACRED

**226** Whether a shrine deep in a mountain forest or a pair of giant “wedded” rocks in the sea, Shinto sacred sites house and protect deities as well as numinous presences. Demarcation of sacred space, sometimes seen as inhabited by deities, is done with shimenawa rope and white zigzag shide paper festoons or torii gate.

**227** Appreciation and veneration of gods and goddesses (kami) in Shinto take many forms, often involving purification of site or visitor. Water and fire are common elements of Shinto purification and healing,

with ablution pavilions for visitors at shrine entrance and huge braziers on temple grounds where believers draw incense smoke over head and body.

**229** Sacred practice in Shinto and Buddhism involves priests and practitioners in elaborate rituals that honor or placate kami or buddhas, or both in syncretic practice, sometimes by carrying a portable shrine through the streets or silent or chanted prayer. Priests and monks wear appropriate attire, often white, color for purity, or exquisite and decorated robes suiting the occasion.

**230-231** Shiogori is a cleansing ritual by salt water of body and mind usually performed at dawn by and in the ocean. Male participants wear loincloths or all-white traditional robes symbolizing purity. A Shinto priest leads a chant, after which the men enter the cold sea and later emerge from the water invigorated, purged in body and spirit.

**232-233** Mt. Koya is both a peak and a monastic community. Although a key center of Shingon Buddhism, there are Shinto shrines among its temples and sanctuaries, evidence of a syncretism practiced even here that includes Shugendo mountain asceticism. A bridge of bright vermilion (a color associated with Shinto) leads to a small shrine on an island that also is a sacred Buddhist site.

**234** The daily life of a monk begins with morning meditation and sutra chanting, continues throughout the day with various duties from gardening to serving guests, and then ends with additional meditation and prayer services for congregants.

**239** The Okunoin cemetery of Mt. Koya is a mystical place and Japan's largest cemetery. In a forest between towering ancient cedars, more than 200,000 moss-covered or wintry snow-covered graves crowd within the twilight.

**240** Goma is a Buddhist purification ritual to eradicate the source of suffering via the fire of Buddha's wisdom. This fire ritual is daily performed by qualified priests who toss wooden sticks into the flames while chanting prayers and sutras to cleanse and purge negative energy.

Early in the morning, priests bring a food offering to the mausoleum of Kukai, the founder of Shingon Buddhism (right).

**245** Kumano has long been revered as the most sacred region on the Kii Peninsula, punctuated by peaks and valleys and threaded by the pilgrimage trail known as Kumano Kodo, stretching east-west and linked to Mt. Koya.

**246** The three highly venerated shrines of Kumano Sanzan were once syncretic structures of Buddhist and Shinto deities and a center of Japanese creation myths.

**251** Shugendo practitioners, known as yamabushi, undergo rigorous physical and mental training to attain enlightenment and supernatural powers to heal others and themselves. An example of extreme asceticism can be found in a temple in the shadow of Dewa Sanzan's peaks: there, a mummy sits in eternal meditation, just as the monk intended more than 200 years ago. It was a unique tradition of Shugendo followers to fast themselves to death in order to become buddhas through self-mummification.

**251 (L)** Dewa Sanzan, three mountains in the north of Japan, are an important pilgrimage site of Shugendo, the ascetic practice comprising mountain worship, esoteric Buddhism, Taoism, and Japanese shamanism. For Shugendo practitioners, both yamabushi and lay followers, Dewa Sanzan's Mt. Haguro is an important site for their mystic-magical rituals.

**252** Ritual use of water or fire is done to protect deities or their habitats and is a form of purification for participant as well as for the site itself. Torches are lit and a text read by a yamabushi to prepare for firewalking.

**255** In an ice-cold waterfall, yamabushi pray on a winter day for the resident Buddha and for protection of the mountain where he abides. A yamabushi priest leads people in a syncretic ceremony of Shinto and Buddhist prayers to honor the mountain and resident deities.

**257** An ultimate form of purification through flames is the Hiwatari firewalk, a Shugendo ceremony involving a Buddhist goma fire ritual performed by yamabushi after undergoing ascetic austerities. As per usual goma, wooden sticks with prayers or wishes are offered to the fire of Buddha's wisdom.

**258** The highpoint of the ritual is the actual firewalk by lay and yamabushi participants.

## AESTHETIC

**264-265** Yoshijima Heritage House is a former sake brewery and residence in Takayama, a city in the Japan Alps. It is an example of the spectacular woodwork of local takumi carpenters, known since ancient times for their extraordinary skills. Built in 1907, the house is a magnificent example of structural imagination, using only wood beams to structure a space large enough to accommodate sake production facilities and living quarters with complex and flexible room arrangements.

**266** Classic tokonoma alcove in Yoshijima Heritage House, in Takayama.

Sand garden, detail, Ginkakuji temple, in Kyoto.

**(R)** A lacquered door panel with moon and red maple inlay, Rengejo-in temple, Mt. Koya, Wakayama Prefecture.

**269** Venus Fort is a famous shopping mall in Tokyo, designed in the style of an imagined medieval Europe village. The grandiose fountain plaza is the center showpiece under a dome with lighting effects and seasonally changing decoration.

**270** As Japanese cities engage in ongoing experiments in architecture and lifestyle, they create a circulation of ideas and paradoxes based on the effects of passing time. At left, a palace of a shop for wedding gowns; at right, a love hotel with modern playful design.

**272** The design of this love hotel room mixes traditional and modern elements. Love hotel interiors come in any style variation – from kinky and art deco to anime-inspired and tropical (suggesting a Bali resort) – for a complete change of scenery and escape into fantasy.

**275** Ikebana, or kado (“the way of flowers”), is the ancient art of flower arrangement. It is influenced by the importance of plants as offerings in Shintoism, but over centuries evolved into a formalized Buddhist practice and spiritual exercise. Today several ikebana schools represent and teach different philosophies and distinct styles.

**277** Traditional curtains, or noren, are common everywhere in Japan and hung at the entrance of not only traditional but also modern inns, bars, restaurants, and shops. They usually display the name or logo of an establishment. When hung outside, noren indicate the place is open for business.

**279** Japanese artisans and their creations are well-known for painstaking attention to detail and superior artistry. Not only are crafted articles exquisite, but the tools used by those masters are highly refined and of the highest quality.

**281** In the Edo period (1603–1868), oiran were high-class courtesans and cultural trendsetters. Many were famous in and out of the pleasure quarters and highly sought as entertainers of the upper class. In addition to playing traditional instruments, they were expected to provide smart entertainment with wit, elegance, and intellectual conversations. Today, Japan's reenactment scene preserves the cultural aspects of oiran traditions.

**284** Anime cars or itasha are painted with images of anime or manga. They constitute a Japanese subculture and often involve expensive Italian sports cars.

**285** More traditional motives are found with art trucks or decotora, “decoration trucks.” Japanese truckers have a long tradition of lavishly decorating their trucks with gaudy flashing colorful lights, shiny chrome-plated attachments, and extravagantly painted images.

**288** Marie, a doll artist, sits in a exhibit booth decorated like a stage for herself and her dejected creations at the Design Festa, in Tokyo. The Design Festa is Japan's largest art event, open to artists involved in painting, design, fashion, performance, and other media.

**291** The famous Kawaii Monster Cafe in Harajuku is a prime display and experience of kawaii, Japan's culture of cuteness. Kawaii Monster Cafe, produced by DD Holdings, is designed by Sebastian Masuda.

**292** The ghoulish namahage masks of Oga Peninsula, Akita Prefecture, are meant to scare the wits out of children on New Year's Eve. The masks are made by local artisans and differ in style from village to village.

**294** The Robot Restaurant in Shinjuku is Japan at its most outrageous, ultra-garish, dazzlingly excessive, and cacophonous, mixing ancient elements as well as futuristic – a phantasmagorical orgy.

**296-297** Like cafes and restaurants, pachinko machines have also evolved. Originally they were mechanical devices, and in their simplest version, nails in a vertical board. But today's pachinko machines are full of eye-catching electronics and flickering lights.

**298-299** Elements of a breakfast in the style of local forest cuisine served at Katsuragi no Sato, a traditional high-class inn located in the Okuhida area of Takayama.

**300-301** Koi in Japan are rich with symbolism, signifying good fortune and associated with perseverance in adversity and strength of purpose.

**302-303** With over 12,000 artists, Design Festa is Japan's largest art event and open to any artists involved in painting, design, sculpture, fashion, performance, music, multimedia, and other genres. While there is unbridled diversity, almost all exhibits are ornamental and generally void of political statement or message.

**304** This is one of the popular and numerous winter illuminations displayed every year all over Japan in designated streets, public areas, and amusement parks.

**305** teamLab Borderless comprises huge immersive 3D digital installations with artworks like gardens, forests, and futuristic design worlds created by the art collective teamLab. Exhibits occupy several floors in the enormous space of the Mori Building Digital Art Museum.

**310** The Unko Museum in Tokyo is the world's first amusement space on the subject of poop. In the poop museum, everything is in pastel, connected to kawaii cute culture, and doesn't stink. Love Love Unko! Happy.

## ABOUT THE WRITERS

### THE INSIDER GAZE

#### *Peter Tasker*

Peter Tasker's long relationship with Japan began in a four and a half tatami-mat (7.4 square metres) room in a company dormitory where communal dining and communal bathing were the rule. After a period of deep immersion in the salaryman lifestyle, he entered the world of investment and was ranked as Japan's number one stock market strategist for five years in a row by the Nikkei newspaper. He then co-founded Arcus Investment, a successful asset management firm. Known as an author, critic and speaker as well as analyst, he launched his writing career with *Inside Japan* (1986), and has produced several more books, fictional and non-fictional, together with innumerable articles on economic, political and cultural topics. In 2011, he co-operated with noted manga artist Toshio Ban to create the satirical *I Am A Digital Cat: A Japanese Future*. Recent publications include *On Kurosawa* (2018), a homage to the great film director, and *Maximum Target* (2016), a thriller set in North Korea, originally published under the name of Martin Gower. He has also translated the writings of Japanese underground icon Shuji Terayama. His blog can be found at [petertasker.asia](http://petertasker.asia).

### METROPOLIS

#### *Stephen Mansfield*

Stephen Mansfield is a British photojournalist and author based in Japan since the late 1980's. His work has appeared in numerous magazines, newspapers and journals worldwide. Stephen is the author of books as diverse as *Lao Hill Tribes: Traditions & Patterns of Existence*, *Tokyo: A Cultural & Literary History*, and *Tokyo: A Biography*, where he delves into the geology, history, and present state of a postmodern city fixated on the present, embracing constant flux and transformation. Could his interest in urban mutability and street life be traced back to his days as a bassist in a European punk rock band? An author who writes extensively on Okinawan themes and issues of a cultural, ethnic and political character, his celebrated books on Japanese gardens include *Japan's Master Gardens: Lessons in Space & Environment*, *100 Japanese Gardens*, and *Japanese Stone Gardens*. He continues to go hands deep in the dirt of a moderately large Japanese garden he designed and built in the backyard of his home in Chiba prefecture.

### NATURE

#### *Holly Thompson*

Holly Thompson was raised amid the resilient nature of New England, where she worked summers

at Audubon sanctuaries and earned a B.A. in biology from Mount Holyoke College. She is a longtime resident of Japan and author of Japan-set fiction including the novel *Ash* and three verse novels for young people: *Falling into the Dragon's Mouth*, *The Language Inside*, and *Orchards*, winner of the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature. Research for *Orchards* included apprenticing to a mikan farmer in Shizuoka for eighteen months: planting, grafting, pruning, harvesting, and shipping the fruit plus working high on hill-sides overlooking the bay. Also critical to her writing has been the study of land management practices and wildlife in rural village habitats. Holly also compiled and edited *Tomo: Friendship Through Fiction – An Anthology of Japan Teen Stories* to support teens in tsunami-impacted regions of Tohoku, and she spent time in the Cambodian craft village created by Japanese textile artisan Kikuo Morimoto, publishing profiles of him in *Kyoto Journal* and *Wingspan*. Holly writes poetry, fiction, and nonfiction for children, teens, and adults, and teaches writing in Japan, and the U.S. Visit her website [www.hatbooks.com](http://www.hatbooks.com).

### COSTUME

#### *Charles T. Whipple*

Charles T. Whipple is an international award-winning copywriter, journalist, author, and novelist. His awards include Editor & Publisher Magazine DM Award, World Annual Report Competition Award, 2010 Oaxaca International Literature Award for *A Matter of Tea*, and 2011 Global eBook Award. Charles worked on the family ranch and farm in Show Low, Arizona, until college, majoring in Japanese History as a graduate student and grantee at the East West Center, University of Hawaii. He is fluent in spoken and written Japanese, and has long been interested in the fantastic aspect of traditional Japanese tales. Charles has been a shipwright in Japan and sailed its oceans. Other works include *Seeing Japan*; *A Matter of Tea*, short stories; and *The Masacado Scrolls* series of novels: *The Fall of Awa*, *The Road to Kio*, *The Shadow Shield*, and *The Horse Soldiers*. Under the pen name of Chuck Tyrell, he has published the Western novels of *Vulture Gold*, *Revenge at Wolf Mountain*, *Trail of a Hard Man*, and more.

### SACRED and RITUAL

#### *Eugene Tarshis*

Eugene Tarshis left Chicago for Japan in 1988 to experience genuine Zen practice and has been a resident since then. He immersed himself in Buddhist studies and meditation at Kyoto's Myoshinji and Daitokuji temples as well as on Awaji Island, where he did weekend chores and zazen in a family temple, moonlighting as bartender and

blues singer at an international jazz bar. Eugene has had training in Dewa Sanzan shugendo as well as conversations with head priests atop Mt. Omine and in Kumano Kodo. He was a founder of Another Chicago Magazine and editor-in-chief of Kansai Scene, and, from 2008 to 2019, editor of ANA's Wingspan magazine. His nonfiction writing on Japanese art, ritual, culture, and travel has appeared in Kyoto Journal and other publications in Japan, and in Pacific Rim Review of Books (Vancouver). His poems have been published in a variety of literary journals, and he has translated, with the author, selected works of Austrian poet Judith Nika Pfeifer.

## AESTHETICS

### *Azby Brown*

Azby Brown, architect, author, artist, and design theorist, studied architecture and sculpture at Yale University, graduating in 1980, and received a master's degree from the Department of Architecture of the University of Tokyo in 1988. He taught architecture and media design at the Kanazawa Institute of Technology from 1995 to 2017, and founded the Future Design Institute in Tokyo. Currently he is on the sculpture faculty at Musashino Art University, and at the Graduate School of Advanced Integrated Studies in Human Survivability at Kyoto University. Azby connects the cultural, creative, and economic dots that illustrate the potential of sustainable design. He speaks and writes from being grounded as well in hands-on work in the carpentry of Japanese Buddhist temples and Edo-period carpentry, all informing such books as *Just Enough: Lessons in Living Green from Traditional Japan*, *The Genius of Japanese Carpentry*, *Small Spaces*, *The Japanese Dream House*, and *The Very Small Home*. Azby frequently gives talks in Japan, including as TED X Tokyo speaker, and abroad about the concepts he has constructed, and his creative work is widely exhibited in Japan and overseas.

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