
On the Art and the Archaeology of Prehistoric Japan

Image and Life: 50,000 Years of Japanese Prehistory. An exhibition organized by the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia; Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan; and The Japan Foundation, Tokyo; and held at the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 8 August–15 October 1978. Circulated to Museum of Man and Nature, Winnipeg; National Museum of Man, Ottawa; Yale Peabody Museum, New Haven; Museum of Art, University of Texas, Austin; Museum of Art, University of Michigan; Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago; and California Academy of Sciences, San Francisco, March 1979–April 1980.

Catalogue: Richard Pearson, *Image and Life: 50,000 Years of Japanese Prehistory*, Vancouver, UBC Museum of Anthropology (Museum Note No. 5), 1978. 44 pp., 52 illus. + 6 drawings, map, chronological table, and bibliography, \$2.50 (paper).

One question which the art historian eventually feels compelled to ask is *why* – why has that object taken that particular form? What is there in the history, the culture, the craft, the hidden recesses of the creative mind which has produced something which might be in excess of or well shy of any functional requirements? These thoughts occur on the occasion of this major exhibition of artifacts of the Palaeolithic, Jomon, Yayoi, and Kofun periods from Japanese collections. It was organized by the Museum of Anthropology of the University of British Columbia under the supervision of Richard Pearson, Curator of Archaeology and Professor of Anthropology.

The exhibition (as chronicled in the catalogue) has two important functions: it introduces some of the discoveries of Japanese archaeology in recent years and, on the basis of that, gives an overview of Japanese prehistory to the time when continental (i.e. Chinese and Korean) culture arrived in force to exert a great impact upon later Japanese civilization.¹ It is important to recognize the pre-contact roots if we are to comprehend rightly something of the shape which

Japanese civilization took and which itself shaped foreign experiences. This is especially true in terms of the visual arts as, while Japanese artists and craftsmen often have been motivated by a continental model, they quickly applied their own unique stamp upon it.² The question is not only how, but, again, why?

There are four major periods of Japanese prehistory, and archaeologists have discerned identifiable phases within each. The earliest, dating from about 50,000 to 11,000 B.C., is the Palaeolithic. The next period, dating from ca. 11,000 to 300 B.C., is named after its characteristic material artifact, 'rope-marked' – Jomon – pottery; there are six phases to this long period. Following in order, with three phases to each, are the Yayoi (ca. 300 B.C.–300 A.D.) and the Kofun (ca. 300–650 A.D.) periods. The exhibition has 108 catalogued artifacts representing these periods (though unfortunately only 53 are illustrated in the catalogue). Of these, something over one-half hold an immediate attraction for the art historian, being vessels and figurines, while much of the remainder (ranging from tools, to ornaments, to a 'sherd showing imprints of rice grains,' cat. no. 85) would find first favour with the archaeologist.

The brief and informative introduction to the catalogue clearly states that 'the exhibition has been conceived around the theme that technology and art provide images of daily life; that they reflect the circumstances, ideas, and also the artistic imagination of the people who made them' (p. 3). While the latter

¹ A not incidental side benefit is the rare opportunity of seeing materials which seldom leave Japan. Two catalogues of related materials from Japan shown in previous exhibitions should be noted: *Haniwa*, introduction by Seiroku Noma (New York, 1960); and *Ceramic Art of Japan: One Hundred Masterpieces from Japanese Collections*, introduction by Henry Trubner (Seattle, 1972). The latter is of interest as it placed prehistoric wares in the aesthetic lineage of all Japanese ceramics.

² A recently published article addresses a rather special aspect of this issue, that of Chinese emigré artists in Japan who were both influenced and influential. See Stephen Addiss, 'Obaku: the Art of Chinese Huang-po monks in Japan,' *Oriental Art*, n.s., xxiv: 4 (1978/79), pp. 420–32.



FIGURE 1. Pottery vessel, Middle Jomon period (3600-2500 B.C.). Tsunan machi Board of Education. Cat. no. 23 (Photo: U.B.C Museum of Anthropology).



FIGURE 2. *Haniwa* figure, male human head, Late Kofun period (6th century A.D.). Kokugakuin University. Cat. no. 101 (Photo: U.B.C. Museum of Anthropology).

has been, perhaps necessarily, slighted, this is basically the stance of the archaeologist, and the art historian can profit from it. For example, while the art historian may be tempted to pass swiftly over spearpoints and such in the belief that purely functional tools may inevitably tend to look alike around the world, Pearson notes at least some methods of manufacture which would seem unique to Japan (p. 6). Finally, however, the exhibition catalogue shows more concern with dates, geographical distributions, and brief suggestions as to the societal role of the objects, with much complementary information as to the material bases of daily life, than it does with speculation on questions concerning art. There is simply a greater concern here for 'life' than with 'images.'

Only twice in the catalogue does Pearson venture towards suggesting the artistic value of the exhibition's artifacts. He succinctly notes that 'the ancient decorative arts of Japan show deep roots in what has become an important theme for modern design – economy of form, thrifty use of materials, durability, close harmony with nature, and striking innovation in aesthetic' (p. 3). Later, in regard to the changed qualities of images from the Jomon to the Yayoi periods, he observes that 'perhaps ... the Japanese were led away from a supernatural world to a more abstract world of nature' (p. 16). Within these two comments there is something of the conundrum which has long caused art historians some distress: while there are identifiable, natural forms in Japanese art, there is a large

question as to their role relative to a concern for nature as such, particularly when there is simultaneously a major – primary? – involvement with the artifice of design itself.

To suggest that the Japanese artist/craftsman linked his art to the physical world of natural phenomena – including abstractions thereof – is perhaps to miss the point that he was usually trying to make. Within the enormous diversity of Japanese arts (virtually anything made by a person's hand is so considered) may be found extreme tensions from earthy asperity to the most gaudily finished splendour. This is parallel to the contrasts and contradictions of Japanese history and culture where equal due is given to 'the chrysanthemum and the sword' (to cite the apposite title of Ruth Benedict's still durable insight into Japanese culture of 1946). Eccentric randomness, even dissonance, in things and events is the character of nature. Art might share this precondition but not replicate it or, at least directly, probe the always unassailable truth of natural phenomena. Rather, the purpose of art was to be new, perfect, and pure in its own self-generating realm governed by the force of design.

In the West we rely upon terms such as 'decorative' and 'abstract' to convey this independence of attachment to the formal or intellectual discipline of things. But such words may not be entirely suitable for the Japanese case as the fundamental quality of an (art) object, which often dominates any nominal subject, was discovered in the creation of it. Nature is thereby more



FIGURE 3. Stone bracelet [?], Kofun period (second half of the 4th century A.D.). Tenri City, Nara Prefecture. Cat. no. 107 (Photo: U.B.C. Museum of Anthropology).

a part of the process of art (*yaku* pottery comes first to mind) than it is the point of departure. Thus, to cite one problem area of understanding, rather than having any real desire to imitate slavishly continental models in later painting, it may be that the Japanese found it more valid to nourish and develop offspring which were profoundly seen as predicated upon the formal nature of art. This was contrary to the intellectual roots of the model, but for the Japanese the potentialities of art found no competitor in any redundant challenges to nature – and vice versa.

This exhibition indirectly testifies to this at the formative stages of the civilization. The forms of nature and the forms of art are fundamentally differ-

ent, always, and both are 'true' as they are parallel creations of their own self-perpetuating merit. Surely there can be scant reference to values other than those found in a delight in the creation of an object in the exuberance of a Jomon vessel – an exuberance which threatens to overwhelm function, whether of a practical or a ritual sort (Fig. 1). The simplest and most subtle articulations of shape and modulations of surface yield an intrinsic characterization in a *haniwa* ('clay cylinder') figure of the Kofun period (Fig. 2). The forceful individuality of each piece is all the more remarkable when it is reported that upwards of 40,000 *haniwa* adorned colossal imperial tombs (p. 19). While *haniwa* figures are often descriptively informative of their society (see p. 19), they are also aesthetically descriptive of an attitude towards art (*versus* nature) which does not derive solely from abstractions of physical fact. Thus, there are objects of the same period which, while a possible use can be ascribed, offer visual and tactile delights in an inverse ratio to any ability to translate their qualities into words (Fig. 3).

Scholars of Japanese art have had many difficulties in finding the words to do justice to their subject, particularly when certain words – such as design and decoration – carry a certain pejorative weight in the West. Among the more obvious tendencies in publications on Japanese art are those which stress the technological achievement at considerable sacrifice to the artistic, those which fall back upon the model of continental standards for measures of qualitative and expressive judgment, those which poetically evoke residual qualities of art, and those which simply let the objects speak for themselves. Yet one cannot help but believe that the intelligence behind design achievements in Japanese art – from the earliest times to the glories of late screen painting – presents a challenge to thought and word which, being so durable and visually unique (at least prior to very contemporary western art), would reward the effort. This exhibition offers ample food for such enquiry, though it will be some time before it is digested.

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