



## Art in Japan

Art, craft, architecture & design

**30 March–10 April 2026 (MM 909)**

12 days

Lecturer: Professor Timon Screech

**5–16 October 2026 (MM 195)**

12 days

Lecturer: Dr Monika Hinkel

Many of the finest collections of Japanese art in museums and *in situ* in temples and shrines.

World Heritage sites at Nikko, Kyoto, Nara and Horyu-ji, and the art island of Naoshima.

Outstanding museum buildings by Tadao Ando, I.M. Pei and other leading architects.

Other aspects of Japanese culture, past and present, including gastronomy and gardens.

Japan has one of the richest and most continuously active art traditions in Asia, perhaps anywhere. Some of the earliest known ceramics are found here, as is the world's oldest-standing wooden building. But Japanese contemporary art also ranks with the best in the world and is eagerly imitated and collected.

Between those chronological poles can be found a wealth of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines from all periods, and some impressive military architecture. National, regional and private collections exist in profusion throughout the country; Japan has a long and impressive lineage of art-historical scholarship and connoisseurship. Add to this in recent times a network of conservation and restoration labs and the latest technology for archaeological investigation. In short, despite the large number of wars and natural disasters that have periodically overwhelmed the country, Japanese arts are to be enjoyed in extraordinary abundance. The great majority of important pieces remain in the country.

Throughout history, Japan has tended to make a less emphatic division between art and craft than is the case in Western countries. Of equal rank alongside the 'fine arts' of painting and sculpture there are outstanding examples of ceramic, textile and metalwork, as well as uniquely beautiful gardens and a special aesthetic to food and eating.

As a deeply hierarchical society until modern times, there is 'high' art and 'low' art, from royal and shogunal works to that of the urban populace (the fabled 'art of the floating world'). Modern Tokyo is part of the experience as well as the ancient capital of Kyoto, the yet



*Japanese woodblock print by Utagawa Kunisada, 1861.*

more ancient city of Nara and the celebrated art colony of Naoshima in the Inland Sea. World Heritage sites figure on the tour, but we also visit less well known sites, such as ceramic studios and mausolea.

### Itinerary

**Day 1: Tokyo.** The tour begins in Tokyo with lunch in the hotel. (Flights from London are not included. There is an airport transfer to meet the recommended flight from London. Your room is available from 3.00pm on 9th March or 4th October – see Practicalities). In the afternoon there is a visit to the Edo-period Korakuen Garden, one of the oldest and best preserved in the city. First of three nights in Tokyo.

**Day 2: Tokyo.** The morning is dedicated to the Tokyo National Museum, which occupies several buildings in Ueno Park and houses some of the finest Japanese art in the world. The main gallery (Honkan) traces the development from prehistoric, sculptural earthenware to exquisite paintings and decorative objects of courtly patronage. Nezu Kaichiro's extraordinary and diverse collection of Japanese and other Asian arts is perfectly

presented in the eponymous museum, a purpose-built space with a delightful garden. Highlights include world-renowned Chinese bronzes and intricate utensils related to the tea aesthetic (*subject to confirmation due to exhibition schedules*).

**Day 3: Nikko.** Full-day excursion to Nikko, a historically important Shinto and Buddhist pilgrimage site in a national park with breathtaking mountain vistas. The 17th-century Toshogu Shrine complex was established here by the powerful Tokugawa Shoguns (the first shogun of the Edo period, Tokugawa Ieyasu, is enshrined here): set amid towering Japanese cedars and pines, the architecturally extravagant buildings are decorated with elaborate wood-carvings and beautiful paintwork.

**Day 4: Tokyo to Kyoto.** The morning is dedicated to the Ota Memorial Art Museum and its collection of ukiyo-e woodblock prints. In the afternoon travel by high-speed train to Kyoto (luggage by road). Kyoto is considered the centre of Japanese culture and today's city and the surrounding hills are dense with examples of art and architecture of the highest importance. First of five nights in Kyoto.

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**Day 5: Kyoto.** Kyoto's National Museum opened its Heisei Chishinkan wing in 2014, an impressive construction displaying ceramics, painting, sculpture, sumptuous textiles and much else. At the foot of the forested Higashiyama mountains the zen temple complex Nanzen-ji is distinguished by its massive gate (Sanmon) and the quarters of the abbacy (Hojo) which contain very fine 17th-century painted screens (fusuma) by Kano Tan'yu. The Kodai-ji Temple is richly decorated with early 17th-century maki-e, gold and silver set in lacquer.

**Day 6: Nara and its environs.** A full-day excursion to Nara, first capital of Japan (ad 710–794). Modelled on the Tang capital of Chang'an (Xi'an) in China, Nara was the birthplace of major cultural and religious development. Here Buddhism firmly established itself and prolific production of splendid temples and devotional art ensued, much of which is *in situ*. Here are some of the oldest wooden structures in the world. The temple of Todai-ji contains an arresting monumental bronze Buddha; the dry-lacquer and bronze statues of the Hokke-do and Kofuku Temple are sublime in their detail. Nearby Horyu-ji is Japan's earliest Buddhist temple, founded AD 607.

**Day 7: Kyoto environs.** A morning excursion to the Miho museum (*subject to confirmation due to exhibition schedules*), designed by I.M. Pei and harmoniously integrated into a forested nature reserve. The approach on foot via a tunnel and bridge leads to a glass structure on the crest of a hill and a sequence of luminous interiors incorporating traditional Japanese motifs. Collections include Greco-Roman and Islamic antiquities and important Japanese artworks. The Sanjusangen-do is an unusually long hall containing 1001 subtly differentiated 12th-/13th-century gilded statues of Kannon, divinity of Mercy, cumulatively a potent visual effect. The home of potter Kawai Kanjiro (d. 1966), a key figure in the folk art revival of the 1930s, is an intimate space furnished with his work and an intact 'climbing' kiln.

**Day 8: Kyoto.** The large walled temple compound of Daitoku-ji, established in the 14th century, is an important foundation of Japanese Zen. Its many sub-temples contain dry-landscape gardens; one of the finest (and smallest) is in the Daisen-in, a Chinese ink-painting rendered in stone. The Raku Museum holds exhibitions of its eponymous ware, most

often in the form of understated tea bowls. Nijo Castle, shogunal residence, has a lavish interior containing brilliantly painted fusuma (screens) by the Kano school.

**Day 9: Kyoto to Naoshima, Uno.** Travel by coach from Kyoto to Uno and from there take the ferry across to Naoshima Island, located in the Inland Sea. Together with the islands of Teshima and Inujima, Naoshima forms part of the 'Benesse Art Site'. A number of striking galleries by architect Tadao Ando and outdoor installations dot the landscape. The Benesse House Museum is a vast structure of concrete, glass and natural light. In addition to pieces by contemporary Japanese artists, the collection includes works by Andy Warhol, David Hockney and Bruce Nauman. Return to Uno by ferry (20-minute crossing). First of two nights in Uno.

**Day 10: Uno, Naoshima.** Return to Naoshima island by ferry. The Art House Project is a collection of traditional buildings in the old fishing village of Honmura that have been restored and transformed by artists to house creative contemporary installations. The Chichu Art Museum houses several Monet paintings, as well as sculptures by Walter de Maria in underground spaces lit only by natural light.

**Day 11: Uno, Naoshima, Tokyo.** The eponymous Lee Ufan Museum on Naoshima houses works by this Korean-born artist and is the latest addition to the collection of Benesse museums. Return to Uno and transfer to Okayama for the train to Tokyo (luggage by road). Overnight Tokyo.

**Day 12: Tokyo.** The tour ends after breakfast. (Flights to London are not included – there is an airport transfer in time for the recommended direct flight back to London – see Practicalities).

## Lecturers

**Professor Timon Screech.** Professor of History

of Art at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) in Kyoto. He has also taught at numerous other universities including SOAS, Chicago, Heidelberg, Meiji and Waseda. He is an expert on the art and culture of the Edo Period, including its international dimension, and has published some dozen books on the subject. His best-known work is probably *Sex & the Floating World*, a study of erotica, and he has recently completed a field-defining overview of the Edo arts, *Obtaining Images*. His work has been translated into French, Japanese, Korean, Polish and Romanian.

**Dr Monika Hinkel.** Lecturer and curator in the field of Japanese art, specialising in Japanese woodblock prints. She is a Research Associate of the Japan Research Centre at SOAS, University of London. She studied Japanese Studies at Bonn University. She was curator for Japanese art at the Museum of East Asian Art in Cologne and spent three years as a guest researcher at Gakushuin University in Tokyo. She has lectured at SOAS, Birkbeck, the V&A and Morley College.

## Practicalities

**Included:** high-speed rail travel (first class) from Tokyo to Kyoto and from Okayama to Tokyo; private coach for excursions; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 7 lunches and 7 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

**Flights:** international flights between London and Tokyo are not included in the price of the tour. We will send recommended flight options from London with your booking confirmation. The cost of a World Traveller (economy) seat with British Airways at the time of going to press is c. £1,800.

We provide airport transfers to meet the recommended return flights from London. For those not taking the recommended flights, airport transfers can be arranged for an additional cost.

**Accommodation.** **New Otani, Tokyo** (March) ([newotani.co.jp](http://newotani.co.jp)): 4-star hotel located in the centre of Tokyo. It has a historic garden dating from the 17th century. **Royal Park Shiodome, Tokyo** (October) ([royalparkhotels.co.jp/ic/tokyoshiodome/](http://royalparkhotels.co.jp/ic/tokyoshiodome/)): 4-star hotel in the redeveloped district of Shiodome with well-appointed but compact rooms. **Westin**

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**Miyako Hotel, Kyoto** (March): ([marriott.com](https://www.marriott.com)) a 5-star hotel located in the temple district of the eastern hills with a fine garden. **Hyatt Regency, Kyoto** (October) ([hyatt.com](https://www.hyatt.com)): an elegant hotel within walking distance of the National Museum. **Uno Hotel, Uno** (March and October) ([uno-hotel.com](https://www.uno-hotel.com)): comfortable hotel within walking distance of the ferry to Naoshima.

**Additional nights.** It is possible to arrange additional nights at the hotels before or after the tour. Please contact us if you are interested.

The nights of 29th March and 4th October 2026 are included in the price of the tour to allow for early check-in on Day 1.

**How strenuous?** A good level of fitness is essential. Unless you enjoy entirely unimpaired mobility, cope with everyday walking and stair-climbing without difficulty and are reliably sure-footed, this tour is not for you. There is a lot of standing in museums. A rough indication of the minimum level of fitness required is that you ought to be able to walk briskly at about three miles per hour for at least half an hour, and undertake a walk at a more leisurely pace for an hour or two unaided. Average distance by coach per day: c. 59 miles.

**Group size:** between 10 and 22 participants.