

12 November 2019

Japan: Courts and Culture

The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace

12 June – 8 November 2020

The Royal Collection contains one of the finest holdings of Japanese works of art in the western world, significant for both the unique provenance and exceptional quality of the objects. Now, for the first time, highlights from the collection are brought together in the exhibition **Japan: Courts and Culture**, which tells the story of the diplomatic, artistic and cultural exchanges between Britain and Japan from the reigns of James I to Queen Elizabeth II. Including rare examples of porcelain, lacquer, armour and embroidered screens, the exhibition offers a unique insight into the relationship between the imperial and royal courts over a period of 300 years.

The formation of the East India Company in 1600 paved the way for direct contact between Japan and England. In 1613, the first English ship to reach Japanese shores was captained by John Saris, who brought with him letters and gifts from James I for Shōgun Tokugawa Ieyasu, the military leader who governed Japan on behalf of the imperial family. Saris returned with a letter granting the English permission to live and trade in Japan, and with gifts for the King. These included a samurai armour, the earliest to arrive in Britain and the first surviving non-European work of art to enter the Royal Collection.

This first contact between England and Japan was short-lived. From the 1630s, for some 220 years, Japan closed to the West in an attempt to regulate foreign influence. During this time, the Dutch were the only Europeans permitted to trade directly with Japan through one small enclave at Nagasaki. Demand for exotic East Asian wares remained high in Europe, where the secrets of porcelain and lacquer manufacture were yet to be discovered.

The British royal family led the way in collecting highly prized examples of Japanese lacquer, porcelain and textiles, much of which was produced specifically for the export market. In the 17th century, Mary II displayed Japanese porcelain in her apartments at Kensington Palace and Hampton Court Palace. In the 18th century, Queen Caroline, consort of George II, formed a significant collection of Japanese lacquer. A century later, George IV incorporated Japanese porcelain into the opulent decorative schemes at Carlton House in London and the Royal Pavilion, Brighton. Many of the pieces acquired by the King were given new functions through the addition of elaborate gilt-bronze mounts, turning a simple jar into a *pot-pourri* vase and animal figures into incense burners.

When Japan reopened to the West in the 1850s, goods began to flow freely, and diplomatic and political links were re-established. Queen Victoria's son, Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, was the first member of a European royal family to visit Japan when he arrived there in 1869 during a world naval tour. The Prince met the Emperor Meiji at the Imperial Palace, where an exchange of gifts took place, and was presented with samurai armour, including a helmet dating from 1537. In a letter to his mother, Alfred wrote: 'To give you any account of this country, I feel quite at a loss. Every thing is so new & so quaint that I am quite bewildered.'

The next members of the British royal family to visit Japan were Queen Victoria's grandsons Prince George of Wales (the future King George V) and his brother, Prince Albert Victor. In 1881, the teenage Princes were serving as midshipmen aboard *HMS Bacchante* and were granted shore leave to meet the Emperor Meiji and Empress Shōken. They returned with presents for their family, including a teapot and cups for their father, Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, and with diplomatic gifts from the Emperor. According to the official diary of the tour, compiled by their tutor, the Reverend John Dalton, the Princes had their arms tattooed during their visit to Japan – Albert Victor with 'a couple of storks' and George with a dragon and a tiger, a combination said to signify East and West.

In the early 20th century, a defensive Anglo-Japanese Alliance was formed to secure both nations' interests in the Pacific. This was also a period of growing artistic exchange. The most significant cultural event was the 1910 Japan-British Exhibition in London, which included demonstrations of Japanese crafts, music, sports and entertainments. More than eight million people visited the exhibition, including Queen Mary, consort of King George V, who was an enthusiastic collector of East Asian art.

The relationship between the Japanese and British imperial and royal families has continued to flourish through reciprocal royal visits, attendance at coronations and the exchange of gifts. In 1902, Prince Komatsu Akihito attended the coronation of King Edward VII on behalf of the Emperor Meiji and presented the King with an embroidered folding screen of the four seasons. In 1911, Queen Mary received a coronation gift of a miniature cabinet bearing the imperial chrysanthemum crest, created by Akatsuka Jitoku, one of the most accomplished lacquerers of his generation. On the occasion of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, the Emperor Shōwa (Hirohito) sent Her Majesty a cosmetic box decorated with a heron by the great lacquer artist Shirayama Shōsai.

Ends

***Japan: Courts and Culture* is at The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, 12 June – 8 November 2020.**

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Visitor information and tickets for The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace: www.rct.uk, T. +44 (0)30 3123 7301.

A selection of images is available on www.picselect.com. For further information and images, please contact the Royal Collection Trust Press Office, +44 (0)20 7839 1377, press@rct.uk

Notes to Editors

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