

The Intersection of Two Religions in Japan Shintō and Buddhism

One important aspect of ancient cultures was the relationship between humans and the environment in which they lived. Some civilizations developed with the world view that nature and humans were in conflict, and nature was something to be challenged and conquered. Other cultures developed with the idea of living in harmony with nature. Generally speaking, the countries of Western Europe fit into the nature-as-adversary mold (for the most part), while the various peoples of Japan had a different view of nature's relationship to humans.

Japan is a series of volcanic islands located in a part of the world known for earthquakes, tsunami, and typhoons. If you visit Japan for any length of time today, you most likely will experience an earthquake as they are a regular occurrence. The ancient Japanese were much like other peoples around the world in seeking to placate the forces of nature but, for whatever reason, in Japan this came to be expressed as a belief that all things are animate and partake of sentient existence. In other words, everything in nature is alive, the abode of deities and the manifestation of deities.



Japan Alps, Nagano Prefecture. Photo by the author (2018)

What came to be called **Shintō** (also spelled **Shinto**, 神道, pronounced: “SHIN-toe”) is a form of nature worship. Manifestations of nature, both great and small, harbor a kind of divine presence and are worshipped accordingly. **Kami** (神, pronounced: “KAH-me”) is a word rendered as “god,” “deity,” or “spirit” in English, but in Japanese refers to the sense of upper or superior. A *kami* is thought to possess some superior quality of power. Even great ancestors, heroes, superior swords, or unusual natural formations were considered to be *kami*. Mt. **Fuji** (富

士山, pronounced: “FUH-jee”), one of the most iconic volcanoes in the world, was considered to be a *kami*. Fuji is, at the same time, both the abode of a *kami* and the manifestation of a *kami*.

The founding deities of the islands of Japan are considered to be *kami*. The creation mythologies of Japan told of *kami* who formed the islands from the brine of the sea; and the Sun Goddess, traditionally considered to be the ancestor of the imperial family, is the daughter of these original *kami*, and a *kami* herself. The Japanese name for the islands, **Nippon** or **Nihon** (日本, pronounced: “knee-PON” or pronounced: “knee-HON”) literally means “land of the rising sun.” Because the forces of nature in their embodiments of sun, moon, mountains, rain, wind and so forth were considered *kami*, the Japanese saw the divine everywhere in nature.

The results of this faith manifests itself in both daily life and the arts. The Japanese have a strong awareness, even today, of the seasons, of seasonal changes, of the transitory beauty of nature, and of the beauty of the islands in general. The islands are filled with greenery and mountains are almost always in view (the country is about 90% mountainous). Late winter brings blossoms of plum trees in the snow, spring hosts the brief blossoming of cherry trees, summer is Japanese iris and hydrangeas, fall is the spectacular display of maple leaves, and winter brings snow and the blooming of winter peonies. Many foods are considered seasonal, from *edamame* (salted soybeans, 枝豆, pronounced: “eh-DAH-MAH-may”) with beer in the summer to the hot one-pot dishes of the winter. Even with refrigeration today, Japanese still prefer their fruits and vegetables and even seafood to be eaten during the seasons in which those items are at their peak of flavor and color. You can’t buy fall persimmons out of season or the perfectly arranged summer strawberries in December.

Symbols of Shintō abound in Japan. Abodes of the *kami* were treated respectfully, and the idea of purification is paramount. In *Edo Avant Garde* as well as in other images of Japan, you will often see straw ropes or woven white paper strips that symbolize the space occupied by a *kami* (as in the great tree in the anime *My Neighbor Totoro* (pronounced: “TOE-toe-row”).



Nagano Prefecture (長野県, pronounced: “NAH-gah-no”) shrine at New Year’s. Photo by the author (2007)

The *torii* gates (鳥居, pronounced: “toe-REE”) that appear everywhere in Japan give access to the Shintō shrines. The Shintō religious compound is called a shrine, and the Japanese language makes a distinction between a shrine, which is Shintō, and a temple, which is Buddhist. Shrine buildings and complexes are traditionally wooden, and in ancient times were often located in forest settings, integrated into the mountainsides, and constructed of the same wood as the trees surrounding them.



Torii gates in Kobe. Photo by the author (2010)

As result of this belief in the sentient nature of “Nature,” the Japanese developed an appreciation for the native animals and plants, as seen in the film’s juxtaposition of live action images of birds, animals, and plants with the images seen in paintings. The calls of the deer in autumn or the cries of cranes were subjects of poetry. The images of seasonal rain or the moon in autumn came to hold poetic and symbolic meanings in stories, songs, and poetry throughout Japanese history. Even today, newscasters will follow the progression of the blossoming of cherry trees in spring or the fall foliage (the cherry blossoms are 50% open, 75% open, fully open), so that people know when to venture out to view these sights and where to go. Thus, when you see the many references to nature in the paintings in the film, you are viewing an extremely heightened sense of the life-giving forces of nature that still exists in Japan today.

This brings us to the intersection of Shintō with Buddhism. Buddhism came into Japan via the kingdoms of Korea as early as the 6th century and continued with waves of influences from Korea and China alike. With Buddhism came a flood of governmental and cultural influences on Japan, which the Japanese assimilated and changed to suit their needs. The Japanese royalty accepted Buddhism while remaining practitioners of Shintō, and the two faiths became intertwined up until the late 19th century. The building of Buddhist temples, filled with statues

and symbolic images such as lotus flowers, drove the corresponding construction of Shintō shrines and the development of *kami* being represented as courtiers in statues and paintings. In response to the introduction of the Buddhist **sutra** (Buddhist scriptures, pronounced: “suu-TR-AH”), the Shintō priests developed their own religious materials. The existence of these two faiths intermixed over centuries is hard for many Americans to comprehend, but the Japanese did not have a problem with a Shintō *torii* gate appearing within the compound of a Buddhist temple, or the Shintō ritual washing of hands and rinsing of mouth that precede entrance to a shrine also becoming a ritual before entering the main building of a Buddhist temple. Buddhism was an accommodating faith as it spread across East Asia, and some of the ideas of Buddhism fit nicely into Japanese world views.

One of these ideas that permeated Japanese art and literature is the sense of impermanence. One of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism is that suffering is in part due to the impermanence of life. This concept meshed well with the heightened sense of seasons and nature in Japan, where the brief and fleeting blooming of cherry trees each spring came to symbolize impermanence and perishability. These ideas became an aesthetic sensibility that permeated much of Japanese art and literature throughout history. Things that were ephemeral and fleeting were highly appreciated.

Naturally, there were numerous paintings of Buddhist figures in Japanese art but, in *Edo Avant Garde* , the important thing to notice is the attention to the natural world and the symbolism or references that images of nature make to the viewer. Ask your students to look for comparable images in Western European or U.S. painting prior to the 19th century. Other than the still life paintings prevalent in Northern Europe, are there paintings of nothing but cranes or fields of barley? Would a British or French castle of the late 18th century or early 19th century have housed *Nachi Waterfall* by **Nagasawa Rosetsu** (長沢芦雪, 1754-1799 CE, pronounced: “nah-GAH-SAH-wah | ROW-set-sue”) or *Cranes* by **Maruyama Ōkyo** (円山応挙, 1733-1795 CE, pronounced: “ma-RUH-YAH-MA | OH-kyoh”)? How are the world views of different cultures revealed in their choice of which subjects to paint and why? There is beauty and expressions of power, religion, and world views in the arts of all world cultures. By researching and learning about how and why people choose the art they choose to use and view, students can learn to appreciate and understand the creativity and inventiveness that results from different world views and faiths.

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Recommended further reading:

Christine Guth, *Art of Edo Japan: The Artist and the City 1615-1868* (Yale University Press, 2010)

Stephen Addiss, *How to Look at Japanese Art* (Echo Point Books and Media, 2015)