

Art and Architecture of Buddhism in Japan

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Chinese culture greatly influenced the art and architecture of Japan. This lesson covers:

1. Time Period and Location: Art and Architecture of Buddhism in Japan
2. The Arrival of Buddhism in Japan
3. Examples of Japanese Art and Architecture
 - 3a. Horyuji Kondo
 - 3b. Tori Busshi Triad
 - 3c. Yakushi Triad
 - 3d. Scene from *The Tale of Genji*
 - 3e. Womb Mandala
 - 3f. Amida Descending
 - 3g. Phoenix Hall



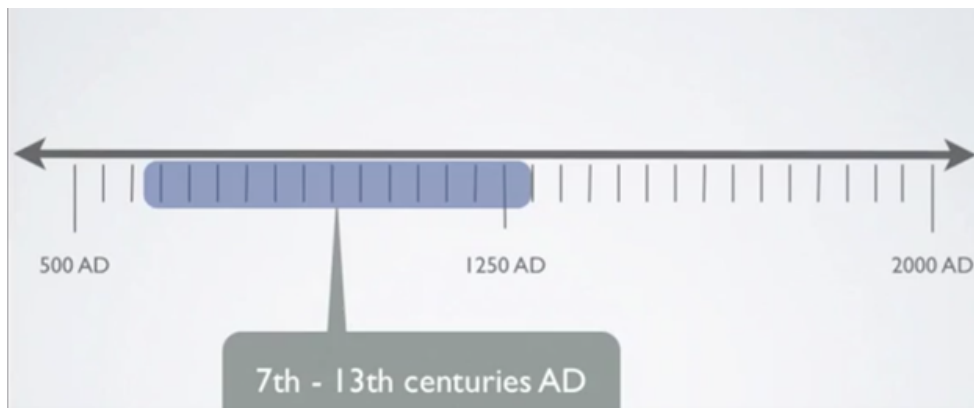
BIG IDEA

Chinese culture, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Chinese writing, and elements of the Chinese royal court, has been very influential in the art and architecture of Japan.

1. Time Period and Location: Art and Architecture of Buddhism in Japan

The period covered in this lesson begins in the 7th century and ends in the 13th century CE. The geographical region covered is Japan, a country consisting of four large islands with numerous smaller islands, located just east of mainland China.

Below is a timeline highlighting the period covered in this lesson.



2. The Arrival of Buddhism in Japan

In 552, Syong Myong, the leader of the kingdom of Baekje in Korea, sent several gifts to the emperor of Japan, including a statue of the Buddha, and encouraged him to convert. Once Buddhism became popular in Japan, Japanese monks also traveled to China to learn more about Buddhism. Its popularity increased dramatically under Prince Shotoku, who built 46 Buddhist monasteries and temples and incorporated aspects of Buddhism into an ethical code. One of the temples that he built was Horyu-ji. Although most of the original structures have burned down, the kondo is the oldest wooden structure in the world.

3. Examples of Japanese Art and Architecture

3a. Horyuji Kondo

Below is our first example of Japanese architecture.



Horyuji Kondo
Nara Prefecture, Japan
7th century CE
Wood

This piece of architecture is from the Horyuji Buddhist temple complex in the Nara Prefecture in Japan. This is a **kondo**, which is the main hall in a Buddhist temple. It was originally built during the 7th century CE and has been rebuilt a few times, although its core remains as it was. In fact, it is the oldest surviving example of a wooden building in existence.

The Horyuii Kondo has several formal similarities to Chinese pagodas:

- Curved roof
- Shrinking size of the upper stories
- Wooden building on a stone platform
- Chinese bracketing system, known as dougong (this cannot be seen here, but it is used to support the building)



TERM TO KNOW

Kondo

The main hall in a Japanese Buddhist temple.

3b. Tori Busshi Triad

This next image is of a bronze Buddha.



Tori Busshi

Shaka Triad

Nara Prefecture, Japan

623 CE

Bronze

The above sculpture, the Shaka Triad from 623 CE, is located within the Horyuji complex and is a gilded bronze **triad**, a common Buddhist depiction of a central Buddha figure flanked by two bodhisattvas. It was created by the artist known as Tori Busshi. “Busshi” means “maker of Buddhist images.” Here, the figures are depicted with elongated heads and highly stylized folds within the robes.

The central Buddha is Shaka, which is the historical Buddha, as opposed to one of his many manifestations. He was made in the likeness of Prince Shotoku, in the hope that the prince would be healed from illness, but the prince passed away before the sculpture was finished. It was dedicated to him anyway in the hope that he would travel to the Pure Land after his death. The Buddha is seated in the meditative lotus position, with his right hand in a specific type of mudra, or gesture, called the “fear not” gesture. Behind the Buddha is a highly stylized flaming mandorla.



Triad

In Buddhism, an artistic grouping of three characters, usually Buddha in the center flanked by two bodhisattvas, but there could be some variation.

3c. Yakushi Triad

This next image is of the Yakushi Triad, from the late 7th or early 8th centuries.



Yakushi Triad

Nara Prefecture, Japan

Late 7th to early 8th centuries CE

Bronze

It shows a stylistic influence of mainland China's Tang dynasty. The artist takes care to render the forms in a much more realistic manner. The clothing isn't as overtly stylized as it is in the Tori Busshi triad. Instead, it clings to the forms and reveals the body definition underneath.

Notice the contrapposto-like stance of the nearest bodhisattva figure. According to scholars, this stylistic influence can be traced back to the Indian influence on the stylistic conventions of China, which were then

borrowed by Japan. This itself may have been the influence of cultural exchange between India and Greece during the reign of Alexander the Great.

3d. Scene from *The Tale of Genji*

During the **Heian period** in Japan, the court moved the capital to Kyoto. It was a time of extended peace and prosperity, and during this time, a lady of the court, known as Lady Murasaki, wrote the first graphic novel in history.

➞ EXAMPLE This image is from Murasaki's 11th century CE literary work, *The Tale of Genji*.



Scene from Minori Chapter of *The Tale of Genji*

Kyoto, Japan

12th century CE

Color on silk

The image is a major insight into the courtly life of an 11th-century aristocrat, told through the main character, Prince Genji. The scholarly language of the time was Chinese, but *The Tale of Genji* was written in a more common form called **Hiragana script**. Hiragana script was often used by women, as it was thought to be easier than other forms of Japanese writing. Keep in mind this was a contemporary opinion.

Works of writing such as this were not considered equal to poetry, so it's very likely this would've been looked at as nothing more than a novelty in its time.

Today, however, it is considered a classic of Japanese literature and one of the first novels ever written.

The above image is a scene from the talk from *The Tale of Genji*. Interestingly, these stories are told from the perspective of the reader, who views the characters from above at an angle inside a building, thanks to the roof being blown off. This is typical Japanese stylistic preference. The artist creates an illusion of depth by making

the walls of the room into a series of diagonal lines. This type of painting is known as *onna-e* and was used for scenes of courtly life, interior spaces, and emotions.



TERMS TO KNOW

Heian Period

“Heian” means “peace and tranquility”; a period from 794 to 1185 in Japanese history when Buddhism, Taoism, and Chinese influences were important; a period of time especially noted for its art, poetry, and literature.

Hiragana Script

Japanese writing system of characters.

3e. Womb Mandala

During the Heian period, Esoteric Buddhism became the main form of Buddhism. It emphasized complex hierarchies of gods, which were depicted in mandalas such as the Womb World Mandala, shown here:



Womb World Mandala

Kyoto, Japan

Second half of 9th century CE

Color on silk



DID YOU KNOW

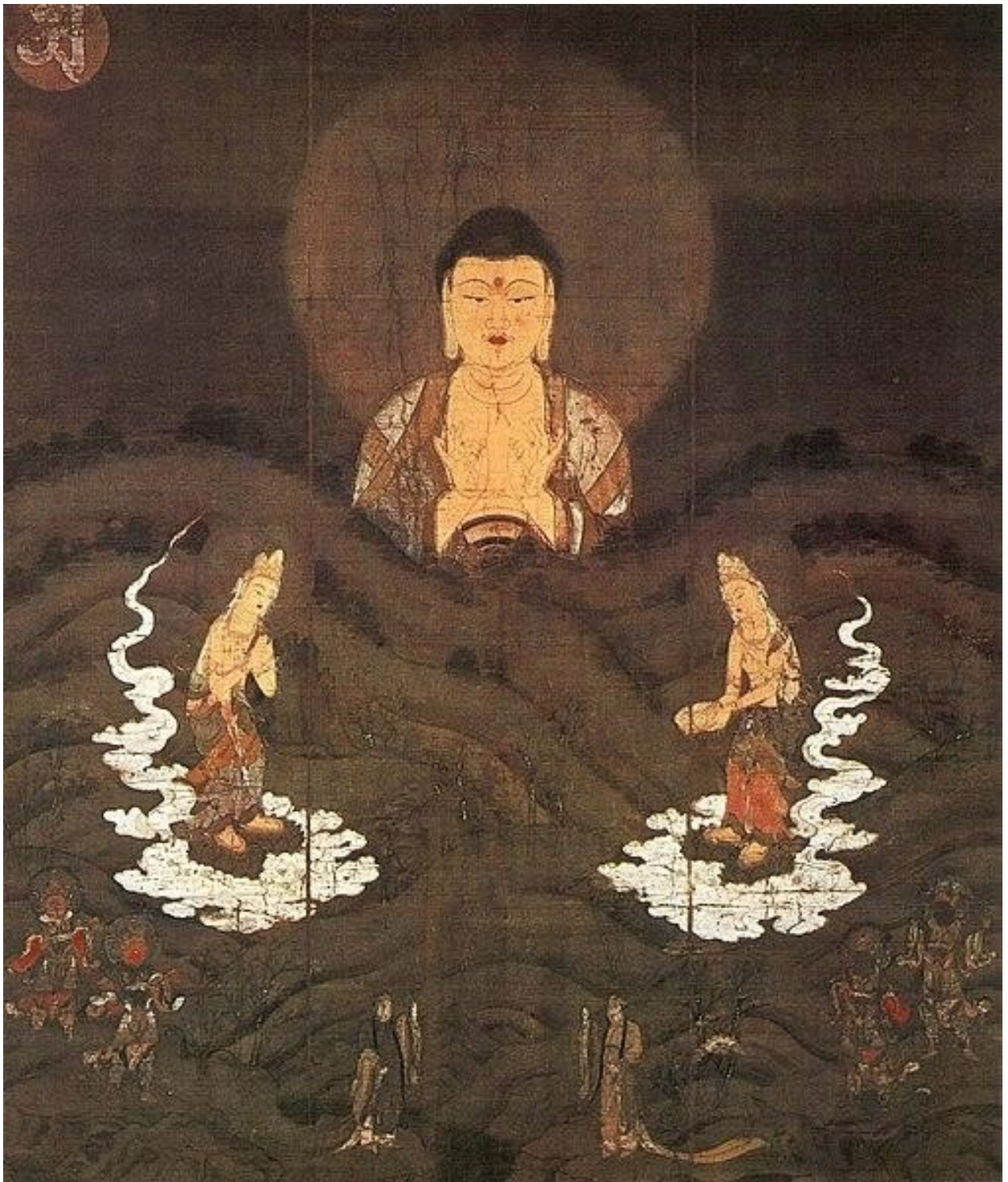
This Womb World Mandala can be thought of as a Buddhist flowchart of sorts; it helps to keep all of the variations of the Buddha straight. During the Heian period, esoteric Buddhism became popular, especially among affluent people. It involved complex hierarchies of Buddhas and Buddhist deities. Monks used mandalas like the Womb World Mandala to learn all of these variations and as aids to meditation.

3f. Amida Descending

Pure Land Buddhism remained popular during the Kamakura period in Japan. The late 12th century through the early- to mid-13th century set the foundation for feudalism in Japan. Pure Land Buddhism emphasizes the importance of the Amida Buddha and the path to salvation that is achieved by committing oneself to the salvation of Amida Buddha. This idea contrasts with the notion of achieving enlightenment by recognizing the nature of suffering and detaching from it and all worldly desires. In Pure Land Buddhism, the Buddha functions as a savior figure.

During this time, speedy descent images of the Buddha became popular, depicting Amida Buddha shooting down from the clouds to help someone in need, usually a dying person. This next image, however, is an image of the Amida descending slowly over the mountains. Obviously, speedy is a relative term.

➤ **EXAMPLE** Below is an image of the Amida Buddha descending slowly over the mountains.



Amida Buddha descending over the mountains

Kyoto, Japan

13th century

Color on silk

3g. Phoenix Hall

The “pure land” of Pure Land Buddhism referred to a paradise of sorts, created by one of Buddha’s manifestations. The Japanese believed that the year 1052 marked the end of the world. For this reason, Pure Land Buddhism was extremely popular at this time. The following year, the Phoenix Hall, located at Byodo-In Temple in Kyoto, Japan, was built. It housed a sculpture of the Amida Buddha by Jocho, who developed a system of proportions and made the sculpture out of multiple pieces of wood joined together from the inside. The shape of the building somewhat resembled a bird, and there were sculptures of phoenix birds on the roof. It uses careful stylistic details such as:

- More accentuated curled roofs with ceramic tile
- More recessed, central building
- Narrower space between sections of the roof
- Reflection pool to evoke a sense of a heavenly realm of the pure land on earth

➤ EXAMPLE Below is the Phoenix Hall.



Byodo-In Phoenix Hall

Kyoto, Japan

1053 CE

Here is the sculpture of Amida Buddha housed in the Phoenix Hall:



Jocho

Amida Buddha



SUMMARY

Japan and its art and architecture were greatly shaped by Chinese cultural influences. This lesson covered the **time period and location of art and architecture of Buddhism in Japan**. Throughout this lesson, you explored works of art and examples of architecture that walked you through these influences. These examples included:

- Horyuji Kondo
- Tori Busshi Triad
- Yakushi Triad
- Scene from *The Tale of Genji*
- Womb Mandala
- Amida Descending
- Phoenix Hall



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