

5. Entertainment at the Heian Court

Heian-kyo's aristocrats had plenty of leisure time for sporting events, games, and contests. Men enjoyed watching horse races, archery contests, and sumo wrestling. In sumo wrestling, which remains very popular in Japan, men of great weight try to throw each other to the ground or out of the ring. When the weather was warm, men and women alike enjoyed watching boat races along the river that flowed through the city.

Groups of courtiers played a game called *kemari*, in which they kicked a leather ball back and forth, keeping it in the air for as long as possible. They played in the same elegant robes they wore at court. Women used the stone pieces of the popular board game Go to play a game called *rango*, the object of which was to balance as many stones as possible on one finger.

Each of the many festivals and celebrations on the Heian calendar had its own customs. Many involved contests that tested athletic, poetic, or artistic skill. For example, in the Festival of the Snake, cups were floated in a stream. Guests took a cup, drank from it, and then had to compose and recite a poem. Other special days featured contests that judged the best-decorated fans, the most fragrant perfumes, the loveliest artwork, or the most graceful dancing.

Dancing was an important skill for Heian-kyo's nobles because dance was part of nearly every festival. *Bugaku* (boo-GAH-koo) performances, which combined dance with music and drama, were a popular form of entertainment. Bugaku dancers wore masks and acted out a simple story using memorized movements.

6. Sculpture and Painting During the Heian Period

During the Heian period, many artists continued to be influenced by Chinese art. Gradually, however, sculptors and painters created their own Japanese styles.

Early Heian sculptors commonly made an entire work from a single piece of wood. Later in this period, sculptors made statues by carving separate pieces from carefully selected wood and then joining them. With the help of assistants, sculptors could make the separate parts in large quantities, enabling them to create a group of similar statues quickly and precisely. Jocho, an artist who worked for Fujiwara Michinaga, probably developed this technique.

Jocho made perhaps the greatest masterpiece of Heian sculpture, the Amida Buddha. This beautifully carved Buddha, "The Lord of Boundless Light," expresses a sense of deep peace and strength.

In painting, Heian artists consciously developed a Japanese style, which they called *yamato-e*, or "Japanese painting." Painters drew their scenes with thin lines and then filled them in with bright colors. Lines were made quickly to suggest movement, but they were drawn more deliberately in restful scenes.

At first, artists used the new style to paint Buddhist subjects, but over time they focused on nonreligious scenes. There were four main types of *yamato-e*: landscapes showing the four seasons, places of natural beauty, people doing seasonal tasks, and scenes from literature (called “story paintings”).

The new style of painting was used to decorate walls, screens, and the sliding doors of houses and temples. Some of the most famous examples of *yamato-e*, however, are scroll paintings. A scroll painting shows a series of scenes from right to left so that viewers see events chronologically as they unroll the scroll. Scroll painting had been invented in China, but Heian painters added their own distinctive touches. For example, they often showed scenes inside buildings from above, as if the viewer were peering down through an invisible roof.

7. Writing and Literature During the Heian Period

Writing was the most valued form of expression in Heian Japan. Everyone was expected to show skill in using words well. Early Heian writers composed artful poems in Chinese, but as time passed, distinctly Japanese ways of writing developed both in daily life and in the creation of works of literature.

Writing in Daily Life Poetry was part of daily life in Heian-kyo, and people were expected to compose poetry in public. If they could not think up a few clever lines to fit an occasion, others noticed the failure. Men and women carefully created poems to charm each other. When someone received a poem from a friend, family member, or acquaintance, he or she was expected to write one in response. The responding poem was supposed to be written in the same style and mood, and have the same imagery, as the original.

In earlier times, the Japanese had used *kana*, which was based on simplified Chinese characters, to write the syllables of their language. In Heian times, there were two ways of writing, much like we have cursive and print letters in English. One, *katakana*, was more formal. Men used *katakana* when they wrote anything important. The second form of writing was *hiragana*. Characters in *hiragana* are formed with simple strokes that make writing and reading easier and faster. *Hiragana* was mostly seen as “women's writing.” Court women favored *hiragana* for personal writing, such as diaries, and some of them used it to create lasting works of literature. Over time, *hiragana* took its place alongside *katakana* as part of Japan's written language.

Heian writers took care to present their work in a beautiful manner, since calligraphy skills were viewed as important as the ability to create poetry. People believed that handwriting revealed their character and goodness better than the words they used. Calligraphy was often displayed on colorful, handmade paper, and sometimes the paper was even perfumed.

Women Become Japan's Leading Writers The female companions to the courtiers of Heian-kyo were usually selected for their intelligence. They often took a great interest in literature, and as a result, women led in the flowering of Japanese literature in the golden age of the 10th and 11th centuries.

The best-known Heian writer was Murasaki Shikibu, often referred to as Lady Murasaki. Born into the Fujiwara family, she served as a lady-in-waiting to one of the daughters of Fujiwara Michinaga. Her novel, the *Tale of Genji* (GEN-jee), is a Heian masterpiece and is today considered one of the great works of world literature.

The *Tale of Genji* is often called the world's first novel. The book follows the life of Genji, a fictional prince, and paints a vivid picture of life in the Heian court. Much of the book focuses on the thoughts and feelings of the characters, particularly the women. For this reason, the *Tale of Genji* has served as a model for the modern romance novel.

Murasaki also kept a diary about her life in the court. Like her novel, her diary offers a close look at court life in the period.

The other leading writer of the time was Sei Shonagon. Like the *Tale of Genji*, Shonagon's *Pillow Book* presents a detailed picture of life in Heian-kyo. *Pillow Book* is a collection of clever stories, character sketches, conversations, descriptions of art and nature, and various lists. Here is Shonagon's list of "Things That Should Be Short":

a piece of thread when one wants to sew something in a hurry
a lamp stand
the hair of a woman of the lower classes
the speech of a young girl

Like Sei Shonagon, many Heian women wrote their thoughts and experiences in diaries. A book called *The Gossamer Years* is the earliest existing example. This diary by an unknown noblewoman describes her unhappy life as companion to a Fujiwara leader. Writers often included artwork, poems, and letters in their diary entries.

8. The End of the Heian Period

The Heian period is known as Japan's golden age of peace. However, despite the glittering imperial court, problems were brewing that would bring an end to this flourishing cultural era.

Aristocrats in Heian-kyo lived very well, but in Japan's rural areas most people were quite poor. The peasants' farming and other work supported Heian-kyo's rich. Even so, the wealthy looked down on the poor and ignored their problems.

While the rich focused on culture in Heian-kyo, events in the countryside began to weaken the Heian court. The practice of giving large estates to top nobles slowly **eroded** the emperors' power. Those who owned these estates paid no taxes. Eventually, tax-free land was so common that the government could no longer collect enough taxes to support the emperor.

Japan's rulers began to lose control. Bandits roamed the countryside, and people of different religions began to band together to attack and rob one another. The government was now too weak to provide law enforcement, so estate owners created their own police forces and armies to

protect their lands. The profits from landowners' estates went to paying the warriors instead of supporting the emperor.

By the 12th century, the power of some local lords rivaled that of the weakened imperial government. Fighting broke out over control of the land, while various clans struggled for power in the capital. By 1180, there was civil war in Japan.

In 1185, Minamoto Yoritomo (meen-ah-MOE-toe yor-ee-TOE-moe), the head of a military family, seized power. A new era began in which military leaders controlled Japan.

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