

Ashikaga Yoshimasa

Ashikaga Yoshimasa (1436–1490) was the eighth shogun of the Ashikaga shogunate in the Muromachi period (1336–1573), a time of civil wars and great unrest. Although ineffective as a military and political leader, he left a lasting cultural legacy. He is remembered for supporting the arts and Higashiyama culture, which reflected the ideals of Zen Buddhism and deeply influenced the development of traditional Japanese aesthetics.

When Yoshimasa was five years old, his father was assassinated. His older brother Yoshikatsu (1434–1443) became the next shogun, but died in a horse-riding accident three years later, leaving Yoshimasa to take on the role. He became shogun at age 13, but had difficulty controlling the lords of the domains and dealing with state business. In 1464, lacking a son as an heir, Yoshimasa adopted his younger brother, Ashikaga Yoshimi (1439–1491), to succeed him. The following year, Yoshimasa's wife had a son, precipitating a dispute between Yoshimasa and Yoshimi over who the next shogun should be. Fighting broke out between rival factions supporting one or the other of the brothers, leading to the Ōnin War (1467–1477), a conflict that destroyed much of Kyoto before ending in a stalemate.

In 1473, before the war was over, Yoshimasa passed the title to his eight-year-old son and retired from his position, while retaining a strong influence over the shogunate. In 1482 he began construction of the Higashiyama-sansō estate in the Higashiyama (eastern hills) area of Kyoto as a retirement villa. The estate became the symbol of what came to be known as Higashiyama culture.

Five years before he died, Yoshimasa became a Zen Buddhist monk. He willed that his villa be transformed into a temple after his death, and the estate was renamed Jishōji (and now commonly called Ginkakuji), after Yoshimasa's Buddhist name, Jishōin.