

Itsukushima Shrine: *Ban-e* Printing Block (Bugaku)

The black woodblock displayed here dates to the 1380s and was used much like a stamp. It was dipped in ink and pressed onto cloth to decorate costumes for *bugaku*, or court dancing, one of the oldest extant performing arts in Japan. *Bugaku* incorporates both indigenous Shinto mythology and Buddhist influences from mainland Asia and is thought to have developed in the eighth century in Kyoto, where the court and most of the aristocracy were based. In ancient Kyoto, the emperor's bodyguards would often be called upon to perform *bugaku*, and this image of a bear is thought to have originated in an insignia used by the royal guard.

Bugaku is distinguished by slow, minimal movements, elaborate costumes, and the *gagaku* music that accompanies it. *Bugaku* has been performed at Itsukushima Shrine since the twelfth century, when the powerful military leader Taira no Kiyomori (1118–1181) rebuilt the shrine, placed it under his protection, and introduced the aristocratic culture of Kyoto to Miyajima. Performances still take place on the shrine's *takabutai*, the square stage on the terrace directly in front of the main shrine building, on set dates throughout the year, and are generally open to the public.