

【Japanese Calligraphy】

Writing in Japan

Writing culture is thought to have been introduced to Japan from China no later than the third century, but it wasn't until at least the seventh century that full-scale documents were produced. At that time, literacy in Japan was generally limited to the clergy and aristocracy, and writing was largely limited to discourse on Buddhism. The composition itself was done either in classical Chinese, or something very close to it. Over subsequent centuries, as each Chinese character was adopted, altered, or abandoned, a uniquely Japanese writing system emerged. The written language came to be supplemented with two additional sets of phonetic characters (*katakana* and *hiragana*) that were developed from simplified and cursive versions of commonly used Chinese characters. By the latter half of the Meiji era (1868–1912), virtually the entire Japanese population was literate, and styles of writing that closely resembled the spoken language of the time had begun to appear.

Writing with a brush has been a sophisticated and respected art in China for centuries, and noteworthy calligraphers quickly appeared in Japan as well. The art came to be known as *shodō* (“the way of writing”). The shape and intensity of a person's brushstrokes is said to reveal subtle aspects of their nature, and skilled calligraphers can achieve great beauty and depth of expression with even a single character. It was particularly important for statesmen and bureaucrats to have refined, respectable handwriting for writing memos, decrees, and other forms. In addition to the aesthetic considerations, the form and content had certain conventions as well—for example, knowing which of many different written greetings to use during which season was fundamental for any daimyo.

Standardization

As writing spread more widely from the aristocracy to the common classes during the early Edo period, calligraphic styles became more and more standardized. One specific style of writing called the “noble house style” (*oieryū*) was used for official documents created by the shogunate. The style, modeled after a document written by an imperial prince during the fourteenth century, was adopted by lower-ranking samurai families and commoners. At the time, spoken Japanese differed greatly from region to region, but the documents and announcements circulated by the shogunate were written in a single, essentially uniform style, which quickly came to function as the standard.

Shogunal Calligraphy

To be given a piece of calligraphy written by the shogun was a great honor for a daimyo family. In the Ii family, a memo jotted down by shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu (1534–1616) was retained and treated as a family treasure. The Ii family's collection of calligraphy includes *waka* poems written by the second and third Tokugawa shoguns, and hand-copied Confucianist passages from the fifth Tokugawa shogun. For the Ii family, whose members occupied powerful positions within the shogunal government, the display of such exemplary calligraphy was likely also a way of affirming their personal connection to the shoguns themselves.