

BOOKS

REVIEWS

Insightful look at sweep of Japanese art over years

JAPAN: SPIRIT AND FORM.

By Shuichi Kato. Translated and adapted by Junko Abe and Leza Lowitz. Tokyo: Tuttle. 259 pp. ¥4,980.

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When someone asked John Steinbeck what "East of Eden" was about, he replied: "Everything."

This is also how one might describe Shuichi Kato's intention for his book on art history, "Japan: Spirit and Form."

Kato looks at Japanese art from the neolithic Jomon period to the present day, examining the artistic impact of outside cultures on long-isolated Japan and Japan's influence on the rest of the world.

His main point is that cultures—like Japan—which develop in isolation do not reflect upon their own progress because they have no outside frame of reference.

This does not necessarily mean stagnation, but rather "the growth of sophistication in traditional technology" and art. This, in turn, enriches the

art of other cultures when contact is finally made, unless those coming in destroy what they have found.

To get a quick handle on what Kato is trying to do with the book flip through the abundant color photos and read Roger Goepner's very good introduction, "Japan and the West: A Productive Dialogue."

Goepner looks at the interactions between Japan and the West from the time of the Portuguese landing in Japan in 1543 to more recent incursions.

It prepares you for the scholarly barrage that Kato has in store.

"If one regards the history of art as the history of shapes, then the history of Japanese art has its origins in (Jomon) earthenware," Kato writes in a chapter that also compares neolithic Japan to cultures thriving at the same time in central America.

This sets the stage for a series of comparative investigations.

In "Shintoism and Buddhism: An Encounter," Kato discusses not only the impact of the sudden entry of



Buddhism from Korea on Japan's mainly Shintoistic culture but how it influenced and re-energized Japanese design and art, particularly sculpture and temples. Kato traces how religious paintings, such as Buddhist *sumi-e*, influenced secular landscape painting.

He also shows how Chinese Amida (Boundless Light) Buddhism influenced Jodo Shinshu, Zen, Tenri and other sects and how it was linked to Kamakura Realism. This school of art, Kato notes, depicted ordinary people rather than aristocrats. It frequently showed people caught

in a particular moment—"fleeting expressions," they were called. A print of a Vincent Van Gogh self-portrait is offered as evidence of the influence the school had abroad.

The book examines the impact of developments in Japanese plastic and pictorial art on Western Impressionism, post-Impressionism, Expressionism and Art Nouveau.

In a chapter titled "The Women of Ukiyo-e," Kato compares the nude in Western and Asian art. He points out that while the nude is dominant in Western art and is found in Hindu and Buddhist works, there is little of it in formal (or "high") Chinese or Japanese art.

Since clothing in China and Japan indicated social status, aristocrats and deities were not portrayed unclothed. This accounts for the fact that Japanese erotic art was confined to "low" ukiyo-e color prints.

Interestingly, the paramount erotic ukiyo-e artist Utamaro painted women "of differing social classes and roles: prostitutes and geisha, respectable

daughters and widows of merchant families."

Amongst all the forms of Japanese art it was ukiyo-e that had the greatest impact on the West. Kato also devotes a chapter to Japanese fantasy and the grotesque, and its Western correlatives, and discusses a modern grotesque in "Tokyo: A City of Transition."

While the scope of the book is vast, Kato tries to make information accessible. For example, if the historical sequences get confusing, you can consult a comparative chronology in the back that lists key dates in the histories of Japan, China and Europe from 10,000 B.C. to 1989.

The book's only drawback is that often the illustrations have nothing to do with the adjacent text. You have to do a lot of page surfing to get a picture of what Kato is talking about.

Apart from this, "Japan: Spirit and Form" is a wonderful book. It is to Kato's credit that, unlike some Japanese art critics, he doesn't mar his book by pushing an ethnocentric, nationalistic agenda in the guise of cross-culturalism.