

Art of Asia and the Middle East

Vocabulary

stupas
scroll
pagoda
woodblock printing
mosques

The cultures of India, China, Japan, and the Middle East have all produced exciting art forms, some very different from European art. The art of Asia and the Middle East reflects different philosophies and religious beliefs from those in Western art.

India

The art of India has been strongly influenced by the Hindu and Buddhist religions. Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religions. It began in ancient India around 2000 B.C. It is not one religion but a group of many related sects. Buddhism began as a Hindu reform movement, and had a strong influence over the country from the third century B.C. to the sixth century A.D. Among the earliest, and most important, examples of modern Indian architecture are **stupas** (**stoo**p-uhs), which are *beehive-shaped domed places of worship*. These were built by Buddhist architects to house relics of Buddha, their religion's founder. Each stupa was reached through four gates covered with relief sculptures (**Figure 12.9**).

After the fifth century, Hinduism rose again in popularity because it was encouraged by the monarchs of the period. Hindu temples and sculptures of the Hindu gods were created. Hinduism combined several different beliefs and practices that developed over a long period of time. In Hinduism there are three primary processes in life and in the universe: creation, preservation, and destruction. The three main Hindu gods reflect this belief system.



► **FIGURE 12.9** Domes such as this were often erected over holy places, burial mounds, and holy relics. What is the purpose of preserving such things?

Great Stupa. Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India.
c. first century B.C.

They are Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver; and Siva, the Destroyer (**Figure 12.10**). In Hinduism, both humans and animals are believed to have souls that undergo reincarnation. Reincarnation is a purification process in which the soul lives in many bodies in many lifetimes until it becomes one with Brahma, the great soul.

India exported its religions to the rest of Asia. In Cambodia many temples were built of stone in the Indian style. The temple at Angkor Wat (**Figure 12.11**) was originally a Hindu temple built between A.D. 1113 and 1150. Dedicated to Vishnu by its builder, it represents the Hindu view of the universe.

► **FIGURE 12.10** The Hindu god Siva is called the Destroyer. This sculpture is rich in symbolism. Notice what the figure is standing on. The objects he holds are a drum that symbolizes creation and a flame that symbolizes destruction. How is destruction related to creation?

Unknown, India, Tamil Nadu. *Siva as Lord of the Dance*. c. 950. Copper alloy. 76.2 × 57.1 × 17.8 cm (30 × 22½ × 7"). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California, given anonymously.



◄ **FIGURE 12.11** The layout of this temple was designed to create a solar calendar by which the summer and winter solstices and the spring and fall equinoxes could be fixed. Why was this important in an agricultural society?

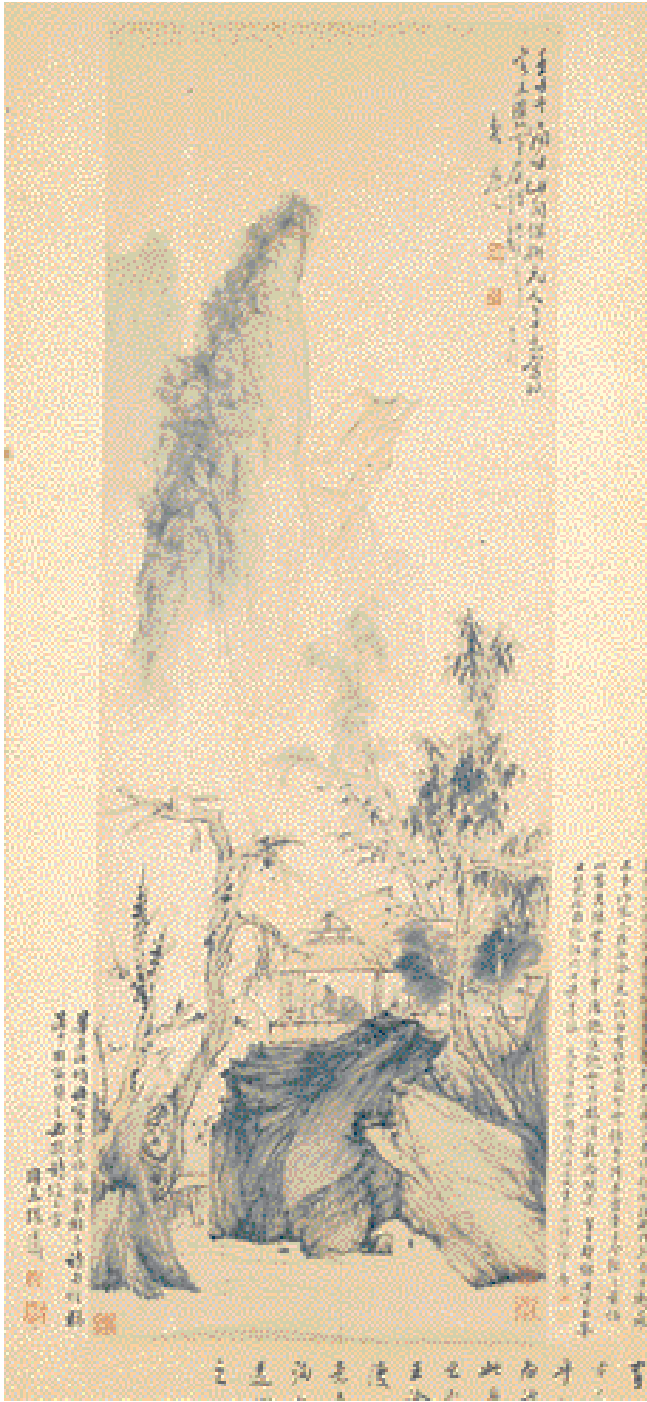
Southeast Asia. Temple at Angkor Wat, Cambodia. 1113–50.

China

China adopted Buddhism during the Han Dynasty, which lasted from 206 B.C. to A.D. 220. Buddhism was easily adopted in China because, like other Chinese religions, it stressed the harmony of human beings with nature. An important part of Buddhism is meditation, focusing one's thoughts on a single object or idea. Chinese artists found that long periods of meditation enabled them to perceive the beauty of an object or a scene with greater clarity. This enabled them to more effectively

capture the beauty of the subject in their paintings. Chinese art of the last 2,000 years has been greatly influenced by Buddhism and meditation.

The Chinese were the first people to consider "picture painting" a valuable endeavor. This was because many artists were also scholars who wrote poems in beautiful writing (called calligraphy) using brushes that could make thick and thin lines. They used these same brushes and line techniques to paint pictures.



▲ **FIGURE 12.12** Notice how small the people are in relation to the landscape. The hut blends in with the natural setting. The calligraphy bordering the drawing is an important part of the picture. Notice how it echoes the shapes of the leaves. How might the calligraphy be part of the “conversation”?

Hua Yen. *Conversation in Autumn*. 1762. Ink and color on paper. 115.3 × 39.7 cm (45% × 15%). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio. The John L. Severance Fund.

They painted fans, pages of books, and scrolls (**Figure 12.12**). A **scroll** is a long roll of parchment or silk. Some were hung on walls, while others were meant to be unrolled a little at a time and read like a book.

The earliest Chinese paintings were filled with images illustrating the beliefs that people should live together peacefully and be respectful of their elders. With the influence of a new religion, Buddhism, the focus of painting began to shift away from humans and toward nature. By around A.D. 1100, the landscape was the main theme of Chinese painting.

The Chinese also produced sculpture for religious purposes and to honor the dead. During the Sung (**soong**) Dynasty (A.D. 960–1279), artists first produced ceramic objects of porcelain made from a fine-grained white clay called kaolin (**kay-uh-luhn**). Work in porcelain reached its highest point during the Ming Dynasty (A.D. 1368–1644). Today, collectors especially prize porcelain from this dynasty (see Figure 5.4, page 99).

Japan

In A.D. 552 the ruler of a kingdom in nearby Korea sent the Emperor of Japan a gift. The gift was a bronze figure of the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. Along with the sculpture came priests to spread Buddhist teachings. Eventually many of the people of Japan accepted this new religion. They also learned about new styles of art. For the next 250 years, Japanese art would show strong traces of Korean, Chinese, and other Asian styles.

The first important Japanese art objects of “modern times” were started in A.D. 594. These were magnificent Buddhist temples that were built throughout the country. Since the islands of Japan are made of volcanic rock, the Japanese could not use stone to build their temples. Instead, they

made them from wood. In the process, they elevated the architecture of wooden structures to new levels.

Japanese temples are intricately assembled and richly decorated. They are carefully fitted together with special joints. Because Japan suffers frequent earthquakes and violent storms, the buildings had to be durable. One of the most interesting features of early Japanese temples was the **pagoda** (puh-gohd-uh). This is *a tower several stories high with roofs curving slightly upward at the edges* (**Figure 12.13**).

The Japanese also created monumental sculptures, often of the Buddha. Such a sculpture can be seen in **Figure 12.14**, the Great Buddha at Kamakura. It was cast in bronze in A.D. 1252. It is situated outdoors in a grove of trees, which seems an appropriate setting for this contemplative Buddha.



▲ **FIGURE 12.13** This pagoda stands as the oldest wooden structure in the world. Its purpose is to preserve relics.

Pagoda from the Temple Complex at Horyuji, near Nara, Japan. c. A.D. 616.



◀ **FIGURE 12.14** The Great Buddha was once housed in a temple, but the temple was destroyed by a tidal wave. What effect does its current location have on this artwork?

Great Buddha. 1252. Bronze. Height: 10.68 m (35'). Kamakura, Japan.

MEET THE ARTIST

KATSUSHIKA HOKUSAI



Japanese, 1760–1849

Attributed to Hokusai. *Portrait of Hokusai as an Old Man*. Honolulu Academy of Arts, Honolulu, Hawaii.

► **FIGURE 12.15** The gust of wind blows away the papers and clothing of the human figures. Mount Fuji stands white and stable, unmoved by the wind or the human drama.

Katsushika Hokusai. *Ejiri in Suruga Province*, from *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji*. 24.6 × 37.9 cm (9²/₃ × 15"). Honolulu Academy of Arts, Honolulu, Hawaii. James A. Michener Collection, 1991.



In A.D. 784, Japan entered its golden age of art. During this period, Japanese artists developed a painting style called *Yamato-e* (yah-**mah**-toh-ay), or “pictures in the Japanese manner.” Paintings done in this style were the first examples of pure Japanese art, meaning that they did not show the influence of other Asian cultures. *Yamato-e* screen paintings were often made in sections and were used to brighten the dimly lit interiors of temples and homes as a temporary wall to divide a room.

Another new Japanese style of art was called *Ukiyo-e* (oo-**kee**-yoh-ay), meaning “pictures of the floating world,” which depict different aspects of the pleasures of life. The demand for artworks in this new style was great. To meet this demand, artists turned to a new technique, **woodblock printing**. This is *making prints by carving images in blocks of wood*. Using this technique, artists could produce many inexpensive prints of one image (**Figure 12.15**).



◀ **FIGURE 12.16**
This building was designed to be in harmony with the surrounding garden and pools. Notice the balance and symmetry of all the elements. What feeling does the building evoke?

Taj Mahal, garden and pools. 1632–43. Agra, India.

Art of Islam

In A.D. 570, an event took place that had a major effect on both the religious beliefs and the art of the Middle East and much of Asia. Muhammad was born in Mecca. He grew up and became a merchant, following the tradition of his family. However, he believed he received personal revelations that challenged him to change the religion of his people, the Arabs, who worshiped many idols. Muhammad taught that there was only one god, called Allah. After his death, his teachings were assembled into the Koran, a holy scripture. Islam was the name given to the religious faith of people who followed Muhammad. Worshipers are called Muslims.

Islamic art (art of the Muslim world) was characterized by the use of ornate line, shape, and pattern. The interior of **mosques**, *Muslim places of worship*, were decorated with calligraphy, geometric patterns, and stylized plants and flowers. Art depicting people or animals was not permitted in mosques. Such art was prohibited early in the history of the Islamic religion and was meant to prevent Muslims from worshipping images when they should instead be worshipping the idea of Allah.

Book illustrators, however, were not limited by the same restrictions. They depicted people and animals in everyday scenes. They filled their illustrations with beautiful decorative patterns.

The religion of Islam, and its influence on art, also spread to the East. Muslims conquered Delhi in India and converted many Indians to Islam. **Figure 12.16** shows a famous building, the Taj Mahal, which was built by an Indian Muslim leader as a memorial to his wife. The building is an outstanding example of Islamic architecture and is considered one of the most beautiful structures in the world. The building emphasizes formal balance and harmony with its surroundings. Its cool marble walls and placid lake evoke a response of serenity and tranquility in those who visit.



Check Your Understanding

1. What is a stupa?
2. What medium did the Chinese often paint on that could be hung on walls or read like a book?
3. Compare and contrast the historical styles in Figure 12.12 on page 328 and Figure 12.15 on page 330. Identify the general trends in art.