

# Art and Architecture of Buddhism in Japan

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

Chinese culture greatly influenced the art and architecture of Japan. This lesson covers:



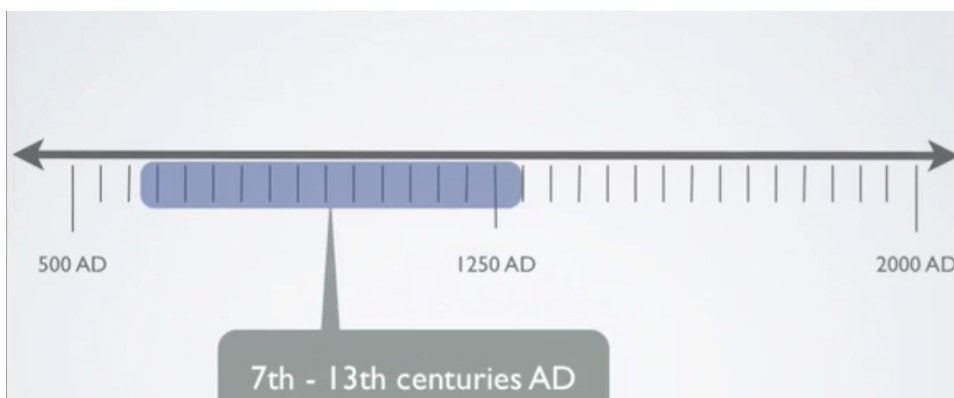
### BIG IDEA

Chinese culture, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Chinese writing, and elements of the Chinese royal court, has been very influential in the art and architecture of Japan.

## 1. Time Period and Location: Art and Architecture of Buddhism in Japan

The period covered in this lesson begins in the seventh century and ends in the 13th century AD. The geographical region covered is Japan, a country consisting of four large islands with numerous smaller islands, and located just east of mainland China.

Below is a timeline highlighting the period covered in this lesson.



## 2. Chinese Cultural Influences on Japan

China's culture deeply influenced Japan in many ways, influencing its writing system, religion, and elements of the royal court. In particular, the Japanese culture copied Chinese Buddhism very closely.

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## 3. Examples of Japanese Art and Architecture

### 3a. Horyuji Kondo

Below is our first example of Japanese architecture.



Horyuji Kondo

7th century AD

Wood

Nara Prefecture, Japan

This piece of architecture is from the Horyuji Buddhist temple complex in the Nara Prefecture in Japan. This is a **kondo**, which is the main hall in a Buddhist temple. It was originally built during the seventh century AD, and has been rebuilt a few times, although its core remains as it was. In fact, it is the oldest surviving example of a wooden building in existence.

The Horyuii Kondo has several formal similarities to Chinese pagodas:

- Curved roof
- Shrinking size of the upper stories
- Wooden building on a stone platter
- Chinese bracketing system, known as dougong (this cannot be seen here, but it is used to support the building)

**Kondo**

The main hall in a Japanese Buddhist temple

**3b. Tori Busshi Triad**

This next image is of a bronze Buddha.



Shaka Triad by Tori Busshi

623 AD

Bronze

Nara Prefecture, Japan

The above sculpture, the “Shaka Triad” from 623 AD, is located within the Horyuji complex, and is a bronze **triad**, a common Buddhist depiction of a central Buddha figure flanked by two bodhisattvas. It was created by the artist known as Tori Bushi. “Bushi” means “maker of Buddhist images.” Here the figures are depicted with elongated heads and highly stylized folds within the robes.

The central Buddha is Shaka, which is the historical Buddha, as opposed to one of his many manifestations. He is seated in the meditative Lotus position, with his right hand in a specific type of mudra, or gesture, called the “fear not” gesture. Behind the Buddha is a highly stylized flaming mandorla.



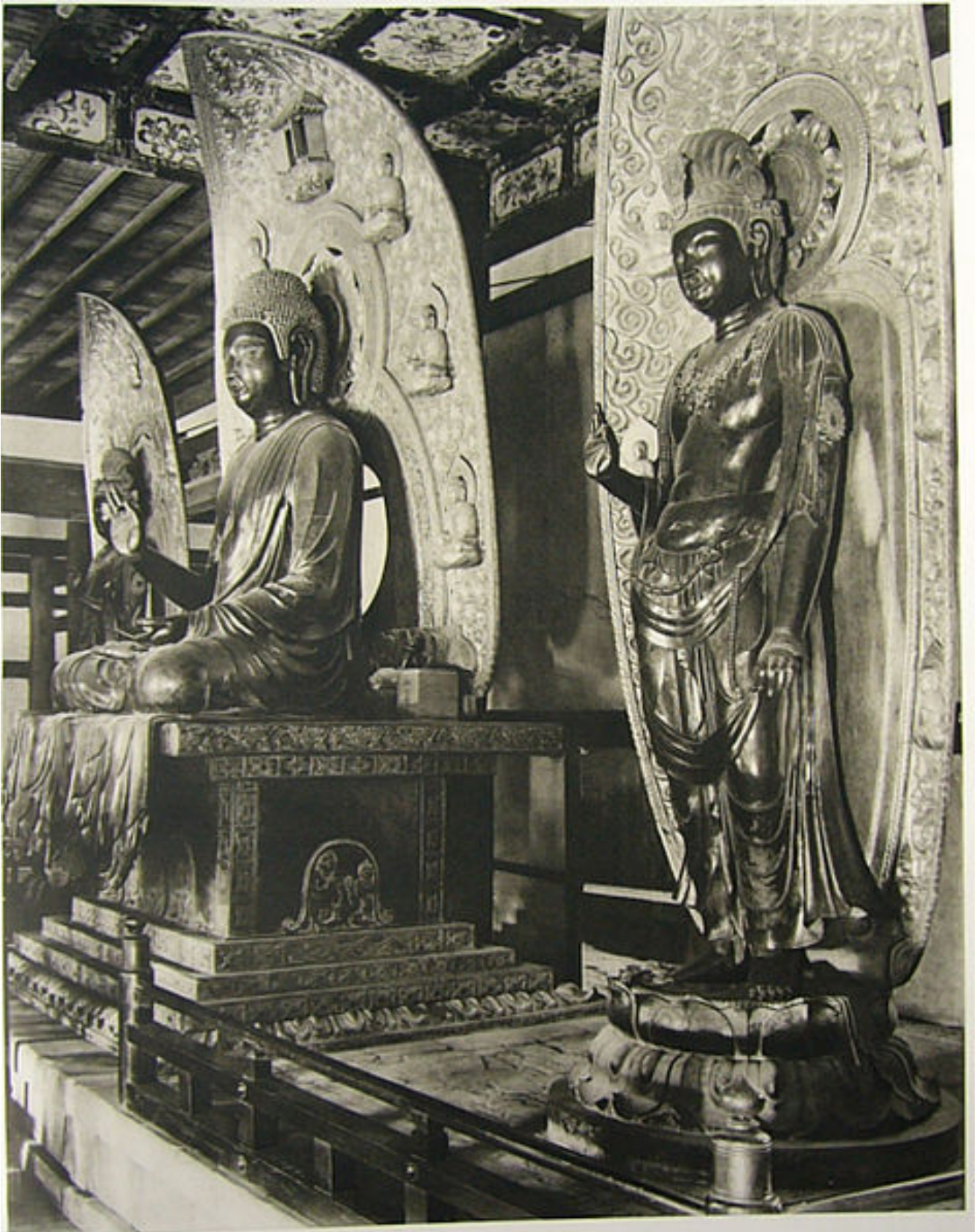
### Triad

In Buddhism, an artistic grouping of three characters, usually Buddha in the center flanked by two bodhisattvas, but there could be some variation

### 3c. “Yakushi Triad”

This next image is of the “Yakushi Triad,” from the late seventh or early eighth centuries.





**Yakushi Triad**

**Late 7th to early 8th centuries AD**

**Bronze**

**Nara Prefecture, Japan**

It shows a stylistic influence of mainland China's Tang dynasty. The artist takes care to render the forms in a

much more realistic manner. The clothing isn't as overtly stylized as it is in the Tori Bushi triad. Instead, it clings to the forms and reveals the body definition underneath.

Notice the contrapposto-like stance of the nearest bodhisattva figure. According to scholars, this stylistic influence can be traced back to the Indian influence on the stylistic conventions of China, which were then borrowed by Japan. This itself may have been the influence of cultural exchange between India and Greece during the reign of Alexander the Great.

### 3d. Scene from *The Tale of Genji*

During the **Heian period** in Japan, the court moved the capital to Kyoto. It was a time of extended peace and prosperity, and during this time a lady of the court, known as Lady Murasaki, wrote the first graphic novel in history.

➔ EXAMPLE This image is from Murasaki's 11th century AD literary work, *The Tale of Genji*.



Scene from Minori Chapter of the Tale of Genji

12th century AD

Color on silk

Kyoto, Japan

The image is a major insight into the courtly life of an 11th century aristocrat, told through the main character, Prince Genji. The scholarly language of the time was Chinese, but *Tale* was written in a more common form called **Hiragana script**. Hiragana script was often used by women, as it was thought to be easier than other forms of Japanese writing. Keep in mind this was a contemporary opinion.

Works of writing such as this were not considered equal to poetry, so it's very likely this would've been looked at as nothing more than a novelty in its time.

The above image is a scene from the talk from *The Tale of Genji*. Interestingly, these stories are told from the perspective of the reader, who views the characters from above at an angle inside a building, thanks to the roof being blown off. This is typical Japanese stylistic preference. Also similar is the way in which emotions are conveyed through color, symbolism, poses, and overall composition.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

### **Heian Period**

“Heian” means “peace and tranquility”; a period from 794 to 1185 in Japanese history when Buddhism, Taoism, and Chinese influences were important; a period of time especially noted for its art, poetry, and literature.

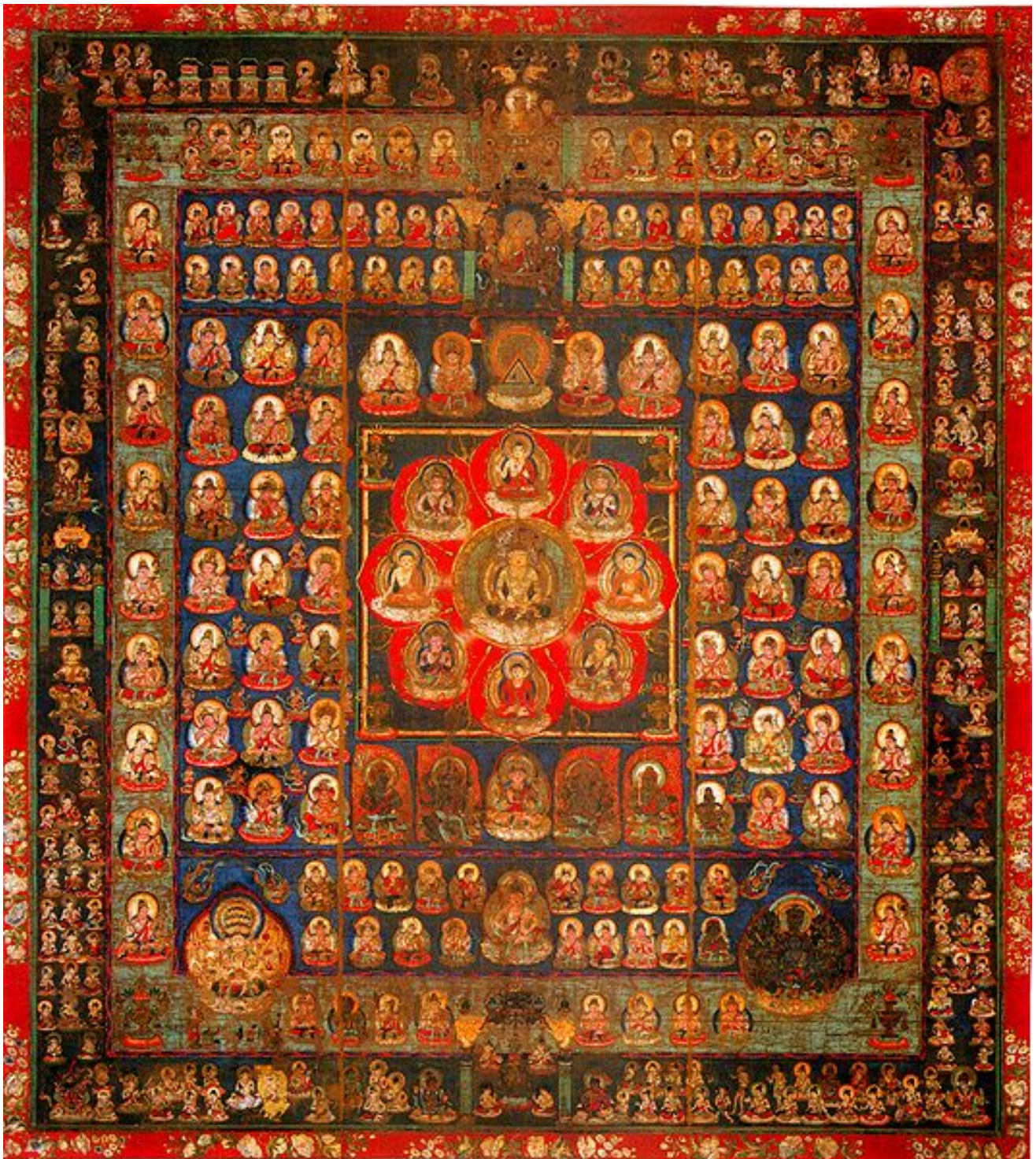
### **Hiragana Script**

Japanese writing system of characters

## **3e. Womb Mandala**

During the Heian period, Esoteric Buddhism became the main form of Buddhism. It emphasized complex hierarchies of gods, which were depicted in mandalas such as the Womb World Mandala, shown here:





Womb World Mandala

Second half of 9th century AD

Color on silk

Kyoto, Japan



#### DID YOU KNOW

This Womb World Mandala can be thought of as a Buddhist flowchart of sorts; it helps to keep things straight.

### 3f. Amida Descending



Pure Land Buddhism remained popular during the Kamakura period in Japan. The late 12th century through the early to mid-13th century set the foundation for feudalism in Japan. Pure Land Buddhism emphasizes the importance of the Amida Buddha and the path to salvation that is achieved by committing oneself to the salvation of Amida Buddha.

During this time, speedy descent images of the Buddha became popular, depicting Amida Buddha shooting down from the clouds to help someone in need, usually a dying person. This next image, however, is an image of the Amida descending slowly over the mountains. Obviously, speedy is a relative term.

➤ **EXAMPLE** Below is an image of the Amida Buddha descending slowly over the mountains.



**Amida Buddha Descending Over the Mountains**

13th century

Color on silk

Kyoto, Japan

### 3g. Phoenix Hall

The pure land of Pure Land Buddhism referred to a paradise, of sorts, created by one of Buddha's manifestations. The Phoenix Hall, located in Kyoto, Japan, uses careful stylistic details such as:

- More accentuated curled roofs
- More recessed, central building

- Narrower space between sections of the roof
- Reflection pool to evoke a sense of a heavenly realm of the pure land on earth

➔ EXAMPLE Below is the Phoenix Hall.



Byodoin Phoenix Hall

1053 AD

Kyoto, Japan



## SUMMARY

Japan and its art and architecture were greatly shaped by **Chinese cultural influences**. This lesson covered the **time period and location of art and architecture of Buddhism in Japan**. Throughout this lesson, you explored works of art and examples of architecture that walked you through these influences. These examples included:

- Horyuji Kondo
- Tori Busshi Triad
- Scene from *The Tale of Genji*
- Womb Mandala
- Amida Descending
- Phoenix Hall

Source: THIS TUTORIAL WAS AUTHORED BY IAN MCCONNELL FOR SOPHIA LEARNING. Please see our





## TERMS TO KNOW

**Heian period**

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**Hiragana script**

Japanese writing system of characters.

**Kondo**

The main hall in a Japanese Buddhist temple.

**Triad**

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