

# diversions

## Artistic beauty in the eye of the Neolithic beholder

### The Living Past

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**T**his story celebrates Man and Woman as Artist. What separates human from beast? Art? Tool-making is a more traditional answer, but some animals make tools; or language, but animals communicate, some with nuances rich enough to be deemed speech. Thought? Another possibility. Without dismissing the alternatives, let's here focus on art.

How far back should we go? The first art form — proto-art at least — was burial, which assumes ritual and decorative aspects before men and women are even fully human. Proto-human Neanderthal Man seem to have sometimes buried their dead on beds of specially gathered flowers. Precise dating is impossible, but 100,000 years ago is one scholarly estimate.

The astonishing paintings Early Modern Humans (formerly known as Cro-Magnon Man) created on walls deep in caves in southern France and northern Spain represent the birth of real art. The earliest of these cave paintings are said to go back 30,000 years.

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Overwhelmingly they depict animals, huge ones more often than not, the prey our remotest ancestors hunted with gradually increasing skill and complexity of organization. Hunting bands were perhaps mankind's first political societies.

Tens of thousands of years separate the earliest from the latest of the paintings so far discovered, an almost incredible changelessness characterizing the style. What did they mean to the artists who painted them, and to their fellow clansmen, huddled in the

depths of the caves viewing them by torchlight? Were they prayers? If so, to gods or beasts? Perhaps the beasts were themselves gods, not so much victims as offerings from generous spirits to needy humanity, as in Ainu lore.

If not prayers, what? Beauty? Did notions of beauty exist in the human mind so very early on? It's hard to believe so — and yet hard to believe not, so beautiful is the result.

Japan's primeval art is not painting but clay figurines known as *dogu*. The earliest are about 12,000 years old and set a pattern that endured for more than 10,000 years. This is Japan in its Neolithic, pre-agricultural Jomon phase (circa 12,000–300 B.C.). The artistic theme is not prey but fertility, not beasts but women — visibly pregnant women. Their beauty, naturally, is of a very different kind, but raises the same questions: Are the figurines prayers? — for fecundity, for life in the teeth of ever-present, ever-menacing death? Was beauty an accidental by-product? — or a goal attained? Art for art's sake? Beauty for beauty's?

The mysteriously expressive faces, the lovingly molded bodies — the artists themselves may have been women, experts conjecture — seem almost to be speaking to us across 10,000 years. Saying what?

Imagine, just for fun, a kind of dialogue, across a gulf of 5,000-odd years, between "Jomon Venus," c. 3,500 B.C., and "Maitreya" — "Miroku" in Japanese — a kind of Buddhist messiah.

"Jomon Venus" is a *dogu*, 27 centimeters tall, unearthed in Nagano Prefecture in 1986. Her eyes slits, her mouth slightly open, her breasts tiny and delicate, her belly swollen, her hips flared, she is fertility personified, life personified, life bringing forth life, life defying death, her unborn child a symbol of survival, hope, a tiny victory snatched from ever-looming, ever-threatening extinction.

The Kudara Miroku — the name hints at Korean origins — is a gilded and lacquered wood statue, a classic of seventh-century Buddhist art, "a sweet-faced pensive figure,"



The 27-centimeter "Jomon Venus," which was recovered in near-perfect condition from the Tanabata site in Nagano Prefecture. TADAHIRO OGAWA

writes George Sansom in "Japan: A Short Cultural History," "exquisitely poised." A national treasure, she graces the Koryuji temple, Kyoto's oldest, built around 603. Right leg resting on left knee, right index finger raised to, not quite touching, the tip of the nose, she radiates a timeless serenity. It is not of this world; nor is it out of this world. What Sansom says of early Japanese Buddhist art in general seems especially pertinent here: "Its pure taste rejects the monstrous and the

ungracious. It does not overflow into the extravagances and excesses of which the Chinese genius is so prolific. It tends to the delicate and the restrained, it is instinctive rather than intellectual, gentle rather than vigorous."

Buddhists await Maitreya's coming — thousands of millions of years hence it is true, but impatience can have no place in the quest for enlightenment — as the ultimate release from the toils of this world. And so we have our two contrasting images: Venus seeming to express a mute agonized fear, too awful for words, that time after all is on the side of extinction, Maitreya's a tranquility infinitely transcending any mere earthly disturbance. Would Venus have been soothed by it?

Beauty itself seems to preside over Japan's Asuka and Nara Periods (552-645, 710-94 respectively), so powerful is the artistic impulse, so subtle the art. Of the clay image of Bonten (Brahma) in the Lotus Hall of the eighth-century Todaiji temple in Nara, Sansom writes, "It shows an almost secular naturalism. ... Yet it is not a mere triumph of visual observation. Realism is there, but with it is harmoniously combined an idealism that could not have flourished in a tired, incredulous age" — like ours.

Here, we might think as we contemplate these masterpieces, is the very soul of Japan. The title that Donald Keene, one of the most eminent Western scholars of Japan, gave his biography of a 15th-century shogun brings us up short: "Yoshimasa and the Silver Pavilion: The Creation of the Soul of Japan." Two developments in particular separate Yoshimasa's time from the centuries we've been considering: Zen and war.

War came first, a shattering intrusion into a country whose first 600 years of civilized life, from the seventh to the 12th centuries, were, in stark contrast to just about every other culture in world history, overwhelmingly peaceful. The court nobles who dominated the Nara Period and the subsequent Heian Era (794-1185) were poets, musicians,

lovers, wine-bibbers, perfume-blenders, sensitive to a fault, moved to tears by the loveliness of flowers, the splendor of the moon, the song of the warbler, the hum of the cicadas — by the sad, haunting evanescence, finally, of all beauty, pathetically doomed to wither in this "dream of a dream" they held the world to be; masters they were of all the civilized arts and refinements; fighters they were not, and when the warriors bidding their time in the remote northeast saw their moment and struck at last, court culture collapsed like a rotten tree. The age of the samurai began.

Zen, Indian in origin and entering Japan via China in the 12th century, is just the religion — more accurately a "way of liberation" — for warriors. Nara and Heian Buddhism was solemn, sonorous, arduous, learned, ritualistic — in a word, aristocratic. Warriors demanded simplicity, and Zen, with its stress on inarticulate experience and contempt for study, prayer and abstract thought, gave it to them. "What is Zen?" "Three pounds of flax." "What's that mean?" "Nothing." "Good." That's Zen! And Zen set Japan's religious and artistic tone for the next 400 years — until peace returned at last in the 17th century.

Ashikaga Yoshimasa (1436-90) reigned as shogun from 1449 to 1473 — "a spiritual weakling, completely under the dominance of his wife," says Keene of him. "His extravagance, his incompetence in dealing with state business, and his inability to succor the people in times of famine or to end the meaningless Onin War (1467-77) are deplored, quite properly."

And yet it is to this man — an utter failure as soldier and statesman but a vigorous sponsor and practitioner of all the Zen-tinged arts that flowered during those very years of unrelieved famine and savage war — that Keene attributes "the creation of the soul of Japan."

To be continued next month. Michael Hoffman is the author of "Arimasen."

### Weekend Crossword: "Coin flips" by Alex Eaton-Salners

- Across**
- 1 Bolts and hitches?
- 7 Gives a hard time
- 14 Dine-in drink freebie
- 20 Porto d'Italia
- 21 Words of grave importance?
- 22 Sheep
- 23 Dirt, so to speak
- 24 Michelle's successor
- 25 Didn't hit
- 26 "Leap onto Grandma's lap!"
- 28 Hobbit hunter
- 29 Reluctant
- 31 ...
- 34 Canonized Mlle.
- 35 "The Man Who Knew Too Much" actress
- 39 Key point?
- 40 Hammarjöld of the UN
- 41 Average fellow
- 42 Capable of performing
- 43 Alum
- 44 Four quarters
- 45 Ripken of the Orioles
- 48 Bobby of the Bruins
- 49 Exam for an aspiring doc
- 50 "\_\_\_, Brute?"
- 51 Dreidel letter
- 52 Hullabaloo
- 53 Hawaii's Mauna \_\_\_
- 54 Hawaiian dish of sliced-up fish
- 55 Guide lines?
- 57 Rubbed some elbows
- 60 Ceremonies
- 61 Metric measure of speed (Abbr.)
- 63 Rich, materialistic workers, colloquially
- 64 "I'm so good at sleeping, I can do it with my eyes closed," say
- 65 Flowers also known as violets
- 69 First name in cosmetics
- 70 Reggae style combining vocals with a DJ's patter
- 74 Bird on Australia's coat of arms
- 75 Codon carrier (Abbr.)
- 76 Hobbit helper
- 77 Seventh Greek letter
- 78 Writing in the sky?
- 80 Peons on a manor
- 85 "Are we there yet?" setting
- 87 \_\_\_ value
- 88 Banned boxing move
- 90 Gorges
- 91 Driver's licenses, say (Abbr.)
- 92 "You some kind of smart aleck?"
- 94 Squeeze (out)
- 95 Trigonometric function
- 97 Small songbird
- 98 "Don't \_\_\_ stranger!"
- 100 Bronte heroine
- 103 Teeth on a gear
- 104 Apartment building divisions
- 107 Matter
- 109 Between continents, perhaps
- 110 Pot starter
- 111 Bob of "Fuller House"
- 112 Carne \_\_\_
- 113 "On the double!"
- 114 Proudful look?
- 116 Stations for the Hogwarts Express?
- 118 Maiden fair
- 119 Grp. with many conveyor belts
- 120 D-Day commander's nickname
- 121 One way Alaska ranks first among U.S. states
- 122 [Achoo]
- 123 Word screamed while jumping
- 124 \_\_\_ Vegas
- 125 Nobel-winning Einstein
- 36 Disney's \_\_\_ Center
- 37 Tent securer
- 38 Some pledge drive rewards
- 45 David and the like
- 46 Take in, as a rescue dog
- 47 Sarge's superior
- 56 Corkscrew shapes \_\_\_ and cry
- 59 Board game reviewer Garcia of "The Dice Tower"
- 60 Frolic without limits
- 62 Three-time Olympic gold-medal-winning skater Sonja
- 64 Rice \_\_\_
- 65 Fleshy fruit
- 66 French female friend
- 67 Unabridged
- 68 Nightingale treatise?
- 69 Mule working the Erie Canal, in song
- 70 "Hang on a \_\_\_!"
- 71 British dairy cattle seller?
- 72 Busy as a bee
- 73 High-pitched barks
- 79 Sounded reasonable
- 80 ...
- 81 Fleecy mama
- 82 Notorious \_\_\_ (nickname of a late Supreme Court justice)
- 83 Seasonal scourge
- 84 Edamame essence
- 86 Try
- 88 Go a-courtin'?
- 89 Surfing spots?
- 92 \_\_\_ all costs
- 93 Swiss miss
- 95 Burns
- 96 Ithaca's sea
- 97 Little skirmish
- 99 Thorny tree
- 101 Grim \_\_\_
- 102 Really rankles
- 105 Curt
- 106 Fajita option
- 107 Language whence "catamaran" and "curry"
- 108 Japanese 1970 World Expo city
- 115 Remarks, slangily
- 117 NBC hit skit show

### Sudoku <http://kjell.haxx.se/sudoku>

Complete the grid so that every row, column and 3x3 box contains a number from 1 to 9.

		8		1				
9							5	6
	7	3		4				2
			5			8	9	
	4					5		
	1					7		2
				7		4		
5		6					8	
					5			

### 7 Little Words

Find the 7 words to match the 7 clues. The numbers in parentheses represent the number of letters in each solution. Each letter combination can be used only once, but all letter combinations will be necessary to complete the puzzle.

- CLUES**
- 1 treat from Krispy Kreme (8)
- 2 time in power (5)
- 3 Venezuelan slugger Cabrera (6)
- 4 pave the way for (10)
- 5 like energy from the sun (5)
- 6 wall (6)
- 7 small crown (5)

UT	NT	RE	UG	MIG
LI	UEL	HN	TA	ME
FA	LA	IGN	TE	CI
TIA	LAR	RA	DO	SO

### Today's puzzle solutions

### Cartoons

### STERMAN'S LAGOON by Jim Toomey

**Sudoku**

6	5	8	2	1	9	3	7	4
9	2	4	7	8	3	1	5	6
1	7	3	6	4	5	9	2	8
7	6	2	5	3	4	8	9	1
8	4	9	1	2	7	5	6	3
3	1	5	9	6	8	7	4	2
2	9	1	8	7	6	4	3	5
5	3	6	4	9	1	2	8	7
4	8	7	3	5	2	6	1	9

**7 Little Words**

1) DOUGHNUT 2) REIGN 3) MIGUEL 4) FACILITATE 5) SOLAR 6) LAMENT 7) TIARA