

diversions

Artistic beauty in the eye of the Neolithic beholder

MICHAEL HOFFMAN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

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.

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 torch-light? 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 *dōgu*. 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 Jōmon phase (circa 12,000–300 B.C.). The artistic theme is not prey but fertility, not beasts but women — visually 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 *dōgu*, 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 Tanabatake 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

ingracious. 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 biding 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 1475 — “a spiritual weakening, 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

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|--|----|---|-----|---------------------------------|
| across | 48 | Bobby of the Bruins | 75 | Codon carrier (Abbr.) |
| 1 Bolts and hitches? | 49 | Exam for an aspiring doc | 76 | Hobbit helper |
| 7 Gives a hard time | 50 | "____, Brute?" | 77 | Seventh Greek letter |
| 14 Dine-in drink freebie | 51 | Dreidel letter | 78 | Writing in the sky? |
| 20 Porto d'Italia | 52 | Hullabaloo | 80 | Peons on a manor |
| 21 Words of grave importance? | 53 | Hawaii's Mauna ____ | 85 | "Are we there yet?" setting |
| 22 Sheep | 54 | Hawaiian dish of sliced-up fish | 87 | ____ value |
| 23 Dirt, so to speak | 55 | Guide lines? | 88 | Banned boxing move |
| 24 Michelle's successor | 57 | Rubbed some elbows | 90 | Gorges |
| 25 Didn't hit | 60 | Ceremonies | 91 | Driver's licenses, say (Abbr.) |
| 26 "Lap onto Grandma's lap!" | 61 | Metric measure of speed (Abbr.) | 92 | "You some kind of smart aleck?" |
| 28 Hobbit hunter | 63 | Rich, materialistic workers, colloquially | 94 | Squeeze (out) |
| 29 Reluctant | 64 | "I'm so good at sleeping, I can do it with my eyes closed," say | 95 | Trigonometric function |
| 31 ... | | | 97 | Small songbird |
| 34 Canonized Mlle. | | | 98 | "Don't ____ stranger!" |
| 35 "The Man Who Knew Too Much" actress | 65 | Flowers also known as violets | 100 | Bronte heroine |
| 39 Key point? | | | 103 | Teeth on a gear |
| 40 Hammamkold of the UN | 69 | First name in cosmetics | 104 | Apartment building divisions |
| 41 Average fellow | 70 | Reggae style combining vocals with a DJ's patter | 107 | Matter |
| 42 Capable of performing | | | 109 | Between continents, perhaps |
| 43 Alum | | | | |
| 44 Four quarters | 74 | Bird on Australia's coat of arms | 110 | Post starter |
| 45 Ripken of the Orioles | | | | |

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122							123						124			125					

- | | | | |
|------|---|-----|--|
| 1 | Bob of "Fuller House" | 36 | Disney's ___ Center |
| 112 | Came ____ | 37 | Tent securer |
| 113 | "On the double!" | 38 | Some pledge drive rewards |
| 114 | Prideful look? | | |
| 116 | Stations for the Hogwarts Express? | 45 | David and the like |
| 118 | Maiden fair | 46 | Take in, as a rescue dog |
| 119 | Grp. with many conveyor belts | 47 | Sarge's superior |
| 120 | D-Day commander's nickname | 56 | Corkscrew shapes |
| 121 | One way Alaska ranks first among U.S. states | 58 | ___ and cry |
| 122 | [Achoo!] | 59 | Board game reviewer |
| 123 | Word screamed while jumping | | Garcia of "The Dice Tower" |
| 124 | ___ Vegas | 60 | Frolic without limits |
| 125 | Nobel-winning Einstein | 62 | Three-time Olympic gold-medal-winning skater Sonja |
| | | 64 | Rice ___ |
| | | 65 | Fleshy fruit |
| | | 66 | French female friend |
| | | 67 | Unabridged |
| | | | Nightingale treatise? |
| Down | | 68 | Mule working the Erie Canal, in song |
| 1 | Liberia's official lang. | | |
| 2 | Mekong River native | 70 | "Hang on a ___!" |
| 3 | Photo ____ | 71 | British dairy cattle seller? |
| 4 | More extravagant NBA jams? | 72 | Busy as a bee |
| 5 | Author T.S. | 73 | High-pitched barks |
| 6 | Savored, as wine | 79 | Sounded reasonable |
| 7 | Pot shop? | 80 | ____ _ |
| 8 | Chimpanzee, for one | 81 | Fleecy mama |
| 9 | Farm buildings | 82 | Notorious ____ |
| 10 | End's opposite | | (nickname of a late Supreme Court justice) |
| 11 | Joust's weapon | | |
| 12 | Front for center? | 83 | Seasonal scourge |
| 13 | "Q: How is a chicken coop like finely stratified sedimentary rock? A: They're both full of layers," and the like? | 84 | Edamame essence |
| 14 | Caesar's time | 86 | Try |
| 15 | "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" musical | 88 | Go a-courtin'? |
| 16 | Problem in an undersized aquarium? | 89 | Surfing spots? |
| 17 | Partners of outs | 92 | ___ all costs |
| 18 | Director Ang | 93 | Swiss miss |
| 19 | Acid, initially | 95 | Burns |
| 20 | Seventh planet | 96 | Ithaca's sea |
| 30 | Smelly | 97 | Little skirmish |
| 31 | Groundskeeper's tool | 99 | Thorny tree |
| 32 | Decadent cake | 101 | Grim ____ |
| 33 | Central American animal with a ringed tail | 102 | Really rankles |
| | | 105 | Curt |
| | | 106 | Fajita option |
| | | 107 | Language whence "catamaran" and "curry" |
| | | 108 | Japanese 1970 World Expo city |
| | | 115 | Remarks, slangily |
| | | 117 | NRC 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.

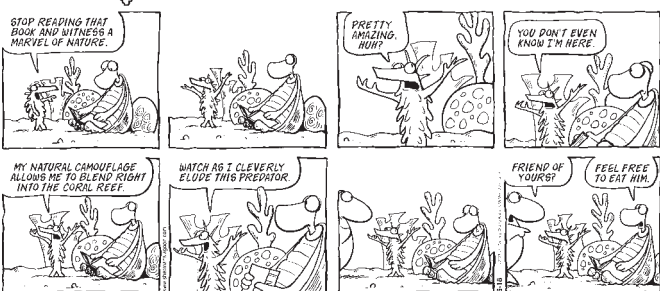
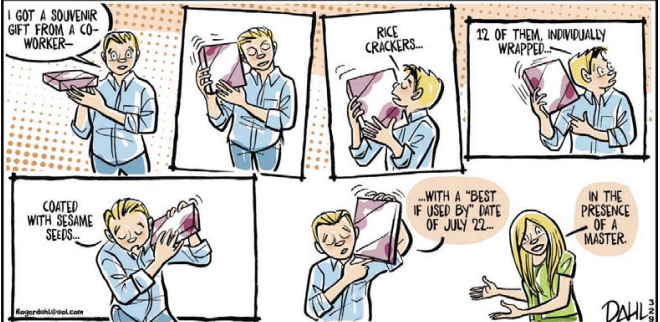
CLUES	SOLUTIONS
1 treat from Krispy Kreme (8)	_____
2 time in power (5)	_____
3 Venezuelan slugger Cabrera (6)	_____
4 pave the way for (10)	_____
5 like energy from the sun (5)	_____
6 wall (6)	_____
7 small crown (5)	_____

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

Zero Gravity



Weekend Crossword

[illegible]

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