

## Haiku

A Japanese poetic form, consisting of seventeen syllables, usually with reference to a season of the year.

Since Japanese is a syllabic language, poets use syllables rather than rhyme in poetry. They may also use similar or contrasting sounds within the poem to create mood.

An early form was called the *waku*, which consisted of thirty-one syllables. This developed into the *haiku* of seventeen syllables of three lines, in the form 5–7–5.

Because the haiku is such a short poem, the poet must rely on the reader's understanding of all the themes, images and emotions associated with each individual word. Often the poet does not name the season or emotion directly.

There are many haiku that use the symbol of blossoms. This usually refers to cherry blossoms (*sakura kana*). They are regarded as the symbol of spring.

Some of the poems celebrate the *hanami* (blossom viewing), which is the subject of Helensburgh's blossom festival. Some contrast the ordinary everyday view with the beauty of the blossom – or the other way round!

In poetry, blossoms can also represent the beginning of a new love, and falling blossoms can symbolise the end of a love affair or the onset of old age.

## Japanese literature

The golden age of Japanese literature is the Heian period, around 794–1185. The most famous works are *The Tale of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu, which is an early novel, and *The Pillow-Book* of Sei Shonagon, which is a memoir of life and love amongst members of the Imperial Court.

The mediaeval period saw the development of the *samurai* and the growing influence of Buddhism. The literature at this time reflects this; for example *The Tale of the Heike* is the story of a power struggle between rival clans.

During the Edo period from the 17th to 19th centuries, drama evolved into *kabuki* theatre, and poetry such as the *haiku* developed and flourished.

In the modern era, Japanese Nobel prizewinning novelists are Kawabata Yasunari, author of *Snow Country*, *The Master of Go* and *A Thousand Cranes* amongst others, and Oe Kenzaburo, whose works include *The Silent Cry* and *A Quiet Life*.

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## Some notes on Japanese books and culture

Celebrating Helensburgh's Blossom Festival  
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## Japanese art and culture

Japanese art is characterised by its simplicity and calm inspired by Zen Buddhism. It influenced many Western artists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as Rennie Mackintosh, James Whistler and Van Gogh.

Japanese art includes not only painting, drawing and printmaking, but many other visual arts. Some of these are:

*Ikebana* – flower arranging. Unlike many traditional Western flower arrangements that include large drifts of colour, Japanese flower arrangements are usually very simple and asymmetric.

*Origami* – paper folding. Usually folded from a square of paper to make models, for example of birds or flowers. The crane is the Japanese symbol of long life, and tradition says that anyone who folds 1,000 cranes will have their wish. In the Hiroshima Peace Park is a statue of a young girl, Sadako, who died as a result of radiation before she could complete folding her 1,000 cranes, so every year the statue is decorated with wreaths of 1,000 cranes.

*Bonsai* – cultivating miniature trees in pots. They are not dwarf varieties, but are kept small by careful pruning. The ideal *bonsai* should look like a natural tree in a beautiful shape, and should demonstrate its true essence.

## Books inspired by Japan

Japan and Japanese culture has inspired some best-selling books by Western authors.

James Clavell's *Shogun* features an English ship's pilot in the late 16th century. By seeing this unfamiliar world through his eyes, we are introduced to qualities and values of Japanese culture. It also provides a gripping story of a power struggle, with strong male and female characters. Some years ago it was shown on TV starring Richard Chamberlain.

*Gai-Jin* is set in the 19th century, when Japan once again opened up to foreigners, and again features the cultural differences between the West and Japan against the backdrop of the fortunes of a trading house.

The world of the *geisha* has been a subject of fascination for Western authors, including Liz Dalby's *Geisha* (an account of her training as a *geisha*) and Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (based on the life of a *geisha* in the 1920s and 30s).

The image of a submissive, beautiful woman catering to a man's every need is perhaps misleading. The training involved perfecting many arts. This included, most famously, the tea ceremony, but the *geisha* was also expected to be accomplished at writing and conversation on all subjects, art and music.

## Manga

Japanese comic books or graphic novels.

They grew out of a fusion between traditional Japanese art forms such as *ukiyo-e* and Western techniques that were imported when Japan opened up to other cultures.

*Manga* developed particularly in the latter part of the 20th century. Many stories and comic strips appeared originally in magazines. The whole story is then bound together in book format.

Japanese writing and printing runs from right to left. When the books are translated, the layout and format often stay the same in order to preserve the design of the artwork that the artist originally intended. This means that to Western eyes the books appear to start at the back!

The artwork has a distinctive style. In particular, the characters are drawn with very large eyes.

In Britain, while comics are popular with children, until recently they have not been seen as suitable for adults. In Japan, the comic book is a respected art form, as it is in parts of continental Europe.