

### **Final Portfolio: Visual Culture in Japan**

#### **Category 1, Question 1 -- Historical, Social, and Cultural Influences on Visual Art Forms**

1) Photo of Mt. Fuji, sakura trees, and a Buddhist pagoda. 2) Modern image of samurai and ninja.

Mt. Fuji, sakura trees, and Buddhism have all had a very large influence on Japan over time and are very culturally significant. When people think of Japan, sakura flowers and Mt. Fuji are probably two images which very commonly come up. Mt. Fuji is a huge tourist draw for both Japanese and foreign tourists and it has a historical religious significance in Japan. It also characterizes Japanese aesthetics values with its near perfect simple, cone shape. Sakura flowers represent the beauty the Japanese believe exists in fragility and transience. From the Heian era, Sakura viewing parties have occurred during the few weeks these flowers bloom in spring, eventually spreading from the nobility to common folk. Though most Japanese people do not identify as religious, Buddhism still plays a cultural role in Japanese life. For example, funerals are conducted according to the tenets of Buddhism. The way Buddhism is practiced in Japan is also very unique, as it is combined with Japanese Shintoism. Around Japan, there are many shrines and temples, and in many cases you can find that they are combined on one plot of land. Because these elements are so prevalent in Japanese culture historically and socially, they can be seen in many photos representing Japan and Japanese works of art. For example, many Japanese national sports teams have uniforms decorated with sakura flowers.

This modern image of samurai and ninja shows cultural change over time, as it shows the modern idea of samurai and ninja. Historically, the sword was not the main weapon of the samurai, and ninja usually did not dress in all black. The main purpose of ninja was information gathering, so they wore whatever would best help them with that; their ranks were generally composed of especially fit and well-trained samurai. It was only during the Edo period that swords became so valued by samurai. However, during the Edo period samurai were, generally speaking, bureaucrats, and the sword was a status symbol. After World War 2, the Japanese were looking for something to be proud of, and the modern incarnations of samurai and ninja were born as symbols of Japan. The modern idea of samurai and ninja can be seen represented across many forms of media in Japan, including tv dramas, movies, manga, and anime. Within Japan and without, ninja and samurai characterize Japan in modern times.

### **Category 1, Question 2 -- Megalopolis Images: Sapporo**

1) Susukino, the entertainment district of Sapporo, at night. 2) Photo of snow sculptures built for the Sapporo Snow Festival in Odori Park.

In the photo of a street in Susukino, Sapporo, many bright, colorful advertisements can be seen. Displayed especially prominently are ads for different brands of beer. Alcohol and other consumer products are part of life everywhere in Japan, and can be seen in advertisements like this, especially in Megalopoli. Advertisements are a form of art which reflect the consumer culture of those they advertise to. The Coca-Cola ad in this photo also shows the western influence present in Japan, which has access to many different western products. Beer was also introduced to Japan by westerners, and has since been truly absorbed into Japanese culture, as seen by the advertisements for famous Japanese beer companies present in this photo.

The snow festival has been taking place in Odori Park in Sapporo since the 1950s, and an international snow sculpture contest has been held every year since 1974. The festival is an enormous draw for both Japanese and foreign tourists, bringing together people from around the world. In this photo, you can see this present in the two snow sculptures visible. The one in the foreground is of a western style palace and the one in the background is a Japanese castle. The festival allows for artistic expression and sensibilities of many different people from around the world to be displayed. However, it still takes place in the Japanese environment in the center of a Japanese Megalopolis, making it a distinctly Japanese event. This mix of foreign and Japanese culture and art is characteristic of Megalopoli in Japan, where Japan experiences the greatest mixture of foreigners and Japanese due to business and tourism.

### **Category 2, Question 3 -- Unique Visual Cultures**

1) Old image of Astro Boy. 2) Recolored photo of four Geisha.

Astro Boy is a manga drawn by Osamu Tezuka that ran from the 1950s into the 60s. It was also made into an anime and has been remade in anime and movie format several times over the years. As one of the original manga and anime, it has had an enormous impact on the Japanese manga and anime artstyle. The large eyes and clear lines present in the artstyle of the Astro Boy manga and anime have come to embody the style people associate with the genre. The show also characterizes a typical shounen (manga aimed at boys) with its young male protagonist who fights to save the day; this type of manga is one of the most popular to this day. Astro Boy also showcases Japan's positive relationship with robots. Unlike in many American shows and movies, in which robots are often the bad guys, Astro Boy is an early example of a humanoid robot as a hero. Japan's media over time has included many such heroic humanoid robots and mechs.

Geisha are another aspect of Japanese culture which embodies its unique visual cultures. In this old photo, four Geisha can be seen in various poses wearing elegant, brightly colored kimono and traditional make-up. The outfits Geisha wear embody the traditional sense of

feminine beauty in Japan. The kimono are bright and artistic, as are their hair decorations, which make the women look as if they are beautiful flowers. The kimono are also not form fitting, which puts the emphasis on the beauty of the clothing and women's faces, as well as their elegance and grace of movement, rather than the female figure. The women's faces are also painted white, showing the value of pale skin as beautiful. Though modern fashion has moved towards more form fitting, western style clothing, the influence of the kimono and traditional sense of beauty is still present. Many modern fashion lines are inspired by the simple, elegant cut of the kimono and bright colors are definitely an aspect of Japanese fashion in many cases. Women also still wear kimono to special events, such as weddings, festivals, and the coming of age ceremony, which shows that they still value their traditional culture and find kimono beautiful. Modern Japanese women also generally try to keep their skin as pale as possible, holding to the value of pale skin as most beautiful. Geisha are also skilled in many different traditional artforms, in this photo this can be seen in the shamisen one Geisha is holding and the dance poses of the other three. Today, not only do Geisha still exist and offer traditional entertainment at high end gatherings, many Japanese are encouraged to take up the traditional Japanese arts such as calligraphy and shamisen.

#### **Category 2, Question 4 -- Ukiyo-e**

1) "Under the Wave off Kanagawa," also known as "The Great Wave," from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, by Katsushika Hokusai, c. 1830-32. 2) "The Pine Island in Night Rain" from *The Mitsubishi Mansion in Fukagawa*, by Hasui Kawase, 1920.

I chose the image of "The Great Wave" by Hokusai specifically because it is so famous and popular. The image of the wave framing Mt. Fuji in the background is a symbol of Japanese culture and art around the world, appropriately so, as it embodies many Japanese aesthetic sensibilities. These sensibilities can be seen in the clean lines and asymmetry of the print. The print also showcases the focus on nature that is typical of many Japanese artworks and forms. In particular, the importance of Mt. Fuji which, though it is often in the background, is the main theme of Hokusai's *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* series. This focus on different natural spots and views is also typical of Ukiyo-e prints which, due to their ability to be produced en masse, were often used to encourage people to travel and see the sights of Japan to increase the tourism industry.

In "The Pine Island in Night Rain" by Kawase, the value of clean lines and asymmetry can also be seen. Again, the value of nature as an artistic subject is also present with the giant, old pine tree as the focus of the print. The fact that the pine tree's branches are held up by man-made supports shows the Japanese respect for nature and interest in maintaining its beauty through cultivation. Furthermore, the Ukiyo-e aesthetic, Kawase's in particular, has influenced modern day artists, such as Hayao Miyazaki and other members of Studio Ghibli. This showcases that the aesthetics present in Ukiyo-e are still valued in modern times.

### **Category 3, Question 5 -- Pre-Modern and Contemporary Japan**

1) Photo of dolls set up for Hinamatsuri. 2) Photo of a Hatsune Miku figurine wearing traditional kimono.

Hinamatsuri, the Doll Festival, traces its origins to the Heian era. During the modern incarnation of the festival, dolls dressed in Heian court clothing are set up. The dolls are very delicately made and the costumes are carefully done and elaborate; often, dolls are passed down through the generations of families. This festival shows the connection between pre-modern and contemporary Japan as the tradition has not changed very much between pre-modern and contemporary times. Japan really values its cultural and historical roots.

The second image shows a more modern type of doll, a Hatsune Miku plastic figurine. These types of plastic figurines are very popular and can be found representing all sorts of characters. They are a kind of symbol of modern times, as they are made of plastic and generally represent very modern character designs, most often showing popular modern characters from various media. For example, Hatsune Miku is a virtual singer, something based totally on very modern technology; she couldn't have existed in pre-modern times. However, this figurine of Hatsune Miku is wearing a traditional kimono and hair pieces, and holding an old style umbrella/parasol. This shows Japan's connection to and appreciation of its traditional culture even in its most modern artforms. There are many depictions like this of modern Japanese characters wearing traditional dress.

### **Category 3, Question 6 -- Traditional and Contemporary Japan**

1) Photo of a traditional Shinto style wedding in modern times. 2) Photos of a modern, western style wedding in Japan.

The first photo depicts a traditional Shinto wedding held in a Shinto shrine, administered by a Shinto priest. The bride and groom wear traditional dress and, though it is in this photo, the bride's kimono isn't necessarily white. This style of traditional Shinto wedding has been around for a very long time, and though this photo depicts a wedding held in modern times, it is still an image of traditional Japan.

The second image, which contains a collage of photos, shows what a "western style" wedding in Japan is like. This style of wedding is often held in "wedding chapels," which are not actually real churches. The "Christian" pastor/priest is usually fake as well. This is because very few Japanese people are actually Christian, they just want to live out the fantasy of a western style wedding. The bride and groom wear a western style white dress with veil and a western style suit, respectively. This style of wedding shows the Japanese fascination with, interest in, and appreciation of western culture in contemporary times.

Both types of wedding are popular in modern times, and couples will sometimes have both types of ceremony. Regardless of the type of ceremony, there is generally a large reception afterwards where the bride will disappear and reappear in several different beautiful dresses

throughout the night. This shows the balance between traditional and contemporary sensibilities that is common in Japan.

#### **Category 4, Question 7 -- Japanese Aesthetics**

1) Photo of ikebana. 2) Photo of wagashi.

Ikebana is the traditional art of flower arranging in Japan, and as such shows off many Japanese aesthetic sensibilities. Ikebana arrangements are typically very simple, as seen in this photo, especially compared to typical western flower arrangements. This photo shows an arrangement that uses only two types of flowers, it has few different colors, and is asymmetrical. The flowers used are also arranged so the branches and leaves can be seen and appreciated along with the flowers. Whereas western style flower arrangements are typically big, colorful, and symmetrical, often with many different types of flower. Typically, the branches and stems cannot be easily seen in a western style arrangement, the focus is brought only to the flowers. The difference between the two styles is very clear.

Wagashi are traditional handcrafted Japanese sweets. Each one is carefully crafted into a work of art that represents the current season, such as a seasonal flower or fruit. The art of wagashi show the propensity for Japanese to appreciate beautiful art that is completely fleeting. Wagashi are gorgeous when made by a master craftsman, but they are meant to be eaten. They are designed to attempt to invoke all the senses while eating, so eating them can be a complete sensory experience as you are reminded of the beautiful sights, sounds, smells, and feeling of the season combined with the delicately sweet flavor and soft texture of wagashi. Western sweets tend not to reflect the season so much, and while western fancy sweets can be gorgeous works of art as well, it is a little less common than it is with wagashi.

#### **Category 4, Question 8 -- Aesthetic Concept: Simplicity**

1) An example of a typical Japanese breakfast. 2) Photo of a Japanese tea ceremony.

This photo of a typical Japanese breakfast shows the aesthetic concept of simplicity present in everyday Japanese life. The color palette is simple and doesn't use too much of any one color; there are only three main dishes with a side of one type of fruit. It is presented on simple dishware that isn't overly bright or overly designed. The food is not overly seasoned and has a limited number of ingredients, allowing the original flavor of the ingredients present to shine through. Food is a huge part of any culture; what kind of foods are common and how they are commonly presented can say a lot about a culture. This isn't a photo of some fancy dish, this is common fare. This shows that ordinary Japanese people have an appreciation for simplicity in many aspects of their everyday life.

The traditional Japanese tea ceremony contains a great many Japanese values and aesthetic concepts, only one of which is simplicity. The tea rooms are small and simple, to reflect humility. There is typically one hanging scroll and one simple flower arrangement to reflect the

season, chosen specifically by the host for their guests. The matcha green tea is presented in a simple, yet beautifully crafted, tea bowl and each guest is presented with a single wagashi to enjoy the contrasting flavors of the mildly bitter match and mildly sweet wagashi. The ceremony is completed with controlled, elegant, scripted movements from the host and the guests and is designed to allow guests to fully appreciate the tea and the host's efforts on their behalf. The experience creates quite a complex picture of Japanese values and ideals, yet is highlighted by its inherent simplicity.

### **Category 5, Question 9 -- The Role of Art in my Life**

1) Image of an origami Yoda. 2) Artwork of Naruto characters by creator Masashi Kishimoto.

Origami is an iconic art form from Japan. I've folded a lot of simple origami in my life; it was one of the first things I associated with Japan. Japan is a big part of my life, as I've been studying it since high school and it is part of my future career goals. In high school, I was president of the Japanese club, and we hosted many origami folding events, as folding origami can be fun for people of all ages. We even folded and sold origami earrings to help raise money for the 2011 tsunami disaster relief in Japan. Administering these events not only helped build my appreciation for the artform, it helped build my leadership skills. I chose an image of an origami Yoda specifically because Star Wars has also been a huge part of my life since elementary school. I built a lifelong friendship around pretending to be a Jedi; Star Wars was a huge part of my creativity and play as a child. The friendship I built with the help of Star Wars shaped who I am today. The mixing of the western Star Wars with the traditional Japanese craft of origami I also find very interesting. I feel it is like taking the best of both cultures, something I aspire to do in my own life.

Naruto is another franchise that has been a huge part of my life, especially in my childhood and teenage years. It was also one of the first things I associated with Japan and it helped motivate me to learn Japanese language and culture. Naruto presented me with my first glimpse into the values and aesthetics of Japanese culture, and I actually learned some Japanese words because of it. It contributed inspiration to my creative life, especially when I was younger. In fact, I chose this image because I actually own the artbook it's featured in. As I grew older, I began to think more critically about Naruto and pick out aspects of it I didn't like, so it also helped to develop my self-reflective and analytical abilities. Like Star Wars, some key friendships in my life were also initially based on a shared interest in Naruto.

### **Category 5, Question 10 -- Japan in the 21st Century**

1) Image showing characters from many of Nintendo's games. 2) Tokyo Olympic bid ambassador, Christel Takigawa, making a speech explaining why Japan should host the 2020 Olympics.

I chose this image of Nintendo characters as the art piece I feel represents 21st century Japan for several reasons. One is videogames are a very modern form of art; I think they

represent the 21st very well in general, especially as they get more and more advanced. Nintendo specifically is a Japan based videogame company which enjoys worldwide recognition. A great many people associate Nintendo and its franchises with Japan. Some games even branch into other media, such as Pokemon, which is both a game and anime. Pikachu and Mario, two iconic Nintendo characters, are some of the most recognizable characters in the world. Nintendo shows the globalization of Japan's culture, ideas, and ever-advancing technology very well. Nintendo games also focus a lot on the ability to play with friends, which is in line with Japan's value of working and socializing in groups.

This image of Christel Takigawa giving the speech to explain why Japan should host the 2020 Olympics includes a lot of how Japan would like to represent itself in the 21st century. Her speech emphasized "omotenashi," the specific Japanese style of hospitality, as one of Japan's best selling points as an Olympic host. The video of Takigawa explaining omotenashi quickly became viral around the world, especially in Japan. This is how Japan wants to represent itself in the 21st century. Omotenashi may be an old concept, rooted in Japanese culture and history, but is present even in the modern day, and Japan is proud of it. The omotenashi speech is especially prevalent as a symbol of Japan because Japan was successful in their bid to host the 2020 Olympics. This shows that Japan has successfully advertised themselves in a way that is positive on a global scale and is attractive to people in the 21st century around the world.