

The Court at Kyoto: Japan's Golden Age

Toward the end of the eighth century, the Emperor and his court chose a new site for the capital in central Japan and built a city surrounded by beautiful mountains. The new city was called **Heian-kyô**, "the capital of tranquility." (It has become the modern city of Kyôto.) During the **Heian period (794-1185)**, named after this city, the country really was at peace, and the aristocrats of the Imperial Court spent much of their time creating a classical culture that still lives today. The Japanese had imported many things from China in the few preceding centuries — Buddhism, Confucianism, poetry (and the language, Chinese, in which poems were recorded), art techniques, methods of organizing government, even the plan for the city of Heian-kyô itself. But as the Heian period progressed, the Japanese took less and less from China, concentrating instead on integrating what they had learned so that it fit their country, their values, and their attitudes. Just as the symmetrical grid arrangement of the streets of the new city gave way to an asymmetrical form, Chinese imports were altered and grew in particularly Japanese ways. The culture that flourished in the tenth and eleventh centuries was dominated by aesthetic concerns and produced art and literature that continues to influence Japanese society and the way Japanese perceive the world.

The aristocrats who lived in Kyôto considered poetry, music, and indeed all the arts to be the most important human accomplishments. They included aesthetic skills we rarely think of now, such as mixing incense to make the most beautiful fragrances. Lovers courted each other with poetry, often written in the form of *waka* or *tanka*, and affairs succeeded or failed according to the sensitivity of the poems and the beauty of the writer's handwriting (calligraphy). Men often gained favor at court more for their abilities in the arts than for their bureaucratic skills. The tales, romances, and diaries of women became the classics of the literature, and the favored poetic form of this age lasted for the next thousand years.

The greatest work of fiction, *The Tale of Genji*, by the lady-in-waiting Murasaki Shikibu, gives a clear and moving image of the ideals and sentiments of the age. Considered the world's first novel, *The Tale of Genji* is written as an absorbing portrait of Heian court life, the splendor of its rituals, and aesthetic culture. It tells of the life of "the shining Genji," his

loves and his troubles, and of the melancholy and sense of decline in the generation after his death. *The Pillow Book* by the court lady Sei Shônagon seems to take us right into the court, as she records her opinions about the small world around her and her experiences with the events of her day. Unlike the wistful and sometimes tragic mood of *The Tale of Genji*, however, the author of *The Pillow Book* expressed the feeling of *okashi*, or a delight in the novelty of life at court. Sei was not shy about expressing her opinions and exercising her wit on all manner of subjects, including the conduct of a love affair.

By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the courtiers' neglect of the more practical matters of government began to tell. The military rulers of the provinces became more and more powerful, until in 1185 power passed out of the hands of the Imperial Court and into the hands of the warriors, the samurai. But even the samurai of later ages owed a debt to the Heian aristocrats, inheriting and developing their Buddhism, their poetry, and their appreciation of beauty.