

Fascinating Insights into Japan´s Golden Age

The rediscovered Japanese folding screen depicting the cityscape of Ôsaka in Eggenberg Palace.

It was in the mid 16th century when the Portuguese landed in Japan, followed by the Spanish, Dutch and English, and not long after that exotic Japanese art objects found their way into Europe. The screen, which can be seen in Eggenberg Palace today, was one of these much sought-after works of art. Originally a traditional eight-panel folding screen, or 'byôbu', it measures 182 cm (height) by 480 cm (length) and is therefore considerably larger when compared with other remaining Japanese painted screens. Most probably acquired by Prince Johann Seyfried von Eggenberg from Dutch merchants between 1660 and 1680, this valuable Japanese artefact was initially used in his Town House in Graz. Some decades later it was dismantled into its eight panels for the redecoration of the Bel Étage in the Palace, which started in 1754. These panels were individually embedded into the wall of one of the then highly fashionable Indian Rooms and alternately embellished with painted Chinoiseries to create a beautiful wall decoration, thus ensuring the preservation of this extremely rare and valuable piece to the present day.

The scene represented is painted in a traditional Japanese style using plant and mineral paints on paper. It is by a so-called machi'eshi (independent town painter), who we know nothing further about and was most probably painted between 1607 and 1614. It is also unknown who commissioned the screen; however, it probably originates from the circle of lords closest to the unifier of Japan, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536 – 1598). Hideyoshi rose from a simple soldier from the lowest classes to become the most powerful commander and unifier of the realm, who brought peace and prosperity to the country after a century of civil wars.

The representation depicted on the folding screen is one composite painting of Ôsaka and must be read from right to left. It shows the largest and most splendid castle complex of 16th century Japan with the surrounding districts of the town and significant religious sanctuaries. The picture depicts a bustling cityscape. Approximately 500 people, both samurai noblemen and townspeople, wear the brightly coloured clothing and large patterns with individual designs characteristic of this period (1596 – 1615). All the buildings are kept in friendly, light colours. Richly decorated, gilded bands of clouds, a typical stylistic device used in Japan, have been added to incorporate the various different vistas of the castle town and events happening at different times into one composition. Hardship or poverty is not illustrated.

Only very few representations of the castle and cityscape exist from this peaceful and prosperous period up to the destruction of Ôsaka in 1615. The Eggenberg folding screen is therefore an invaluable document of the Toyotomi period. The representation is, however, not to be taken as a lifelike image, but must be understood as a stylised painting with characteristic elements. The scale of the buildings and people is nowhere near realistic. The people are portrayed as much too large, while buildings and ships are on the other hand purposefully painted so small to enable as many as possible to fit into the picture, a typical stylistic device of folding screen paintings. Furthermore, only specific details of castle buildings, temples or cityscape are portrayed.

The vista goes from the north (bottom corner of the picture) to the south (top corner of the picture). Parts of the castle town can be seen to the west on panels I and II. The massive fortified castle complex takes up the largest area (panels II to VIII). It is encircled by the Yodogawa and Yamatogawa rivers to the north and the outermost defensive moat, used as a navigable canal, to the west. Topographical details in the south and east have been omitted for compositional reasons. To the far left on the last panel (VIII) faraway Buddhist and Shinto temples in the neighbouring provinces are depicted. These all have a special significance within the Toyotomi family – either as personal donations, scenes of festivities or theatres of war.

Hideyoshi had planned for his Ôsaka residence to become the most formidable seat of power and commerce in Japan. After his death, Hideyoshi's son Hideyori (1593–1615) had, however, not yet come of age and the Toyotomi family soon lost its powerful ruling position to the Tokugawa clan, who then heavily developed the city of Edo, today's Tokyo, into the new seat of power. Osaka did, however, remain Japan's centre of commerce for many centuries to come.

The monumental castle complex was constructed in four phases between 1583 and 1599. This folding screen depicts Osaka between 1596 and 1607. At this time the city had also become the cultural centre of Japan. It was flourishing as a port of trade with foreign countries, which thus enabled the warlords and townspeople of Ôsaka to live in great affluence. This prosperity was reflected in impressive, monumental structures, the arts, flamboyant clothing patterns and many other areas. New pleasures and art forms such as, for example, the Japanese Art of the Tea Ceremony, of which Hideyoshi himself was a master, quickly became popular.

Apart from depicting various customs and traditions of 16th century Ôsaka, the Eggenberg folding screen is also characterised by unique details: The "Paradise Bridge" is only ever shown in this painting with its tiered wooden structure and magnificent lacquer decorations, as yet no other illustration has been found of Hideyoshi's famous pleasure boat, the "Hôômaru" (Phoenix Ship), the castle's third bailey is also not known to exist on any other painting and scattered gold clouds have been applied in a unique relief-like design with three different floral patterns.

The Toyotomi era may have only been short, but it was of enormous significance for Japan's political, social and cultural development. The painting on the folding screen is a hymn of praise to the power and glory of the legendary Taiko, who had already departed this world when the screen was decorated, Toyotomi Hideyoshi – in his lifetime the most powerful man in Japan and upon his death, deified.



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Ôsakajô-zu-byôbu

Folding screen depicting Ôsaka Castle

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Phoenix Hall in the Byōdōin Temple

The Phoenix Hall, completed in 1053, is the most famous building in the Byōdōin temple complex in Uji. It is still regarded as the most beautiful architectural masterpiece of ancient Japan to survive to the present day. With its stunning gardens it represents Buddha Amida's paradise on earth, into which all believers desire to be reborn after their death.

Inner Bailey

The "inner or first bailey" was established in 1583-1585. Standing-out from afar is the main five-layered keep. The lavish private and public palaces of the Toyotomi clan are surrounded by a massive wall with corner defence towers.

Shitennōji Temple

The Buddhist "Temple of the Four Heavenly Kings" (Shitennōji), which was already significant in ancient times, can be recognised by its famous stone torii, erected in 1294. A torii gate comprises two upright posts, on the top of which rest two cross-beams.

Sumiyoshi Shrine

The Sumiyoshi Shintō shrine complex portrays four similar religious buildings, the curved bridge in front and the stone stage for ritual dances above the canal to the right.

Procession

Every summer a huge procession carries the Sumiyoshi deities in their mikoshi (portable shrines) to the port of Sakai and back. Known as the Sumiyoshi festival, this procession was and still is very popular in Ōsaka today.

Senba district

People can be seen strolling through the prosperous district of Senba. Images of restaurants, fishmongers and street performers are visible. Children can be seen playing. The magnificent Shintō shrine to the right is most probably the Nintoku Tennōgū shrine dedicated to Emperor Nintoku.

Daigoji Temple

This building is most likely the Daigoji Temple, which had been heavily damaged in 1470 during the vicissitudes of civil war. It was completely rebuilt by Hideyoshi and his son Hideyori. In 1598, Hideyoshi held a famous Blossom Viewing Party at Daigoji Temple, which was attended by over 1,300 women.

Iwashimizu Hachimangū Shrine

On the summit and at the foot of Mount Otokoyama lies the Shinto shrine of Iwashimizu Hachimangū. It is dedicated to the god Hachiman, divine protector of the Imperial Court in Kyoto and the god of war of the samurai noblemen.

"Paradise Bridge"

The richly decorated Paradise Bridge alludes to the Buddha Amida's "Pure Land", a paradise, into which all believers desired to be reborn after their death. It was only located here from 1596 to 1600. After that, the magnificent tiered structure with rich lacquer decoration was dismantled and integrated into the mausoleum for the departed Toyotomi Hideyoshi in Kyoto.

"Third Bailey"

The "third bailey" was established in 1598-1599. This is only depicted here by the area of Sasanomaru, which served to protect the entrance to the second bailey. Within its mighty walls and gates sits a high-ranking daimyo in a palanquin surrounded by his retainers.

Hideyoshi's pleasure boat and the Kyōbashi bridge

Toyotomi Hideyoshi enjoyed wooing his women on boats. The Eggenberg screen shows the only known depiction of his famous pleasure boat, the "Hōdōmaru" (Phoenix Ship). The gilded phoenix on the roof, the illustrations of white herons and willows on the wall decorations are all indications of the luxurious furnishings.

Luxurious express boat and the Tenmabashi bridge

Rowed by numerous men, the express boat on the Yodo river is owned by the most powerful man in Japan, the unifier of the realm, Toyotomi Hideyoshi. This is revealed by his coat of arms crest, the Paulownia flower, on the red cloth that covers the top of the boat.

Outermost defensive moat to the west

The defence moat, used as a canal and spanned by numerous bridges, connects the Uemachi district to the left and the Senba district to the right. The "Korea Bridge" at the bottom is an important hub of activity where a money changer is going about his business.



Detailed illustrations



1. Street performers

In the centre of the five musicians is a young man, who is rotating eight cymbals on ribbons around his neck at lightning speed while at the same time hitting them with two small hammers.



2. Children's games

A popular boy's game is "fighting with sticks" where two groups fight each other using long sticks. To the left of them one boy is riding on a hobby horse.



3. Money changer

Crouching in front of a money changer, a traveller gets his gold or silver coins weighed and changed into an appropriate amount of smaller coins on the "Korea Bridge", which is crossed by travellers from all different parts of Japan. These coins have holes in the middle so that they can be strung together.



4. Falconer

Falconry was the most popular pastime of the warring class. Toyotomi Hideyoshi also had many falconers in his service, who held an extremely prestigious position at court.



5. Noble women

Three upper-class women – recognisable by the lightweight silk kimonos covering their heads and shoulders and the fans in their hands – are on an excursion with their servants.



6. Tea house

A master of the Tea Ceremony is preparing a bowl of tea for his guests in a tea house with a thatched roof. He is just about to ladle hot water from the kettle into the tea bowl in his left hand. On the roof is a pail of water as a means of fire protection.