Japan Cultural Expo
Exploring the Arts of Japan from Antiquity to the Present
Exploring 10,000 Years of Cultural Practices

Attracted to Japanese paintings like those of artist Katsushika Hokusai? Curious about ancient techniques for wooden architecture or the works of famous modern architects such as Kenzo Tange and Kengo Kuma? The Japan Cultural Expo, a series of art and cultural programs across Japan, will go into full swing this year. It offers opportunities for lovers of Japanese culture to learn and embrace both traditional and contemporary arts, such as cultural assets, performing arts, media arts and music, as well as food and lifestyles that have developed in Japan over the past 10,000 years, beginning with the prehistoric Jomon Period. Leading up to the Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo, the expo began in 2019 under the theme “Humanity and Nature” and will continue beyond 2020. Its programs are intended to inspire and share with visitors how nature has cultivated creativity in Japan.

Some of the major programs scheduled for this year are outlined here. However, some exhibitions are temporarily closed in March due to the coronavirus outbreak. Please contact each museum to confirm the schedule.

April 28 to June 21, 2020

Kyoto National Treasure: To Protect and Convey Japanese Treasure

Commemorating the reopening of Kyoto City Kyocera Museum of Art, this exhibition showcases a collection of over 40 National Treasures, including paintings, sculptures, craft pieces, writings, archaeological artifacts and other historical items involved in Kyoto’s history. The exhibits cover the Heian Period (794 to 1185) through the Edo Period (1603 to 1868). The program also offers a glimpse of the work that goes into restoring cultural artifacts, such as securing the materials needed for restoration work, passing down the necessary skills to the next generation of craftspeople. Other displays focus on the enhancement of skills and procurement of raw materials specifically used for those traditional architectural buildings.

Venue: Kyoto City Kyocera Museum of Art

November 2020 to February 2021 (tentative)

Late March to June 1, 2020

Timeless Conversations 2020: Voices from Japanese Art of the Past and Present

This unique exhibition will shed an entirely new light on Japanese art through a comparison of classic and contemporary artworks. Pre-20th century pieces including paintings, Buddhist statues, pottery and swords will be paired with artworks by eight contemporary artists in eight separate exhibition rooms. Works in the pre-Heian Era include works by legendary artists such as Soga Shohaku, Ogata Kenzan, Enku, Sengai Gibson and Katsushika Hokusai. Works by eight prominent contemporary Japanese artists: Rinko Kawauchi, Tomoko Konnoke, Shirsagar Kotoshuji, Koito Suga, Koji Tanada, Tsuyoshi Tane, Akira Minagawa and Tadanori Yokoo will be on display alongside the classic exhibits.

Venue: National Art Center, Tokyo
URL: https://lotengenatural.exhibit.jp

The Architecture of Japan: Natural Materials Meet Traditional Techniques

This exhibition features Japanese architecture, which has been developed using a wide range of natural materials such as timber, earth and stone. Visitors can see and learn about Japan’s architectural history through some 50 model buildings from the pre-Meiji Era to the present day. These one-tenth scale models, including works from Todaiji temple in Nara Prefecture covering the Kamakura Period (1185 to 1333) to those from the Kanchin Guest Hall covering the Edo Period (1603 to 1868), were built by actual shrine and temple carpenters. There are also structures from the 20th century such as the Main Building of Tokyo’s Imperial Hotel, which was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and built in 1922. Explanations of wooden architecture techniques and the characteristics of various building styles will be offered during guided tours.

URL: https://japanculturalexpo.bunka.go.jp/en/livetx/10/
People are invited to explore Japan’s rich and diverse performing arts history ranges from the classical theater of kabuki, bunraku, noh and kyogen to diverse performing arts history ranging from the classical theater of kabuki, bunraku, noh, and kyogen to the folk art of kumi-odori. This interactive exhibition provides attendees with an overview of these practices, all of which are accredited by UNESCO as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Visitors can experience what it’s like to be a kabuki actor through interactive displays. Attendees will be immersed in the intricate costumes, various props and array of musical instruments, alongside impressive reproductions of the different stages used in each field, to discover more about these traditional performing arts. Priceless footage courtesy of Japan’s national theaters provides further learning, while regularly scheduled demonstrations and symposia give an exiting glimpse into the both the accessible yet rarified world of each artform.

Venue: Hyogoikken, Tokyo National Museum

2020 National Noh Theatre Showcase Performances
Newcomers and dedicated fans alike of noh and kyogen have further opportunity to indulge in their love of the practice through a series of performances held at the National Noh Theatre.

Of special note is a specially curated program of shortened two-hour shows drawing upon “Humanity and Nature in Japan,” the designated theme of the Japan Cultural Expo and scheduled in conjunction with the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Non-Japanese speakers need not miss out; individual LCD displays located on the back of each seat typically feature subtitles and simply worded explanations of noh plots and simply worded explanations of noh plots for novice viewers via English, simplified Chinese and Korean languages.

Venue: National Noh Theatre
Date: July 20 to Sept. 5
URL: https://www.ntj.jac.go.jp/schedule/nou/2020/7910.html?lan=e

Washoku: Nature and Culture in Japanese Cuisine

Washoku, traditional Japanese cuisine, has gained global recognition and popularity in recent years, especially after it was added to UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2013. This exhibition examines the allure of the quintessential Japanese cuisine from different perspectives. These include how it has evolved over time, distinctive cooking techniques and abundant natural ingredients found across the archipelago.

From bluefin tuna to radish and mushrooms, the exhibition is a showcase of more than 250 food samples, interactive images and other items. It sheds light on the versatility of produce grown or caught in Japan and develops space food.

Venue: National Museum of Nature and Science, Tokyo
URL: https://washoku2020.jp/english.html

KIMONO: Fashioning Identities

The kimonos—literally “something to wear”—is not only one of Japan’s most iconic symbols, but also perhaps one of the most recognizable pieces of clothing in the world. A garment for all occasions, it is surprisingly utilitarian in its functionality. Yet the kimono is also a culmination of outstanding craftsmanship, with the garment’s different textiles, patterns and colors all signifiers of Japanese culture and aesthetics.

Enter “KIMONO: Fashioning Identities,” an exhibition examining the remarkable evolution of the garment since its inception roughly 800 years ago. From precursory kosode (“small sleeve opening”) garments to contemporary interpretations of kimonos by modern artists, the exhibition is an array of over 200 pieces celebrating this remarkable and most distinctive apparel. Such is the kimonos’ worldwide allure that several major museums—New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and the Victoria and Albert Museum—are also involved. People are invited to see showcase pieces debuting in Japan, or attend the international symposium held in conjunction with the exhibition.

Venue: Heiseikan, Tokyo National Museum
URL: https://www.tren.jp

More than 250 food samples, interactive images and other items will be on display at the “Washoku: Nature and Culture in Japanese Cuisine” exhibition.

It’s not just art. It’s how we see the world.
President Junko Kawamura hopes the expo sheds light on Japan’s culture of respect

Maciko Murakami CONTRIBUTING WRITER

 Held across the years before and after the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, Junko Kawamura, president of Japan Arts Council, is confident that the Japan Cultural Expo will offer a great opportunity for people from Japan and abroad to appreciate and learn about the beauty of nature found in traditional food, clothing, housing and arts and culture.

The expo, co-organized by the Japan Arts Council and the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan, is themed “Humanity and Nature in Japan” and consists of hundreds of programs, broadly covering history, life and culture from the prehistoric Jomon Period (circa 10,000 B.C. to circa 300 B.C.) to the present.

“I hope Japan’s view of nature and the attitude of respecting all living things will be shared globally,” Kawamura said in an interview at her office located inside the National Theatre’s complex.

Kawamura expressed hope that through the various programs at the expo, international audiences and visitors will witness both tangible and intangible skills that have supported the life and culture of Japanese through traditional methods of expression, as well as modern presentations inspired by tradition.

Describing Japan as an island country with diverse geographic features that include mountains, forests, rivers and seas, Kawamura said that the country is blessed with abundant nature that evolves with the changing of the seasons.

“You can see in our artworks and culture in our i-shoku-ji (clothing, food and housing). For example, we put away the clothes for one season and take out the ones for the next season. Even with today’s Westernized ways of living, Japanese ways of doing things like that still alive,” she said.

One of the programs that illustrates Japan’s traditional clothing culture is an exhibition titled “Kimono: Fashioning Identities” starting on April 14 at the Tokyo National Museum.

Kawamura explained that Japan’s seasons and nature are also alive in many of Japan’s artworks.

“For example, there are works of folding screens that express the continuation of the seasons. In the countdown to the 2020 Olympics, there are often small flowers used as symbolic stage props that audiences constantly share the understanding of which season the scene is unfolding in,” Kawamura said. Take, for example, how animals and plants are depicted in the way that they also have emotions and characters like humans do in many works of art. “These expressions come from the sense of awe we have for everything that exists,” she said.

Japanese is the field of washoku, Japan’s culinary culture that has been designated a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, there will be an exhibition that aims to facilitate scientific understanding of washoku at the National Museum of Nature and Science, Tokyo.

To learn about modern and traditional architectures in Japan, Tokyo exhibitions featuring two major Japanese architects, Kenzo Tange and Kengo Kuma, are scheduled to start on Mar 26. Of the most notable works is the Yoyogi National Gymnasium that served as one of the venues for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Kuma, one of Japan’s leading architects, and his team designed the new National Stadium for the upcoming Olympic and Paralympic Games.

“There are also exhibitions showcasing Japanese architecture held concurrently in three locations in Tokyo. These exhibitions feature buildings from the Asuka Period (552 to 645) to today, designed in the way that match the characteristics of Japan’s nature,” said Kawamura.

Many architectural models will be presented to better describe the historical progression of architectural technology. Not only the Japanese tradition and skills in wooden architecture, but repair and restoration techniques are focuses of these exhibits. Such traditional architectural craftsmanship has also been nominated for addition to UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list.

Kawamura stressed that those programs are a result of a multitude of efforts and ideas developed to help visitors, especially those from overseas, understand Japanese tradition and culture.

“Offering hands-on experience is one of the ways to help people enjoy exhibits and performances from their own viewpoint,” said Kawamura in one of last year’s events titled “Experience Japanese Culture, Samurai Manal! Explore Japanese Armor at the Tokyo National Museum,” a full-sized and weighted replica of armor was available for visitors to try on. A noh theater workshop allowed participants to actually play a traditional Japanese musical instrument such as the drum or learn part of a song from a play.

This year, an interactive exhibition titled “The World of Traditional Performing Arts: Kabuki, Bunraku, Noh, and Kyogen, Galakan, Kumon-odori” is scheduled to take place from late March until May 24 in Ueno. It will exhibit these five different disciplines of Japanese performing arts, all recognized by UNESCO as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list.

Unlike typical exhibitions showcasing stage props and costumes, “People can actually try kumadori, kabuki-style makeup on using digital art technology. You can also see the back of the bunraku stage to learn how puppeteers manipulate puppets,” she said.

These kinds of events are being held throughout Japan from Okinawa to Hokkaido. I hope that people also visit various regions and interact with regional cultures as well,” she said.

In Hokkaido, a series of programs related to Ainu people and culture are to be held at the Upponyn National Ainu Museum and Park, a new museum featuring Ainu indigenous people in Hokkaido scheduled to open in Shiraoi, Hokkaido, on April 24, as well as other locations across the prefecture.

Designed to demonstrate both the diversity and universality of Japanese culture, Kawamura pointed out that the Japan Cultural Expo is a platform for the country to introduce the way its people have interacted with nature and its history of sustainable living to the world.

“I imagine how our ancestors lived with nature. What is it like to coexist with nature rather than just pursuing efficiency? The respect for the nature includes the respect for other humans,” Kawamura said, expressing hope that the expo may trigger such thoughts in people, making a positive impact in the global conversation.