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YAKITORI

JAPAN

IN 100 WORDS

FROM ANIME TO ZEN
Discover the Essential
Elements of Japan



IKEBANA



YŌKAI



SUSHI



YŪZEN



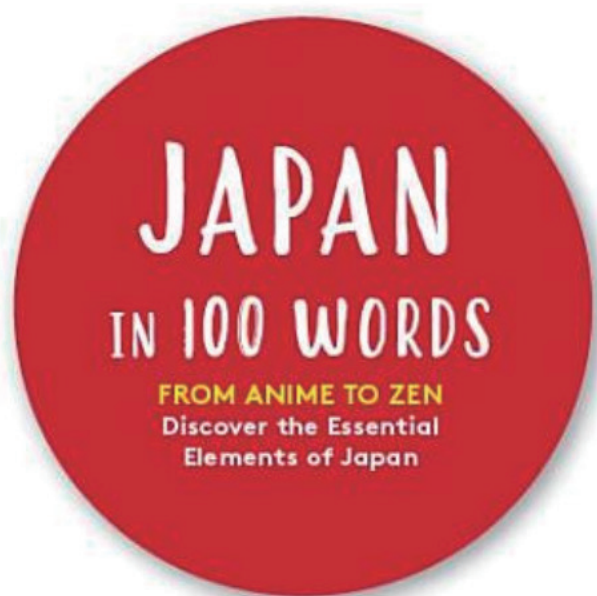
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Discover the Essential
Elements of Japan

Ornella Civardi & Gavin Blair

Illustrations by **Ayano Otani**

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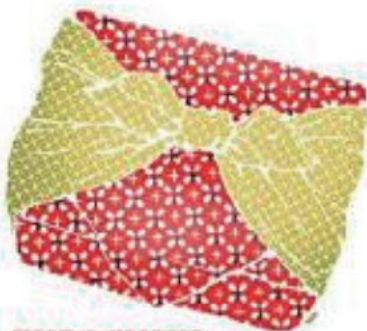
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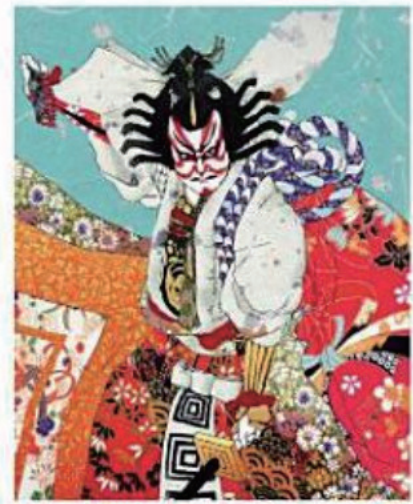


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アイヌ

Ainu

The Native People of Hokkaido

Though less well-known than many others, the story of Japan's Ainu people is sadly reminiscent of indigenous populations around the globe: subjugation, stolen lands and the destruction of culture and language. One legend says, "Ainu lived in this place a hundred thousand years before the Children of the Sun came." In reality, it was likely thousands of years before the Japanese arrived. They once occupied the northern part of the main Honshu island, Hokkaido, and the Kuril Islands, now controlled by Russia. During the middle ages, the Japanese pushed them northward and brought diseases that, along with conflicts, decimated their populations and confined them to Hokkaido.

Ainu genetics link them to the people of Tibet, the Indian Andaman Islands, northern Myanmar and Okinawa. They were generally lighter skinned, more hirsute, had deep-set wide eyes and were bigger than the Japanese. Ainu were animistic hunter-gatherers who believed the bear to



be the most important of the spirits that occupy all nature. Traditionally, the men never shaved and the women tattooed themselves around their mouths and sometimes on their forearms. They lived in villages of thatched huts and dressed in robes spun from elm tree bark, tied with a waistband, with leggings of deerskin in winter.

From the 16th century, Japan colonized Hokkaido, again taking Ainu lands and suppressing their culture, annexing the island in 1869. In 1899, an act declared Ainu former aborigines and forced assimilation, banning their language, tattoos and other elements of their culture. The act was not repealed until 1997 and they were partly acknowledged as indigenous people in 2008. In February 2019, a law formally recognized Ainu culture and laid out measures to preserve it. Fewer than 20,000 people now identify themselves as Ainu, though the true number may be ten times that, as discrimination led many to hide their roots. Only a handful of people still speak the Ainu language, though efforts are underway to revive it.



アニメ

Anime

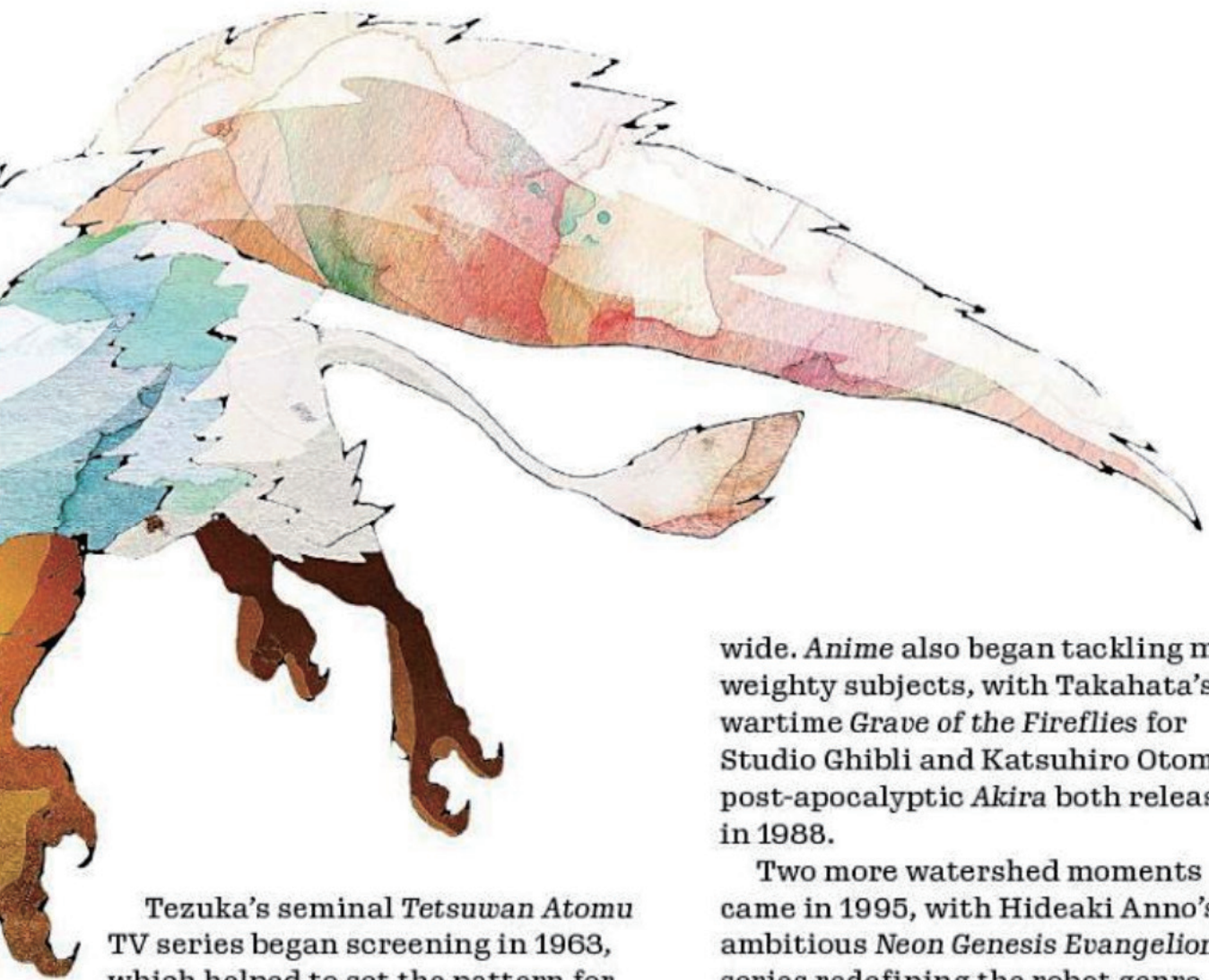
Japanese Animated Films

Though elsewhere *anime* refers to Japanese cartoon films and TV series, in Japan the term is used to describe all animated content.

The genres of *anime* are legion, spanning frivolous stories of kids at *ninja* school to epic dystopian tales addressing philosophical themes.

The history of *anime* can be traced back to a few short films made in 1917, including *Namakura Gatana*, though earlier productions are likely to have existed. The nascent industry was devastated by the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, which razed much of Tokyo. A pivotal moment came in 1948 with the founding of what is now the leading studio, Toei Animation. As well as creating some of *anime's* seminal works, such as *Dragon Ball*, *Sailor Moon* and *One Piece*, Toei Animation was instrumental in the careers of directors Osamu Tezuka, Leiji Matsumoto and Studio Ghibli founders Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata.





Tezuka's seminal *Tetsuwan Atomu* TV series began screening in 1963, which helped to set the pattern for *anime* adaptations of *manga* and popularize robot and space-themed productions. Other new *anime* styles born in the 1960s included sport and erotica, along with the family tale *Sazae-san*, which became a national institution with a world record of more than 7,500 weekly episodes.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the further rise of robot *anime*, with stories like *Gundam* garnering fans world-

wide. *Anime* also began tackling more weighty subjects, with Takahata's wartime *Grave of the Fireflies* for Studio Ghibli and Katsuhiro Otomo's post-apocalyptic *Akira* both released in 1988.

Two more watershed moments came in 1995, with Hideaki Anno's ambitious *Neon Genesis Evangelion* series redefining the robot genre, and Mamoru Oshii's cyberpunk classic *Ghost in the Shell* asking existential questions.

Studio Ghibli was all-conquering in the late 1990s and 2000s, with Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997) only topped by his own *Spirited Away*, which won the best animated film Oscar and set an unbeaten Japanese box office record. Today, it is a 2 trillion yen industry.

弁当

Bentō

Iconic Box Lunches

At one level, the *bentō* is simply a lunch box containing ready-to-eat food in separate compartments. But it carries a deeper meaning in Japanese culture than its function might suggest and is often referred to honorifically as *o-bentō*.

The precise origins of *bentō* are unclear, but the word has been in use since the 13th century to refer to the box itself, traditionally made from lacquer since the 16th century. *Bentō* have certainly been eaten for centuries at *hanami* cherry blossom viewing parties, as well between acts at traditional *Nō* and *Kabuki* theatrical performances.

In more recent times, the most common consumers of *bentō* have



EKIBEN



**BENTŌ AND
ONIGIRI**

been schoolchildren and *salariman* office workers. Homemade *o-bentō* is seen not only as a means of providing a balanced, nutritious and aesthetically pleasing meal, but also an expression of the maker's love for the recipient. That task has fallen almost entirely on women, who often feel considerable social pressure to create these mini masterpieces on a daily basis, even though *konbini-bentō* are readily available at convenience stores. As the number of working women has increased sharply in recent years, many mothers have felt obliged to get up even earlier to prepare *bentō* for their husbands and children.

These days, *bentō* boxes come in many shapes and sizes, with designs featuring characters from *anime* or *manga* popular with children. Even

the food inside can be intricately prepared to form *kyaraben* (character *bentō*), which look like characters from popular culture.

Onigiri

The *onigiri* rice ball is a staple of *o-bentō* and usually consists of a filling of vegetable, fish or meat encased in white rice, often wrapped in *nori* seaweed. It is perhaps the closest Japanese equivalent to a sandwich, which are themselves sometimes found in *bentō* nowadays.

Ekiben

Ekiben, literally station *bentō*, are found at train stations, usually for consumption onboard. Now an integral part of train travel, they were first sold in 1885 on trains from Utsonomiya to Tokyo's Ueno.



盆栽

Bonsai

Sculptural Potted Plants

The cultivation of dwarf trees in containers was developed in China and came to Japan possibly more than 1,000 years ago, likely brought by the monks whose teachings would form the basis of Zen Buddhism. Though the term *bonsai*, literally “tray plant,” would not come into use until many centuries later, the art was gradually

refined in Japan, adding local aesthetics and characteristics.

Many of the early practitioners were Zen monks, who brought to bear principles from the emerging philosophy on the new art form. Asymmetry, embracing the imperfections of nature and an acceptance that the cultivation of a *bonsai* tree is an

ongoing process requiring prolonged attention, are all influenced by Zen thought.

Bonsai are grown from standard trees, though the practice is thought to have begun in China with dwarf varieties, which are manipulated through cutting, repotting and wiring in order to achieve the desired shape.

The art began as the preserve of the upper echelons of society, but spread to become widely practiced among ordinary folk. However, one of the best known *bonsai* has been in the imperial family for centuries, cared for by successive emperors. It has been granted the status of a National Treasure.

Bonseki

Bonseki is a relative of *bonsai*, sharing their first character. *Seki* means “stone,” referring to the materials used along with sand to create miniaturized landscapes in shallow trays of lacquer.

Kokedama

Kokedama sprung from *bonsai* and consists of a plant growing from a suspended clump of soil surrounded by a moss ball—the direct translation of the term.

Both *bonseki* and *kokedama* are centuries old, and like *bonsai* reflect the Zen concept of *wabi sabi*, accepting and respectful of aging, flaws and simplicity.



武道

Budō

The Japanese Martial Arts

Although fighting systems are to be found in nearly every country, no one has codified and imbued them with intricate etiquette, rituals and spiritual elements to the extent the Japanese have. The range of Japan's martial arts is also remarkable. The Japanese Association of Budō consists of federations representing nine separate disciplines: *aikidō*, *jūdō*, *jūkendō*, *karatedō*, *kendō*, *kyūdō*, *naginata*, *shōrinji kenpō* and sumo. That by no means covers all the martial arts in the country.

Budō means “martial way” and it is the *dō* aspect that contributes to the distinctive nature of Japan's fighting arts. Beyond the skills to be gained by practicing such disciplines, it is the peace of mind, character development and respectfulness that traditional exponents regard as even more important than the physical attributes. The journey on the path of self-improvement towards an unattainable perfection is seen as an end in itself, and one that brings greater

rewards than a technically accomplished kick, throw or sword cut.

The mother of Japanese martial arts is often said to be *jūjitsu*, also written as *jūjutsu*, from which both *jūdō* and *aikidō* sprung, while it also influenced some schools of *karate*. There were at one time more than 2,000 different schools of *jūjitsu*, most practicing both unarmed and armed combat. Mirroring the decline of the samurai, the emphasis on *jutsu* or practical technique elements shifted to a focus on the *dō* aspects. *Jūdō* went on to become an Olympic sport and discarded much of its traditional syllabus in favor of the pursuit of medals. Meanwhile, disciplines such as *naginata*—the art of using a traditional Japanese spear—still eschew competition and remain entirely dedicated to perfecting technique for its own sake. Other martial arts, like *karate*, straddle both worlds, with some practitioners and *dōjō* focusing on competition and some on the traditional methods and goals.

真捨身技

足



肩車



払腰



巴投



上四方固

逆十字



谷落



後腰



立てば芍薬

座れば牡丹

歩く姿は百合の花

AYANO OTANI is a Japanese artist whose sensitivity is expressed through various forms of visual art. She draws inspiration both from natural forms, with works of an absolute simplicity, all built on lively monochrome tones, and from the urban environment. She has exhibited her works in pencil and watercolor and her paper creations throughout Asia and Europe. She has also collaborated with some European fashion designers.

ORNELLA CIVARDI has a degree in Oriental Languages and Literature and has translated and edited the works of many celebrated Japanese writers, including Yukio Mishima, Yasunari Kawabata, Junzaburō Nishiwaki, Yōko Ogawa, Ōgai Mori and Ikkyū Sōjun. She has also written and edited works on Zen and on Japanese culture and art history. In 2005, she won the Alcantara Prize for her translation of Kawabata's *Palm-of-the-Hand Stories*.

GAVIN BLAIR has spent nearly two decades in Japan as a writer and journalist. He covers the Japanese entertainment industry for *The Christian Science Monitor* and *The Hollywood Reporter*, and reports on Japan for France 24 TV, CBC/Radio-Canada, Al Jazeera, Radio France Internationale and BBC Radio, as well as writing for other publications in Asia, Europe and the United States. He is fascinated by Japan's complex culture, including its martial arts.

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