

An EAA Interview with Brenda G. Jordan, Author of *The Arts of Japan: Creativity and Innovation*

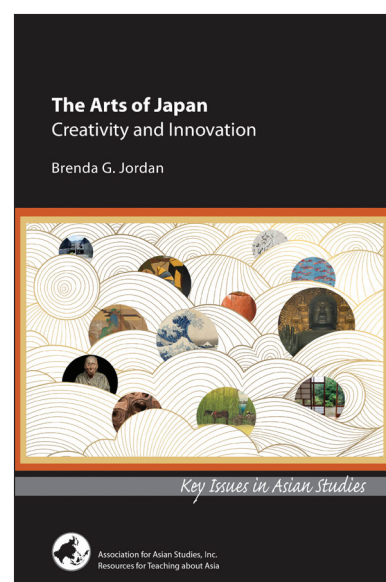
View Brenda Jordan's companion article—[Top Ten Things \(Plus One\) to Know about Japanese Art](#)—for an overview of what makes the arts of Japan so widely appreciated internationally in disciplines such as architecture, garden design, fashion, and popular culture.

The Arts of Japan: Creativity and Innovation by Brenda G. Jordan is the latest volume in the AAS [Key Issues in Asian Studies](#) book series.

Japanese art has long had a global impact. Drawing on current scholarship in the field and providing historical context for developments over time, *The Arts of Japan* distills centuries of history into a short and eminently readable—and teachable—volume: from the Jōmon (one of the oldest continuous pottery cultures in the world dating back to 13,500 BCE) through to world-renowned Studio Ghibli anime features, such as *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Spirited Away*.

Certain themes crop up repeatedly in Japanese art—such as a heightened attention to nature and the seasons; humor and satire; a fascination with the mysterious and strange (ghosts, demons, tricksters); a love of the “cute”; and an eagerness to engage with the new. Despite a deep respect for tradition, Japanese artists also process and restructure ideas and technologies from abroad to develop entirely new styles and techniques.

The Arts of Japan is intended to tease out some of these creative and innovative moments in the history of Japanese art and provide readers with a solid foundation from which to learn more. Written in a compelling, jargon-free style, [Key Issues in Asian Studies](#) books are designed for use in undergraduate humanities and social science courses, as well as by advanced high-school students and teachers, and will appeal to anyone with an interest in Asia.



***The Arts of Japan: Creativity and Innovation* by Brenda G. Jordan** is available from the Association for Asian Studies through its Key Issues in Asian Studies book series. For ordering information, please visit <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/the-arts-of-japan/9781952636578>

Brenda G. Jordan is a Japanese art historian specializing in Tokugawa-period paintings and woodblock prints. She received her PhD from the University of Kansas and was a Monbushō scholar at the University of Tokyo. She joined the Asian Studies Center at the University of Pittsburgh in 2001 and, from 2008 to 2025, she was the Director of the University of Pittsburgh's coordinating site for the National Consortium for Teaching About Asia (NCTA). Her publications include *The Arts of Japan: Creativity and Innovation* (Association for Asian Studies, Key Issues in Asian Studies, 2026), *Copying the Master and Stealing His Secrets: Talent and Training in Japanese Painting* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2003) and “Potentially Disruptive: Censorship and the Painter Kawanabe Kyōsai” in Hiroshi Nara, ed., *Inexorable Modernity: Japan's Grappling with Modernity in the Arts* (Lexington, 2007).

Education About Asia Managing Editor, Jon Wilson, talks with Brenda Jordan about Japanese art, about her new book, *The Arts of Japan: Creativity and Innovation*, and about her time as Director of the University of Pittsburgh's coordinating site for the National Consortium for Teaching About Asia (NCTA).

Jon: Congratulations, Brenda, on the publication of *The Arts of Japan*—a wonderful and important addition to the AAS Key Issues in Asian Studies book series! My first question is: how and when did you first become interested in Japanese art?

Brenda: Thanks so much, Jon. I've been interested in East Asian art since I was around nine years old. I remember reading children's books about Japanese dolls and checking out books on ikebana and Chinese painting at our local library in Emporia, Kansas where I grew up. But the turning point was when I entered the University of Kansas as a graduate student and initially elected to focus on Chinese art history. However, while taking a course on Japanese art, I participated with fellow grad students in a field trip to Joe Price's home in Bartlesville, Oklahoma with our professor Stephen Addiss.

Joe (1929–2023), whose family had been in the oil pipeline construction business, and his wife Etsuko Price, were in the forefront of collecting eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japanese painting, particularly by the “eccentrics,” at a time when these artists were not yet appreciated as they are now. For several days, we spent hours with Joe, as he pulled out painting after painting for us to study in his exhibition room, in his Bruce Goff designed avant-garde house. We ate together and at night slept like sardines in sleeping bags on the shag carpeted “conversation pit” room, our heads spinning from what we had seen during the day. I was fascinated by the work of painters such as Itō Jakuchū, Maruyama Ōkyo, and Nagasawa Rosetsu: the colors, the meticulous attention to detail, the sheer technical expertise of the works, the strong sense of design and composition. It changed my trajectory as I decided upon return to KU to focus on Japanese art, and started taking Japanese language courses—better late than never, but painful nevertheless! (A large portion of this collection became the Shin'enkan Collection at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.) That led me to Japan, and study with two prominent Japanese art historians, Kōno Motoaki and Tsuji Nobuo at the University of Tokyo. I can credit both Stephen Addiss and Tsuji Nobuo with their influence on my choice of themes for this book (and my other research) as they were pioneers in addressing topics such as humor, satire, and the world of “strange and mysterious things” (*bakemono*) in Japanese art history.



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Jon: From 2008 to 2025, you were the Director of the University of Pittsburgh's coordinating site for the National Consortium for Teaching About Asia (NCTA). Can you describe this role to *EAA* readers? Did your role directly influence the writing of *The Arts of Japan*?

Brenda: Serving as the Pitt NCTA Director was one of the most rewarding things I have ever done, as the position required me to learn more about East Asia broadly and interact with a wide variety of scholars and teachers. I managed a Freeman Foundation grant (as one of seven NCTA coordinating sites) that grew from responsibility for four states to overseeing professional development and curriculum development for K–12 teachers in eleven states. We worked with faculty and outreach specialists both here in Pittsburgh and at universities in our eleven states to run college level courses of different types, short courses, workshops, book discussion groups and

even cultural events. We led summer institutes to East Asia and developed curriculum for K–12 educators. We coordinated with other NCTA sites, documentary filmmakers, and art museums on many of these programs as well.

As a result, I was able to interact with and develop a deep appreciation for K–12 educators and the challenges they face. Lucien Ellington had already encouraged me to write a history of Japanese art for teachers and I had resisted, based on what I perceived as an impossible task: to fit all of Japanese history—responsibly—into a short *Key Issues* volume. But in 2023, my husband Hiroshi Nara encouraged me (ahem—strongly) to tackle this project. I finally gave in, realizing that my years of working in the NCTA had given me a broader perspective in East Asian history and culture, enabling me to select themes that might work for these shorter volumes.

Jon: Condensing thousands of years of history, and current research, into a short volume is a huge challenge. How long did it take to write *The Arts of Japan* and how did you decide on the major themes?

Brenda: It was a gigantic challenge. How do you do justice to the broad spectrum of Japanese arts and its long history? What gets included? What has to be left out? And cultural and historical context has to be provided; art doesn't exist in a vacuum. When I thought about it, however, I realized that I had long taught about Japanese arts that fascinated me, especially humor and satire, a fascination with the mysterious and strange (ghosts, demons, tricksters), aesthetic sensibilities, a love of the “cute,” and Japan's eagerness to engage with the new. It was at times a journey of discovery for me and at other times a royal pain in the neck, requiring a few days off to “refuel.” The book took two years (although it seemed longer) of going through research by many of my colleagues in Japanese art history and other fields, fact checking one source against another, and searching for images (a task that sometimes seemed to take as long as the research and writing). I went down rabbit holes more than once. I also solicited feedback on drafts from colleagues, both Japan specialists and K-12 master teachers, and my editor, Meg Taylor. We revised and re-revised. You really made it possible, Jon, by working with me to develop this longer volume. It would never have been possible without your flexibility and willingness to understand that an art history book, after all, has to both explain and illustrate the art.

Jon: Your book spans a number of disciplines: history, architecture, theater, poetry, popular culture. Can you talk briefly about the varied courses your book will best fit into, and how teachers might use your book in their classrooms.

Brenda: As we often told teachers in our Pitt NCTA classes, the *Key Issues* books can serve several purposes. They are a resource book for teachers. They can serve as additional textbooks or selected readings for high school students or be used for classroom assignments and projects. Most, if not all, of the *Key Issues* books can be used in undergraduate teaching, for community college courses and survey courses at the four-year college level, particularly in courses that a faculty member has to teach but whose expertise lies in another area. Selections from this book or the entire book can be used for studio art, world history, world cultures, or any number of art history survey courses. Sections can be used for literature courses as text and image were long intertwined in Japan (pair it with, for example, Marvin Marcus' *Japanese Literature: from Murasaki to Murakami*). NCTA sites may wish to use the book for K–12 professional development courses and programs, supplementing the expertise of their instructors. The book also provides a different sort of treatment of Japanese art for curators, collectors, and others who have a special interest in Japan or Asian art in general.

Jon: Anime, manga, and videogames from Japan have become international sensations. Can you talk us through the influence of Japan's centuries-old fascination with playfulness, humor, ghosts, demons, and the macabre on these modern-day cultural icons.

Brenda: That is a good question, and the answer could take up an entire book. The Japanese have demonstrated a love of the new, of playfulness, of humor, and of the “strange and mysterious” for over two thousand years—from playful *haniwa* to tales of Tricksters in ancient stories and graffiti on the bases of Buddhist statues. These characteristics are deeply engrained in the culture and one of my favorite things about Japan's arts. They became more prevalent during the broadening of consumer culture in the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), from the various ranks of samurai to merchants, wealthy farmers, artisans and denizens of the entertainment world. For various reasons (and scholars have different opinions about why), the nineteenth century became a period of increased proliferation of the “strange and mysterious” in the arts and culture. But playing with humor, satire and *bakemono* could cost an author or artist their career or even their life, if Tokugawa officials disapproved of censored subjects being disguised as playful or mysterious figures (for example, using a “Parade of a Hundred Ghosts and Demons” theme that seems to contain an underlying commentary on contemporary events). Censorship didn't stop the Japanese in trying to turn the world upside down, however. This continued into the Meiji period (1868–1912), as writers and artists drew upon this rich history for political or social commentary, or even as topics of novels or sensational images in woodblock prints. This was also the period when the first manga magazine was produced. Thus, when the twentieth century came around, all the elements were there for use in popular culture. Why did Japan's *bakemono*, *yūrei* (ghosts) and *yōkai* (also strange and mysterious) become so popular world-wide? Hard to pin down any one reason—I will have to refer readers to Bill Tsutsui's insightful *Japanese Popular Culture and Globalization* in the *Key Issues* series for some answers.

Jon: Can you tell readers how Japan's trauma during and in the aftermath of World War II has had a lasting impact on postwar arts in general in Japan.

Brenda: World War II left a lasting, painful impact on countries around the world, from Europe to East and Southeast Asia in ways that the typical American today may not appreciate, at least not to the same extent. When your country has been invaded, bombed, burned, and much destroyed as was the case with Japan, scars remain emotionally and psychologically. A great deal of what has become appreciated internationally in Japan's arts and literature grew out of the angst of being a defeated nation, one that was devastated by aerial bombings and the dropping of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. *Barefoot Gen* is based on Nakazawa Keiji's experiences as a survivor of the Hiroshima bombing. *Grave of the Fireflies* is a heartbreaking but visually beautiful anime about the fire-bombings in the final days of the war. The original *Gojira* (Godzilla) is a critique of the U.S. and of nuclear fallout. And many of the Studio Ghibli anime such as *Princess Mononoke* or *Pom Poko* challenge humanity's relationship to nature and destruction of habitats. Even the much lesser known Anpo artists of the 1960s, who protested the renewal of the United States – Japan Security Treaty, were part of the anti-war sentiments in Japan that linger even today. Despite the destruction of World War II, it is a testament to the Japanese spirit that the country continued to produce many internationally known artists—from Yayoi Kusama (who passed away in August) to architect Isozaki Arata to Miyazaki Hayao and so many others. I thought this opening quote to my last chapter to be particularly apt in this respect:

*Even amidst the hatred and carnage, life is still worth living. It is possible
for wonderful encounters and beautiful things to exist.*

— Miyazaki Hayao, Studio Ghibli

Jon: What might you describe as the most surprising aspects of Japanese art? Did anything surprise you during your research?

Brenda: I'm an early modern specialist so the developments of the twentieth century were often a delightful surprise; for example, the importance of Japanese postcards, department store posters, and the influence of avant garde groups on the subsequent development of arts and culture in Japan. It was also reaffirming to learn more about how Japanese technology, engineering, performance art, architecture, etc. was right in the midst of global trends in the twentieth century. It just confirmed for me one of my theses, that there is a strong interest in the new, the different, and in creativity and innovation in Japan that carries through to today. There has been a lot of new research in the last twenty to thirty years that has brought to light much that was often disregarded or unknown when I was in graduate school.

Jon: If you could choose three favorite pieces of art from the book, which would they be and why?

Brenda: Oh no, you really want me to narrow it down? That is cruel, but ... I am a huge fan of Nagasawa Rosetsu's *White Elephant and Black Bull* screens for the subtle humor, as with many of his works. I also love Kawanabe Kyōsai's satirical works such as *The Enlightenment of Fudō Myō-ō*. Another work that I have been drawn to for a long time is *Komagata Embankment* by Kawase Hasui, for the interesting composition and a different way of illustrating *Twelve Scenes of Tokyo*. I could give you an entirely different list of other works that are favorites as well. I confess to being particularly drawn to nineteenth century arts.

Jon: Thank you so much, Brenda!
