

Japan's festival floats: a celebration of summer in Japan

Japan festival floats

20 April – 2 July 2023

Room 3

Free

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Immerse yourself in Japanese summertime festivities at a new free display at the British Museum The Asahi Shimbun Display *Japan's festival floats*, in Room 3 from the 20 April – 2 July 2023.

In Japan, summertime is centred on local festivals. In towns and cities across the country, people take to the streets to celebrate their neighbourhood's shrine with costumes, dancing, singing and a procession of spectacular floats.

The display's centrepiece is a beautifully crafted Japanese festival model float which evokes the culture of Japanese local summer festivals. It is set on a wheeled carriage and was donated to the British Museum by the art dealership Yamanaka & Co. in 1908 to mark the London Olympic Games of that year. Fully conserved and on display for the first time in decades, its story was lost until investigations which took place during the pandemic.

Collaborative research with Japanese colleagues has revealed that this model float represents the 'state barge' or *gozabune*, which was the marine transport used by the shogun (the hereditary military rulers of Japan). The float bears three banners with the crest of the ruling Tokugawa house.

The model was probably created by Murakami Tetsudō (1867–1919), a woodworker known for elaborate carvings on festival floats depicting mythological subjects. Working for Yamanaka at their factory in Osaka, Tetsudō led the field in producing Western-style furniture with 'Japoniste' carved ornamentation of dragons, phoenixes, chrysanthemums, turtles and fish.

The festival float was probably also made at the factory but, in stark contrast, represents a revival of more traditional forms and customs and came to represent 'old Japan'.

Japan's longstanding custom of staging local summer festivals is well documented in Japanese paintings, prints and books.

The display will also draw on other objects from the Museum's collection that highlight Japanese festival tradition including a vivid colour woodblock print of five festival floats by Utagawa Hiroshige.

Rosina Buckland, Curator of Japanese collections, said:

'Japan has a rich tradition of festivals, celebrated by communities across the country and often dating back hundreds of years. This display highlights an unusual and finely crafted object in the collection representing a festival float. It has been fully conserved and is on display for the first time in decades.'

The Asahi Shimbun Display *Japan's festival floats* will be on display, for free, in Room 3 from the 20 April – 3 July 2023

Notes to editors

The Asahi Shimbun Display *Japan's festival floats* runs from 20 April to 3 July 2023 in Room 3 at the British Museum.

The Asahi Shimbun Displays are a series of regularly changing displays which look at objects in new or different ways. Sometimes the display highlights a well-known item, sometimes it surprises the audience with extraordinary items from times and cultures that may not be very familiar. This is also an opportunity for the Museum to learn how it can improve its larger exhibitions and permanent gallery displays. These displays have been made possible by the generous sponsorship of The Asahi Shimbun Company, who are long-standing supporters of the British Museum. With a circulation of about 6 million for the morning edition alone, *The Asahi Shimbun* is the most prestigious newspaper in Japan. The company also publishes magazines and books, and provides a substantial information service on the Internet. The Asahi Shimbun Company has a century long tradition of staging exhibitions in Japan of art, culture and history from around the world.



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