



pleased to see there were people of all ages in attendance.

At the start of the performance, puppets and puppeteers enter the stage. To the right, a secondary stage receives the narrator who not only chants the action but also speaks all the parts, altering his voice in sensational ways, and a shamisen player who accompanies him and sets the mood for each scene. Soon, the puppets movements become hypnotic and I almost forget that each one is being directed by three men who work silently in complete unison and in full view of the audience. The lead puppeteer wears formal traditional clothes while the other two are entirely clad in black fabric, including a hood covering their heads. Events unfold on stage and the puppets gestures express a range of emotions. Rather than merely



mimicking human movements, a variety of distinctive poses forms the symbolic repertoire of sentiments on display: for example, a touch of the sleeve suggests romantic happiness. In Bunraku, there is a unique and subtle marriage between realism and artifice.

Afterwards, I am extremely lucky to meet one of the performers who patiently shows me how the puppets are handled and even let me try my hand at it! I am shown how the lead puppeteer operates the puppet's head and the right hand, while the second one operates the left hand and the third is in charge of the legs. A puppet is made of wood and measures about 120 to 150 cm high. I quickly discover how heavy they can be (about five to ten kilos, which must be tiring to hold during a performance that can last a few hours). Directed by the master puppeteer, I slide my arm in the puppet's sleeve he is presenting and try to move its left arm. Using a string with my two fingers I can animate four of the doll's fingers in unison (the thumb does not move): its hands are mobile and expressive and, a bit clumsily, I try to replicate the greeting gesture the master is showing me. I can only imagine how challenging it must be to operate a doll along with two other performers standing so close to one another: the three men must carefully coordinate their movements to ensure that the doll's gesture appear effortless, while respecting each other's space. Bunraku, along with Noh and Kabuki, ranks among Japan's foremost stage arts and as such has been

inscribed on the Unesco's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. I warmly encourage anyone to attend a performance on a visit to Japan: plays can be seen at the **National Theatres in both Tokyo and in Osaka**, the latter city being the actual birthplace of Bunraku. Its dramatic spectacle and aesthetic qualities continue to captivate audiences three centuries on.



National Bunraku Theatre

Place 1-12-10 Nippon-bashi, Chuo-ku, Osaka-shi, Osaka 542-0073



National Theatre

Place 4-1 Hayabusacho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102-8656

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"Five traditional Japanese performing arts registered as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage!"



ArtsJP



Vol.1

The Japan Cultural Expo 2.0 website offers articles about Japanese arts and culture, as well as information on museums, theaters, and arts festivals. The ArtsJP is a sub-branch of the Japan Cultural Expo 2.0.



Tea Bowl, Named "Furisode (Swinging Sleeves)", Mino ware, Shino type, Azuchi-Momoyama-Edo period, 16th-17th century (on display until October 29, 2023).

“You’ll never see the same thing twice!”

A treasure trove of Japanese culture where displays are rotated 300 times a year

Words by Mari Hashimoto



Each capital city has a museum that serves as the nation's public face, with many tourists visiting to enjoy their rich collections. As well as housing a zoo, a park, a university and several other cultural institutions, Tokyo's Ueno district is also home to five national and public museums. When it comes to ancient Japanese art, though, the first port of call has to be **Tokyo National Museum (TNM)**.

Amassed over 150 years, TNM's collection comprises over 120,000 objects, including 89 National Treasures and 649 Important Cultural Properties (as of April 2023). TNM has six galleries, with around 3,000 items on permanent display. Unlike museums in other countries, there is no single "must-see" masterpiece at TNM. This is not to say TNM has no outstanding works. Quite the opposite, in fact. Japanese cultural

properties are easily damaged by UV light and humidity. To protect them, TNM rotates its regular exhibitions around 300 times a year, which means visitors can encounter many different artworks. TNM is also unique in the way it plans exhibits to match the seasons and seasonal events.

One popular exhibit concerns the art of the tea ceremony, and this will be expanded dramatically from 2023 onwards. People around the world have long used tea leaves to brew different types of tea. Tea came to Japan from China in the 9th century, with the practice of tea drinking and cultivation gradually taking root thereafter. By the 16th century, tea had become a central part of Japanese life and the way of tea had developed into a deeply spiritual art form. Simplified versions of the tea ceremony are now held



Japanese Gallery (Honkan) 2F Room 10: The Art of Fashion and The Art of Ukiyo-e.

across the globe, giving many people the chance to experience this representative aspect of Japanese culture.

TNM's Tea Ceremony exhibition room inside the Japanese Gallery (Honkan) features tea utensils, vases, incense containers, tableware, and ornamental paintings and calligraphic works, for instance. These are artfully arranged in a manner similar to an actual tea ceremony, with items chosen to match the seasons or the day's guests. There are also several teahouses on the grounds where visitors can hold tea bowls, drink tea, and participate in a real tea ceremony. In the 16th century, just as the tea ceremony was developing into an art form, the world was embarking on the Age of Discovery. Japan's international exchanges also expanded to encompass not only



Wander Japan's Wonders

The Japan Cultural Expo 2.0 is a Japanese government initiative to enhance the appeal of Japanese arts and culture. Our mission is to enable visitors to Japan to experience and enjoy Japanese art, including performing arts and art festivals, thereby raising awareness of the charm and appeal of Japanese arts and culture.

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Excerpted from our online articles.



Japanese Gallery (Honkan) 2F Room 4: Tea Ceremony

neighboring countries like China and Korea, but Vietnam, Indonesia and even faraway Portugal and Spain too, with curious new articles brought into the country and hungrily incorporated into the tea ceremony.

This importation, assimilation and adoption of strange new objects is a typically Japanese trait. Tokyo National Museum is a treasure trove of this 'Japanese' cultural heritage and it should be visited by anyone wishing to learn about the diversity of Japanese culture.

With the cooperation of:
Mikasa Keiko, Curator of Asian Decorative Arts, Publications Section, Planning Division, Curatorial Planning Department, Tokyo National Museum



TOKYO NATIONAL MUSEUM

Place 13-9 Ueno Park, Taito-ku, Tokyo, 110-8712, Japan
Time 9:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m.
*The Regular Exhibitions close at 5:00 p.m. However, they will be open until 7:00 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays starting November 3.
* Last admission 30 minutes before closing.

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Exploring the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field

A Journey into Niigata's Culture and Art Scene with Frankie

Situated in Niigata, Japan, **Echigo-Tsumari Art Field** stands as a pioneer in celebrating regional art festivals. Held in the serene Echigo-Tsumari area, this region seamlessly marries idyllic rural communities with contemporary art, creating an extraordinary fusion of tradition and innovation. Today, we embark on a journey to immerse ourselves in the captivating local culture and flourishing art scene of the Echigo-Tsumari region, with Japan-based content creator Frankie.

Day 1: Essence of the Region

Before we start looking at the artworks dotted around the region, our expedition commenced with a deep dive into the essence of this remarkable region with a local tour guide. The rice terraces here, devoid of natural water sources, solely rely on the blessings of rainfall to sustain their lush greenery. Our first stop was the enchanting Gimyo Rice Terraces, a place where local farmers have inherited and diligently preserved the land for generations, cultivat-



ing it as their livelihood. Frankie was awestruck by the terraces' architectural beauty, envisioning the mesmerizing transformation with each season. She expressed her desire to witness the cherry blossoms casting delicate reflections on the water during spring.

As we strolled along the inner roads, our guides

pointed out various edible plants like myoga and sansho. They explained how the heavy snowfall in the area contributes to the delectable mountain vegetables that grace springtime tables.

Our final stop on the walking tour was the Gamo Rice Terraces. Here, we enjoyed a brief break, gazing upon the sprawling beauty of the terraced landscape and surrounding nature. Our guides brewed tea using the



Irisawa Yoshitoku, Ando Kunihiro, "Ubusuna House"

kuromoji we had collected along the way. "It has a wonderful fragrance, reminiscent of herbal medicine," Frankie noted.

As the sun dipped behind the mountains, it was time to head to our accommodation for the night. We chose to stay at Ubusuna House, one of artworks of Echigo-Tsumari Art Field, a charming thatched-roof building that has been transformed into a ceramic art museum and a restaurant. The house boasts a range of ceramic art pieces, from the kamado oven and irori hearth to the sink and bath.

Operated primarily by local women, Ubusuna House served us dishes prepared with locally sourced ingredients, each on beautiful dishes that are also a part of the ceramic collection of the museum.

"I'm delighted to have tried the myoga the guides mentioned on the tour; you can taste the freshness of each vegetable," Frankie commented. "The term 'Okasan,' or mother, used by the staff, and the warmth of our interactions, make me feel like I have a Japanese mother taking care of me here."

Day 2: Immersing in Art

Following a hearty breakfast at Ubusuna House, we set out for a day filled with art and inspiration. One of the enchanting aspects of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field is the way art is seamlessly integrated into the natural surroundings. The entire area feels like an open-air museum, emphasizing that art can be discovered everywhere. Our first stop was a picturesque park adorned with outdoor artworks, including the Pavillon, a reflective stage designed for Noh or Kyogen performances.

Frankie marveled at how the festival beautifully melded each artwork into the idyllic satoyama landscapes. She pointed out "A Small House-Don't forget to listen to-" by Ito Yoshiaki, a cozy nook nestled across from a lone tree by the water. "The intimate connection you feel while observing it is truly fascinating," she remarked.

Beguiled by Bunraku

Sophie Richard wanders around Japan

Words by Sophie Richard

One of the traditional performing arts of Japan, Bunraku is a sophisticated form of puppet theatre accompanied by music. Its origins date back to the early Edo period (early 17th century) and it gradually reached the style we know today about 300 years ago. On a recent visit to the National Theatre in Tokyo during a Bunraku performance, I was transported back to the heydays of Japan's imperial court, in all its magnetic splendour.

The wonderfully convoluted historical plot, illustrating

Next, we headed to the Museum on Echigo-Tsumari (MonET) which exhibits numerous artworks and is a base facility that serves as a gateway to Echigo-Tsumari Art Field.



Leandro Erlich, "Palimpsest: pond of sky"

Frankie enthusiastically shared her thoughts: "The museum offers an abundance of artistic experiences. I was thrilled to encounter works by artists I'm familiar with, like Leandro Erlich's impressive centerpiece. I also appreciated the art that thoughtfully incorporated the local landscape and soundscape."



El[mé] ,"movements"

After our museum exploration, we ventured to the Golden Playroom, a seemingly old traditional Japanese house in appearance, but upon entering, the entire interior gleamed in gold, from the walls to even the toilets. This whimsical spot was adorned with vintage Japanese game-related items, old slot machines, and nostalgic games available for play.

Frankie shared her delight: "The room exuded an eerie yet exciting vibe. It's a blast to dive into the world of these vintage games – a rare find even in Japan."

Our next destination was the Matsudai NOHBUTAI, where art, food, and the terraced rice fields took center stage. Here, we encountered world-class artworks, including Ilya & Emilia Kabakov's Terraced Paddy Fields and Kusama Yayoi's artwork "Tsumari in Bloom".



Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, "The Rice Fields"

Frankie reflected, "It's evident that this region deeply values its land and its beauty through the lens of these artworks."



Kusama Yayoi, "Tsumari in Bloom"

Lunch awaited us at Echigo-Matsudai Satoyama Shokudo, a restaurant that also doubles as an artwork within the museum. Here, we indulged in a buffet featuring dishes infused with local flavors and home-style cooking, all prepared with locally sourced vegetables.

Art, Culture, and Unity

Our two-day journey through Echigo-Tsumari has unveiled a captivating blend of art, culture, and community. From the mesmerizing rice terraces to the seamless integration of art into nature, we've witnessed the enduring connection between tradition and innovation. As we bid farewell to Echigo-Tsumari, we carry cherished memories of a place where art, culture, and community harmonize to create an unforgettable tapestry.

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