



## Exploring The Essence of Washoku: The Ichiju-Sansai Dining Style

Words by Mari Hashimoto

Ranging around 3000 km from north to south, Japan has a diverse climate and topography, with this diversity nurturing a variety of rich dietary cultures rooted in each region. Known collectively as “washoku,” this traditional Japanese cuisine is a major highlight for any visitor to Japan.

Washoku was registered as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013. When applying for the registration, the Japanese government listed four main features of washoku: (1) diversity and freshness of ingredients, and respect for their inherent flavors, (2) an expression of natural beauty and the changing seasons, (3) close links with annual events, and (4) an exceptionally well-balanced and healthy diet.

The main contributor to washoku’s healthiness is thought to be the eating style known as “ichiju-sansai,” which literally means “one soup, three dishes.” Usually comprising one soup, one main dish and two sides, along with rice as the staple food, this style allows people to eat a variety of foods and thus absorb many micronutrients. Indeed, Japan’s Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare encourages people to eat this way as a health promotion measure.

Of course, contemporary Japanese dietary culture is constantly expanding, so someone might have burger and fries from a fast food restaurant for lunch and some pre-made sushi in a plastic pack for dinner, for example. However, meals at smaller restaurants or at regular family homes still take the ichiju-sansai form, albeit with variations in the number of dishes. So when did this way of eating become the norm amongst the Japanese people?

In both the East or the West, paintings and sculptures in the pre-modern era were mainly produced to commission from the aristocracy, the clergy or rich merchants, so they predominantly featured motifs with deep connections to the lifestyles and faiths of these groups.

As such, though we still have paintings showing how the nobility feasted, there is much we still don’t know about how common folk ate back then.

Fortunately, very rare scenes of ordinary people dining can be found in Yamai no Soshi (Diseases and Deformities), a 12th-century illustrated scroll depicting a variety of maladies. This work was originally a single handscroll comprising 15 scenes, but these became separated over time and are now housed at Japan’s national museums and other institutions across the country. Let’s take a look at one scene: Man with Loose Teeth (Kyoto National Museum; National Treasure).

The picture depicts a man with dental problems and a woman, probably his wife, trying to look inside his mouth. The text at the side explains that the man has loose teeth and can’t bite into solid foods, which suggests he is suffering from tooth decay or periodontitis (gum disease).

The food the couple were eating is still laid out for us to see. The most eye-catching item is the rice-laden bowl with chopsticks stuck on top. Next to the rice, on the right from the man’s perspective, is a bowl of soup. This pairing of rice on the left and soup on the right still forms the core of washoku meals today. This picture reveals how this custom was already established in the 12th century.

There are also two plates apparently for side dishes and a bowl for seasonings like salt or vinegar (soy sauce or miso paste didn’t exist back then).

The black rice and soup bowls have splashes of vermilion on both the outside and the inside, which reveals them to be lacquerware decorated with motifs on black lacquer. Regular folk with a certain standard of living probably ate with bowls like this.

We can’t tell what food the side dishes contain, but the man has an anguished look as he holds his empty stomach and contemplates all this food he can’t eat, so it must be something very delicious.

The ichiju-sansai eating style, the left and right pairing of rice and soup, and the lavishly decorated lacquerware are all traditions that have survived to the present day. However, new dining customs have also emerged since. For example, it is now very bad manners or even taboo to stick one’s chopsticks in rice like in the picture, so take care not to inadvertently imitate this particular practice!



Man with Loose Teeth (12th-century, Kyoto National Museum; National Treasure)  
Source: ColBase (<https://colbase.nich.go.jp/>)



OKINAWA

## Encountering Performing Arts and Learning about Their Backgrounds.

### National Theatre Okinawa

Words by Mari Hashimoto



National Theatre Okinawa is the newest of Japan’s five national theaters. It was established in 2004 in Urasoe City, Okinawa Prefecture, with the goal of preserving and promoting Okinawa’s traditional performing arts. Located next to Naha City, the current seat of Okinawa’s prefectural government, Urasoe was once the capital during the Ryukyu Kingdom era. The theater was designed by the architect Shin Takamatsu (winner of the 47th BCS Prize and the 11th Public Buildings Award). Its rhomboid lattice-shaped exterior is modelled on the “chinibu” bamboo walls of traditional Okinawan houses, which are designed to let in air while blocking off the strong subtropical sunlight. Furthermore, the upper section juts out to create a space underneath like the “amahaji” eaves of traditional Okinawan houses, with the structure resembling a blooming flower. The interior comprises a large theater,



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a small theater and a rehearsal room. In 2005, one year after its opening, the museum began a Kumiodori training program to nurture a generation of very talented young dancers and actors (tachikata) and musicians (jikata), while also helping performers to hone their skills. Shinji Kinjo was among the theater's first group of trainees and he now serves as artistic director of National Theatre Okinawa. Besides Kumiodori dance, the theater stages a variety of performances, including sanshin recitals, Okinawan plays, and Ryukyuan dance. It also hosts performances of folk performing arts, principally from Okinawa Main Island, and Kyogen from the Japanese mainland.



**National Theatre Okinawa**  
**Place** 4-14-1 Jitchaku, Urasoe City, Okinawa Prefecture 901-2122

Read full article by Mari Hashimoto

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Benches crafted from tatami, traditional Japanese flooring, offer visitors a unique seating experience, allowing them to fully immerse themselves in the artworks showcased in this room.

### Highlighted Artworks

As we explore the galleries, Athena pauses to admire several standout pieces in the museum. These artworks, ranging from bold and experimental to contemplative and introspective, beautifully showcase the diversity and dynamism of MOMAT's collection.



Sol LeWitt, *Wall Drawing#769: A 36-inch (90cm) grid covering the black wall. All two-part combinations using arcs from corners and sides, and straight and not straight lines, systematically.*, 1994, Courtesy the Estate of Sol LeWitt, Massimo De Carlo and TARO NASU. Copyright the Estate of Sol LeWitt.

A captivating installation by Sol LeWitt (1994), challenges conventional notions of art and perception, inviting viewers to engage with space, form, and line in innovative ways.



Athena's Pick: *Hand* by Kotaro Takamura (c.1918)

"Here is a favorite of mine. It immediately made me want to try the pose out myself. It made me realize it's actually a difficult hand pose for me. It was interesting that at first glance, it seemed like a western-style sculpture, but the more I looked at the pinky, it made me think of Buddhist, oriental figures."



**The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo**  
**Place** 3-1 Kitanomaru Koen, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo

Read more on the website

Exploring the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo with Athena: Part 2



- Dining Delights at MOMAT

- Walking around the Imperial Palace



Ryusei Kishida, *Road Cut through a Hill*, 1915, National Important Cultural Property

# Exploring the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo with Athena: Part 1

Embarking on a journey to uncover Tokyo's vibrant art scene, we teamed up with Japan-based content creator Athena for an immersive tour of The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo (MOMAT). Join us as we delve into the cultural richness and artistic diversity housed within this renowned institution.

## Encountering Modernity at MOMAT

Situated across from the Imperial Palace, the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo (MOMAT), stands as Japan's premier national art museum. With over 13,000 pieces dating from the late 19th century to the present day, MOMAT boasts one of the largest collections in Japan, featuring works by both Japanese and foreign artists. The exhibitions showcase approximately 200 works at any given time, with displays rotating about five times a year.

Stepping into MOMAT, Athena was immediately captivated by the museum's dynamic ambiance and

contemporary design, setting the stage for a day brimming with artistic exploration and discovery.

## Exploring MOMAT's Collection

Navigating through MOMAT's extensive collection, we encounter a kaleidoscope of artistic expressions spanning genres, mediums, and cultural influences. From striking paintings to innovative sculptures, each artwork offers a unique perspective on the evolving landscape of modern art.

"It's fascinating to see how artists have interpreted and redefined the boundaries of Japanese art," remarks Athena.



Nara Yoshitomo, *Aomori-ken (Aomori Dog)* 2005

# Journey through the Cultural Treasures of Aomori and Iwate

## Day 1: Exploring Aomori's Artistic and Ancient Gems

Delve into Aomori's artistic heritage and rich history by exploring the Aomori Museum of Art, where contemporary masterpieces meet innovative architecture, and the Sannai Maruyama Jomon Culture Center – an archaeological gem that brings ancient history to life.

rious elements that convey emotional complexity. One of his standout pieces is the Aomori-ken, a colossal dog sculpture towering 8.5 meters high. Its commanding presence has established it as a prominent symbol of the museum. In contrast, his other sculpture – Miss Forest – residing in an octagonal brick structure, captivates visitors with a solemn atmosphere that seems to speak through the tranquil sounds of nature.



## Aomori Museum of Art

A breath of fresh air—figuratively and literally—welcomes you upon your arrival at the Aomori Museum of Art. The museum's striking white building, surrounded by expansive greenery, was designed by Jun Aoki and inspired by the nearby Sannai-Maruyama Site.

It features architectural elements reminiscent of archaeological excavations, creating a unique atmosphere that sets the stage for a captivating artistic experience.

As you venture deeper into the lobby and step into the lift ascending to the exhibition space, a grand atrium 19 meters high and 21 meters wide engulfs you, known as the Aleko Hall. Each wall of this four-cornered atrium showcases the masterpieces of the 20th-century artist Marc Chagall (1887-1985), commissioned by the New York ballet company – American Ballet Theatre – in honor of the ballet Aleko.

Following the exhibit's route takes you to the works of Yoshitomo Nara, a Japanese contemporary artist born in Hirosaki City, Aomori Prefecture. Nara's artworks often feature childlike figures, predominantly young girls or animals, infused with mischievous or rebel-



Nara Yoshitomo, *Aomori Hütte 1* 2016



Nara Yoshitomo, *Miss Forest* 2016

Read more on the website

Journey through the Cultural Treasures of Aomori and Iwate



- Sannai Maruyama Site (Sanmaru)

- Day 2: Discovering Aomori's Vibrant Bay Area and the Nebuta Festival

- Day 3: Unveiling Morioka's Charms and Hiraizumi's Spiritual Heritage

