

JAPANESE BRONZE
FLOWER VESSELS

1600-1900 AD



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FLOWER VESSELS
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at Tomasso, London

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Japanese Bronze Flower Vessels

Japanese art and culture and the aesthetics of flower arranging and the tea ceremony, so admired in the early part of the last century, and then largely forgotten, have started to re-engage young scholars, collectors and institutions all over the world. Bronze flower vases over the past two centuries represent a particularly beautiful manifestation of Japanese aesthetics and their evolution from the enriching influence of China. Michael Goedhuis published the book on the subject, 'Flower Bronzes of Japan', written by Joe Earle in 1995.

China of course has always played a significant role in Japanese life and access to Chinese civilisation has always been easy for Japan.

In particular, in the Kamakura period (1185 to 1333), a profound imprint was left on Japanese feudal society by the superiority of Chinese culture. It became fashionable for the aristocracy and the warlords in Japan to introduce touches of Chinese sophistication into their abrasive military lives. They assumed a patina of cultural respectability by collecting Song and Yuan paintings, bronzes and porcelain, as well as creating beautiful landscape gardens. Although this current of Chinese influence diminished over the following years, Japanese aesthetics always retained its flavour.

However, a distinctive and independent Japanese sense of style had already begun at the imperial court in Kyoto in the 10th and 11th centuries and was to leave its mark, with fluctuating emphasis, on Japanese culture over the next thousand years.

For example, while close variations of Chinese bronzes were made in the 14th and 15th centuries, by the 16th century, thanks to the reunification of Japan and the more stable economy that ensued, a shift in aesthetics from respectful awe for Chinese culture to a more assertive, if subtle, national style emerged.

The Edo period (1603 to 1868) was a period of restlessness and experimentation which fostered an authentic and distinctive Japanese self-confidence in the arts. The patrons were the newly rich merchant class. It was an era of a more expansive lifestyle... the Floating World... of elegant bath-houses, tea houses, and theatres frequented by an audience conscious of the melancholy reality of life's impermanence.

Although the use of bronze had become central to Japanese society with the introduction of Buddhism in the 6th century, with its strong association with Buddhist piety, by the Edo period bronze vases, incense burners and items for the scholar's studio began to be savoured by the elite more for their decorative style than for their relationship with the prevailing religious orthodoxy.



1. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, c. 1800
H: 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ in (31.5 cm)



2. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 18th century
H: 8 ¼ in (21 cm)





3. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 17th-18th century
H: 10 ⁵/₈ in (27 cm)
Xuande mark on body





4. Bronze Flying Handle Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 17th-18th century
H: 14 1/4 in (36 cm)



Above: 5. Bronze Flying Handle Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 17th century
H: 10 5/8 in (27 cm)



Below: 6. Bronze Flying Handle Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 19th century
H: 14 3/4 in (37.5 cm)



7. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, c. 1700
H: 8 ³/₄ in (22.5 cm)



8. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 17th century
H: 12 in (30.4 cm)
Signed on base, 嶋馬筑後大掾藤原氏重常味作
[‘Made by Shimauma, Steward of Chikugo Province’]
Inscription on neck, 奉献真前 ‘Hoken Shinzen’ [‘Offering before the Divine Presence’].
The body further inscribed with a votive inscription listed with donor names.





9. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, c. 1800
H: 10 in (25.4 cm)



10. Bronze Flying Handle Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 19th century
H: 10 ¼ in (26 cm)

Japanese Taste

Flower arranging and the tea ceremony now started to assume an importance for Japanese society that they were never to attain in any other culture. In particular the uniquely Japanese Tokonoma and the performance of the tea ceremony were to provide a retreat from the clamorous outside world in which the samurai or merchant could enjoy sympathetic surroundings and simple works of art in rustic tranquility.

The aesthetic criteria associated with this graceful world, namely restraint, simplicity and intimacy with nature, determined the type of Japanese (and Chinese) bronze that became most cherished. Great importance was allocated to the aesthetic appreciation of form and surface patina and the sacred significance of these vessels became less relevant than their sheer decorative beauty.

As the Edo period drew to its close in the first half of the 19th century, traditional restraint was eschewed in favour of bolder and more decorative designs for a new class of patron as well as to the growing interest of the Europeans beginning to discover Japan.



11. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 19th century
H: 9 7/8 in (25 cm)



12. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, c. 1800
H: 18 ½ in (47 cm)





13. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, c. 1700
H: 12 in (30.4 cm)
Mark on base, 越後守作, 'Made by the Guardian of Echigo'



14. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 17th-18th century
H: 10 ½ in (26.5 cm)





15. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 18th century
H: 10 ⁵/₈ in (27 cm)

Japonisme

By 1868, at the start of the Meiji period and Japanese exposure to the West, state policy promoted a hamfisted rejection of Buddhism and much of traditional Japanese culture. It incorporated a panicky dismissal of Japanese aesthetic values in favour of an excited adulation for all things Western.

Much was destroyed and what survived was often sold off to foreigners who were only too ready to profit from the flow of works becoming available. Museums in the West, the V&A in London and the Cernuschi in Paris, the Metropolitan in New York and the Chiossone in Genoa, amongst other institutions were the fortunate beneficiaries.

This surge of collecting by Europeans and Americans led to an astonishing succes d'estime for Japanese works of art at the series of great exhibitions that began in London in 1851 and was to continue into the early years of the next century.



16. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 17th-18th century
H: 7 in (17.75 cm)
Provenance: Mary and Jackson Burke Collection



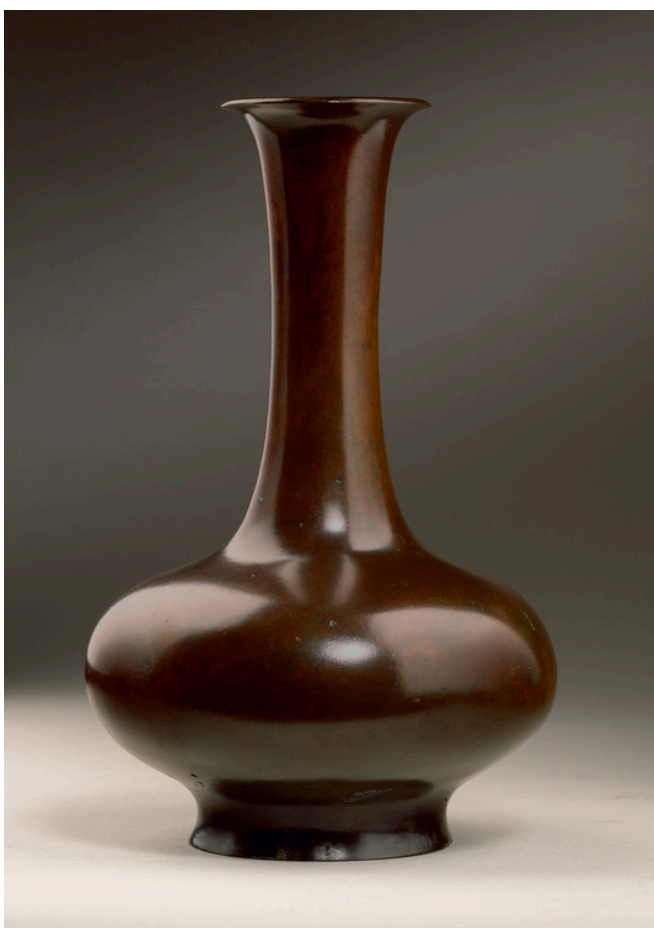
17. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 18th century
H: 7 ½ in (19 cm)



18. Pair of Bronze Flying Handle Vases,
Japan, Edo period, 18th-19th century
H: 11 ⁷/₈ in (30 cm)



Above: 19. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 17th -18th century
H: 5 ½ in (14 cm)



Below: 20. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 18th century
H: 9 in (23 cm)



21. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Meiji period, 1868-1912
H: 9 ½ in (24 cm)



22. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 18th century
H: 11 ³/₄ in (30 cm)





23. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Meiji period, 1868-1912
H: 11 ½ in (29 cm)





24. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Meiji period, 1868-1912
H: 10 ¼ in (26 cm)



25. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Meiji period, c. 1880
H: 9 ¼ in (23.5 cm)
Xuande/Sentoku mark on base
Provenance: Musee Chateaux, Bourgogne



26. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 17th-18th century
H: 10 ⁵/₈ in (27 cm)

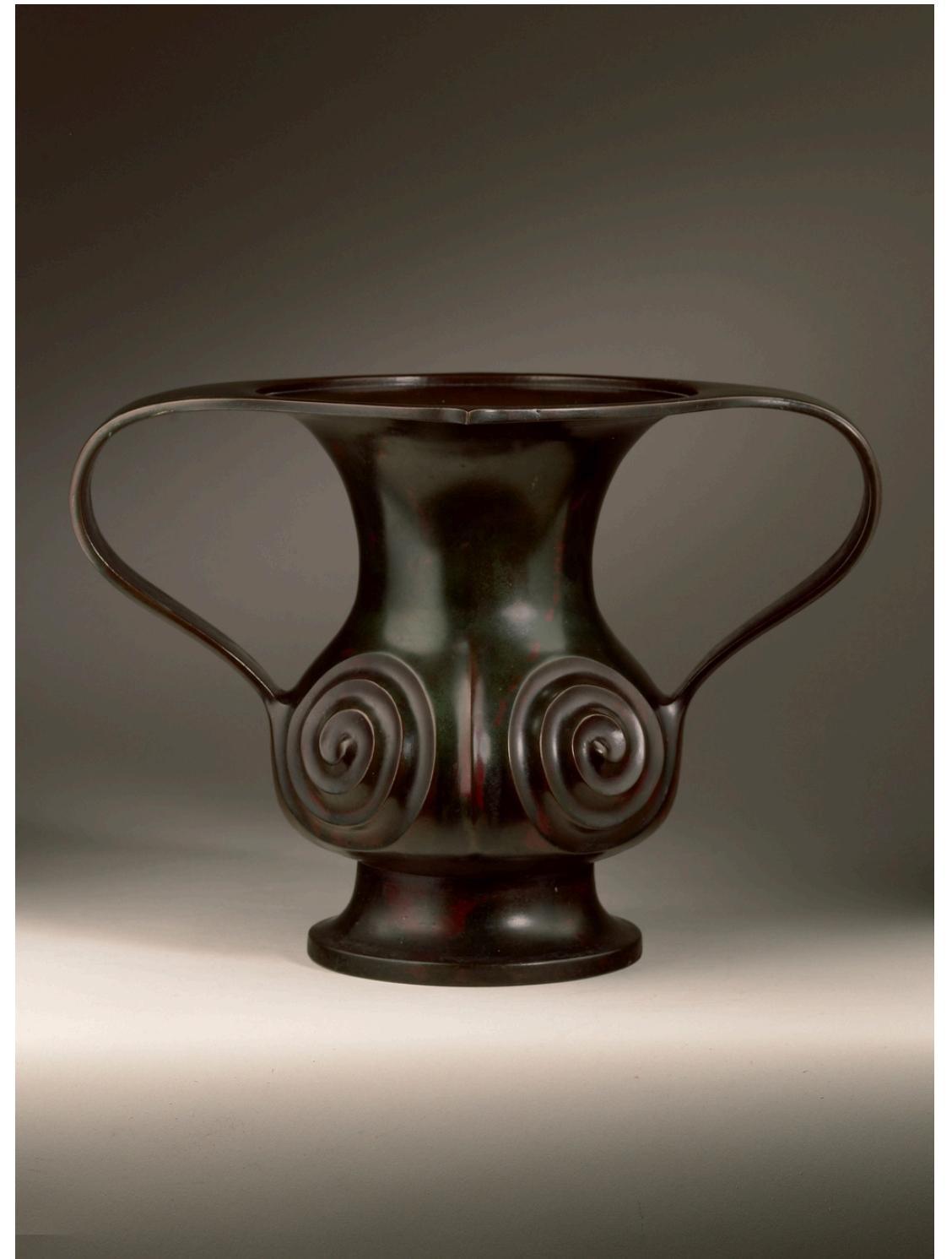


27. Offering Bowl with Silver Inlay,
Japan, Edo period, 18th century
D: 12 1/2 in (31.75 cm)



Above: 28. Bronze Flying Handle Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 18th century
H: 12 ½ in (32 cm)

Below: 29. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Meiji period, 1868-1912
H: 10 ⅝ in (27 cm)



30. Bronze Flying Handle Vase,
Japan, Edo period, 19th century
H: 10 ¼ in (26 cm)



31. Bronze Flower Vase,
Japan, Meiji period, 1868-1912
H: 15 ³/₄ in (40 cm)

European Collecting

The Parisian dealer Siegfried Bing started his influential and elegant revue "le Japon Artistique" in 1888 and sold a substantial group of Chinese and Japanese bronzes to the V&A Museum. Manet's portrait of Zola (1867) is almost a manifesto of the rage amongst artists and collectors for the fresh insights yielded by study of Japanese prints and the new provocative forms of ceramics, lacquers and bronzes. However, while nearly every major French artist, with the possible exception of Cézanne, was to some degree indebted to the Japanese vision, it was in the applied arts that the annexation of Japanese and Chinese designs is most uninhibited. It is through Gallé, Lalique, Tiffany and other Art Nouveau designers and architects that the momentum of western aesthetics is given a decisive direction by the art of the East.



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