



25–16 | Yokoyama Taikan **FLOATING LIGHTS**  
 Meiji period, 1909. One from a pair of hanging scrolls, ink,  
 colors, and gold on silk, 56 ½ × 20 ½" (143 × 52 cm).  
 The Museum of Modern Art, Ibaraki.

in his seventies, with a fifty-year career behind him, when he designed this image. Such was his modesty that he felt that his Fuji series was only the beginning of his creativity, and he wrote that if he could live until he was 100, he would finally learn how to become an artist.

## THE MEIJI AND MODERN PERIODS

Pressure from the West for entry into Japan mounted dramatically in the mid-nineteenth century, and in 1853 the policy of national seclusion was ended. Resulting tensions precipitated the downfall of the Tokugawa shogunate, however, and in 1868 the emperor was formally restored to power, an event known as the Meiji Restoration. The court moved from Kyoto to Edo, which was renamed Tokyo, meaning “Eastern Capital.”

### Meiji

The Meiji period marked a major change for Japan. After its long isolation, Japan was deluged by the influx of the West. Western education, governmental systems, clothing, medicine, industrialization, and technology were all adopted rapidly into Japanese culture. Teachers of sculpture and oil painting were imported from Italy, while adventurous Japanese artists traveled to Europe and America to study.

**A MEIJI PAINTER.** Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908), an American who had recently graduated from Harvard, traveled to Japan in 1878 to teach philosophy and political economy at Tokyo University. Within a few years, he and a former student Okakura Kakuzo (1862–1913) began urging artists to study traditional Japanese arts rather than to focus exclusively on Western art styles and media. Yokoyama Taikan (1868–1958) subsequently developed his personal style within the *Nihonga* (Japanese painting) genre promoted by Okakura. Drawing from Japanese tradition, notably the Rimpa style, Yokoyama avoided outlines and instead defined forms in fields of color. His pictorial space, however, owes something to the Western tradition. Like Okakura, Yokoyama traveled widely. His **FLOATING LIGHTS** (FIG. 25–16) was inspired by a visit to India in 1903, where he observed women engaged in divination on the banks of the Ganges.

### Modern Japan

In the push to become a modern industrialized country, Japan did not lose its sense of tradition, even in the days of the strongest Western influence. In modern Japan, artists still choose whether to work in an East Asian style, a Western style, or some combination of the two. Just as Japanese art in earlier periods had both Chinese style and native traditions, so Japanese art today has both Western and native aspects.

**A MODERN CERAMICIST.** Perhaps the liveliest contemporary art is ceramics. Japan has retained a widespread appreciation for pottery. Many people still practice the traditional arts of the tea ceremony and flower arranging, both of which require ceramic vessels, and most people own at least one fine ceramic piece. In this atmosphere, many potters earn a comfortable living by making art ceramics, an opportunity not available in other countries. Some ceramicists continue to create raku teabowls and other traditional wares, while others experiment with new styles and new techniques.

Miyashita Zenji (b. 1939), who lives in Kyoto, creates an initial form by constructing an undulating shape out of pieces of cardboard; he then builds up the surface with clay of many different colors, using torn paper to create irregular shapes. When fired, the varied colors of the clay seem to form a landscape, with layers of mountains leading up to the sky. Miyashita's work is modern in shape, yet traditional in its evocation of nature.

Miyashita is representative of the high level of contemporary ceramics in Japan, which is supported by a broad spectrum of educated and enthusiastic collectors and admirers. Objects useful for the tea ceremony or for flower arranging, such as Miyashita's flower vase entitled **WIND** (FIG. 25-17), reflect a continued refinement of traditional taste. There is also strong public interest in contemporary painting, prints, calligraphy, textiles, lacquer, architecture, and sculpture.

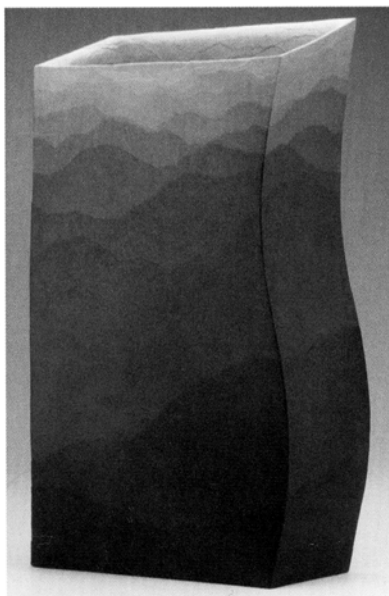
**A CONTEMPORARY SCULPTOR.** One of the most adventurous and original sculptors currently working is Chuichi Fujii (b. 1941). Born into a family of sculptors in wood, Fujii found himself as a young artist more interested in the new materials of plastic, steel, and glass. However, in his mid-

thirties he took stock of his progress and decided to begin again, this time with wood. At first he carved and cut into the wood, but he soon realized that he wanted to allow the material to express its own natural spirit, so he devised an ingenious new technique that preserved the individuality of each log while making of it something new. Fujii first studies the log to come to terms with its basic shape. Next, he inserts hooks into the log and runs wires between them. Every day he tightens the wires, over a period of months gradually pulling the log into a new shape. When he has bent the log to the shape he envisioned, Fujii makes a cut and sees whether his sculpture will stand. If he has miscalculated, he discards the work and begins again.

Here, Fujii has created a circle, one of the most basic forms in nature but never before seen in such a thick tree trunk (FIG. 25-18). The work strongly suggests the *enso*, the circle that Zen monks painted to express the universe, the all, the void, the moon—and even a tea cake. Yet Fujii does not try to proclaim his links with Japanese culture. He says that while his works may seem to have some connections with traditional Japanese arts, he is not conscious of them.

The artist has achieved something entirely new, yet his work also embodies the love of asymmetry, respect for natural materials, and dramatic simplicity encountered throughout the history of Japanese art.

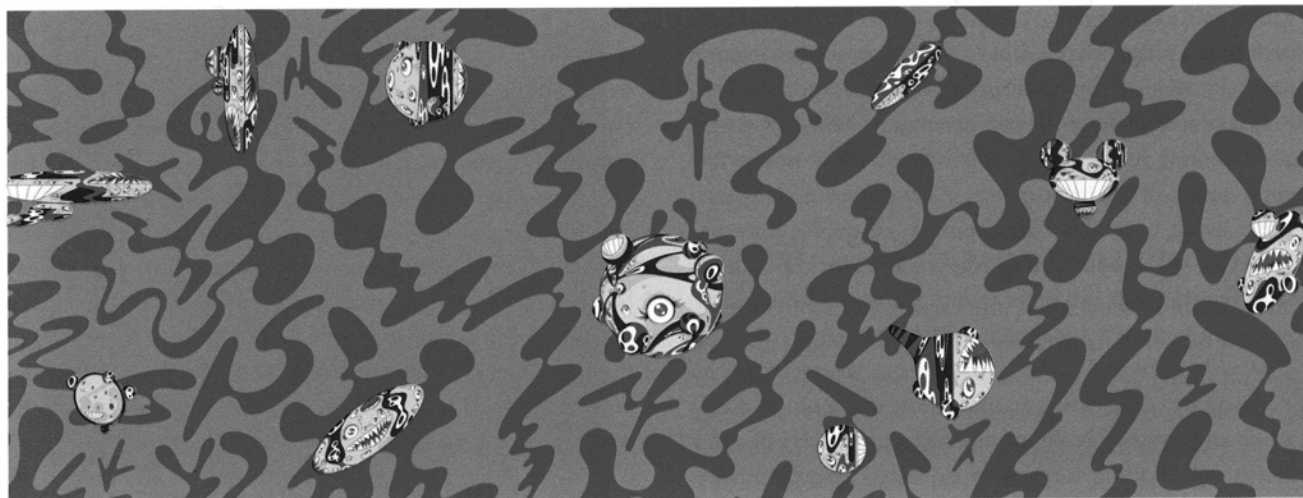
**A CONTEMPORARY PAINTER.** In the 1990s, art in Japan merged with that in the West, with tradition and creativity playing out in new ways. Takashi Murakami (b. 1962), who lives and works in New York as well as in Japan, is prominent among artists who have taken Japan's *manga* and *anime* art forms, derived from the *ukiyo-e* tradition, as an inspiration for



25-17 | Miyashita Zenji **WIND**  
c. 1989. Stoneware, 21 1/8 × 12 3/4 × 5 1/2" (55.4 × 32.4 × 13 cm).  
Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, Lawrence.  
Gift of the Friends of the Art Museum/Helen Foresman Spencer Art Acquisition Fund



25-18 | Chuichi Fujii **UNTITLED '90**  
1990. Cedar wood, height 7'5 1/2" (2.3 m).  
Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo.



**25–19 | Takashi Murakami MAGIC BALL (POSITIVE)**

1999. Seven panels, acrylic on canvas mounted on board,  $94 \frac{1}{2} \times 248 \frac{1}{4} \times 2 \frac{3}{4}$ " ( $240 \times 630 \times 7$  cm).

Collection: Galerie 20.21, Essen.

painting and sculpture. These forms' close involvement with popular culture has a strong precedent in the *ukiyo-e* tradition. The emphasis on undulating lines and flat forms—to the point of a denial of pictorial space—also has its root in that Edo period style. Murakami's floating motifs (FIG. 25–19) reference *anime* and at the same time satirize its international consumer culture.

## IN PERSPECTIVE

Muromachi, Momoyama, and Edo—six hundred years of Japanese culture—saw profound social and political changes. The arts felt these shifts through changing patterns of patronage of arts, yet all the while distinctive aesthetic orientations matured.

Evocative ink landscapes and Zen dry gardens, based on traditions imported from China, developed as the deeply artistic expressions in Japan. In these art forms the bold brushstrokes or subtle washes, and the general aesthetic of monochrome ink complements a strong appreciation of

nature, its materials, and its forms. Wood, clay, and straw, or naturally shaped rocks provide patterns and textures with no need of obvious embellishment.

During the same periods, Japanese art inspired exquisite and exacting craftsmanship. Decoration in gold played a distinctive role in the painted screens that defined interior spaces as well as in the ornamentation of lacquer ware and other useful objects. Forms from nature became abstract and stylized patterns. Representation was often distilled to the simplicity of fluctuating line and flat shapes of color.

Japanese art of these periods was also invested with whimsy or even paradox. A sense of humor shows: sometimes easily accessible and at other times in works of art so sophisticated that they could only be understood by those with a deep knowledge of both Japanese and Chinese literature. In Japan, the patronage of art has long reflected a pluralistic cultural atmosphere. With that has come an ability to refine forms to greater and greater subtlety or, in contrast, to startle the viewer with audacious surprises.