**Asuka and Nara Art**

During the Asuka and Nara periods, so named because the seat of Japanese government was located in the Asuka Valley from 552 to 710 and in the city of Nara until 784, the first significant invasion by Asian continental culture took place in Japan. The transmission of Buddhism provided the initial impetus for contacts between Korea, China, and Japan, and the Japanese recognized facets of Chinese culture that could profitably be incorporated into their own: a system for converting ideas and sounds into writing; historiography; complex theories of government, such as an effective bureaucracy; and, most important for the arts, advanced technology, new building techniques, more advanced methods of casting in bronze, and new techniques and mediums for painting.

Throughout the 7th and 8th centuries, however, the major focus in contacts between Japan and the Asian continent was the development of Buddhism. Not all scholars agree on the significant dates and the appropriate names to apply to various time periods between 552, the official date of the introduction of Buddhism into Japan, and 784, when the Japanese capital was transferred from Nara. The most common designations are the Suiko period, 552-645; the Hakuho period, 645-710; and the Tempyo period, 710-84.

The earliest Buddhist structures still extant in Japan, and the oldest wooden buildings in the Far East are found at the Horyu-ji to the southwest of Nara. First built in the early 7th century as the private temple of Crown Prince Shotokuconsists of 41 independent buildings; the most important ones, however, the main worship hall, or Kondo (Golden Hall), and Goju-no-to (Five-story Pagoda), stand in the center of an open area surrounded by a roofed cloister. The Kondo, in the style of Chinese worship halls, is a two-story structure of post-and-beam construction, capped by an irimoya, or hipped-gabled roof of ceramic tiles.

Inside the Kondo, on a large rectangular platform, are some of the most important sculptures of the period. The central image is a Shaka Trinity (623), the historical Buddha flanked by two bodhisattvas (Buddhist saints), a sculpture cast in bronze by the sculptor Tori Busshi (flourished early 7th century) in homage to the recently deceased Prince Shotoku. At the four corners of the platform are the Guardian Kings of the Four Directions, carved in wood about 650. Also housed at Horyu-ji is the Tamamushi Shrine, a wooden replica of a Kondo, which is set on a high wooden base that is decorated with figural paintings executed in a medium of mineral pigments mixed with lacquer.

Temple building in the 8th century was focused around the Todai-ji in Nara. Constructed as the headquarters for a network of temples in each of the provinces, the Todai-ji is the most ambitious religious complex erected in the early centuries of Buddhist worship in Japan. Appropriately, the 16.2-m (53-ft) Buddha (completed 752) enshrined in the main hall, or Daibutsuden, is a Rushana Buddha, the figure that represents the essence of Buddhahood, just as the Todai-ji represented the center for imperially sponsored Buddhism and its dissemination throughout Japan. Only a few fragments of the original statue survive, and the present hall and central Buddha are reconstructions from the Edo period.

Clustered around the Daibutsuden on a gently sloping hillside are a number of secondary halls: the Hokkedo (Lotus Sutra Hall), with its principal image, the Fukukenjaku Kannon (the most popular bodhisattva), crafted of dry lacquer (cloth dipped in lacquer and shaped over a wooden armature); the Kaidanin (Ordination Hall) with its magnificent clay statues of the Four Guardian Kings; and the storehouse, called the Shosoin. This last structure is of great importance as an art-historical cache, because in it are stored the utensils that were used in the temple's dedication ceremony in 752, the eye-opening ritual for the Rushana image, as well as government documents and many secular objects owned by the imperial family.