

JAPANESE STYLE

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Japanese interiors are a study in simplicity and flexibility. They emphasize both functionality and minimalism. Simple unobstructed lines and the absence of clutter convey a sense of austere elegance (Yagi, 1982). There is a notion of “incompleteness” about Japanese design which “implies that the person who inhabits a Japanese designed room becomes part of its life” (Seidman et al., 1988, p. 153). Abundant light and the copious use of natural materials express purity and integrity. Japanese interiors are serene, comforting and exotic (Frederick, 2012b) and deeply rooted in tradition. They invite you to contemplate, make you feel calm and in harmony with your surroundings (Little, 2014).

The design challenge now consists in figuring out how to imbue an interior space with all these desirable properties without refraining from adding furniture (such as a sofa or chairs) that would be considered essential from a Western point of view?

STAY CLOSE TO NATURE AND HEED TRADITION

When we think of Japanese interiors, Tatami floor mats spread over hardwood flooring come to mind. Tatamis are rectangular mats made from woven igusa – a type of grass – with the edges bound in black or green cloth. They are known for being wonderfully cool in summer and warm in winter (Anderson, n.d.). Tatami mats come in standardized sizes and are arranged in pre-established configurations to suit a room’s size. Aside

from wood floorings, other commonly used flooring types include stone tiles, spa rocks, and pebbles.

In line with the “close to nature”-theme, walls are frequently finished with natural colored clay, painted in a neutral color, paneled with wood or covered with paper (shoji).

SEEK NATURAL LIGHT WHEREVER POSSIBLE

While abundant natural light is a right in Japan (Anderson, n.d.), soft, filtered light is the preferred variety.

Large expansive windows, ceiling openings, and skylights are almost a must. Windows are usually left clear of obstruction, that is don’t receive any window treatments. If this is not possible for whatever reason, simple bamboo shades or sheer gauzy curtain panels will take care of the problem (Little, 2014).

But how to get that soft, filtered light that is so important for turning a space into the peaceful, Zen like oasis, Japanese interiors are known for? Probably the most iconic component of any Japanese interior is the Shoji screen. Its versatility and translucency are key to its popularity. Shoji screens find use as window treatments, standing screens, partitions, and pocket doors, but can also easily be converted to closet or cabinet doors. They are wooden framed screens/sliding doors covered on one side with translucent rice paper, glass or plastic (Kerr et al., 2013; Snider, 2011). Their translucent quality lets in natural light, yet also softens it up while simultaneously preserving the occupants’ privacy.

Another popular window treatment are sudares. Sudares are a species of nearly opaque bamboo blinds that consist of very thin, horizontally arranged strips that are



knotted together with strings. They are typically used to shield the porch and other openings of the home from sunlight, rain, and insects. They are normally put up in spring and taken down again in fall. Their light structure allows breezes to pass through, which is a big plus when the weather is getting hot in summer.

KEEP FURNISHINGS SPARSE AND LOW

The minimalistic Japanese interior eschews superfluous furnishings. Whatever furniture is used is carefully selected and highly functional. Since in a traditional Japanese home, few rooms have only one permanent function, but rather need to accommodate different numbers of people for different reasons at different times, traditionally furniture tends to be sized more for the individual than for communal use. This ensured that it was portable and thus could be moved around easily (see Tansu boxes below) (Locher et al., 2015). A limited number of pieces make up the entire interior. As Japan is traditionally a floor-based culture (Rao et al., 1997), furnishings (this includes lamps) are generally kept as close to the floor as possible: Tables have short legs, while traditional Japanese chairs are even legless. Sunken benches and tables are also common. Wood shelving and lacquered tray and side tables have a clean and streamlined look. If one wants to add Western style furniture (e.g. for more comfortable seating) to a Japanese space, it is thus critical to select low pieces with simple and clean shapes.

A traditional and highly versatile piece of furniture are stackable *Tansu* boxes. Each of these lightweight boxes has a set of handles to facilitate carrying. This was traditionally important as Japan is prone to natural disasters and thus those handles came in handy whenever disaster struck and the owner's belongings had to be hauled away.

Tansu boxes are usually made from elmwood or Japanese cypress which are stained, not painted, and thus show the wood's natural beauty. Similarly to Shoji screens, their usage is varied: Stacks of Tansu boxes find application as buffets, kitchen cabinets or dressers.

Soft furnishings are as important to the Japanese interior as they are elsewhere, though with a twist: they are by far not as plentiful as they are in Western homes and oftentimes only visible when actually needed. Here are a few examples: Noren – split curtains (made from cloth or hemp (Yagi, 1982) – are used as screening devices, e.g. to block the view into the kitchen or into private areas. As they are made from a flexible and light material, they enable one to “see the wind as it flutters in the breeze” ... which is a very good example for how Japanese interiors seek to bring nature indoors.

Another typical soft furnishings are futons. Together with pillows and blankets are they usually stored in closets during the day. Flat floor cushions may be used in lieu of traditional Japanese chairs.

EXERCISE RESTRAINT WHEN IT COMES TO ACCESSORIES

In line with overall austerity of the Japanese interior, pictures, paintings, and other accessories find only limited use. “No clutter” is again the guiding decorating principle (Alvarado Sierra, 2012). Most of the decoration in a traditional Japanese home is inherent in the permanent architectural elements of the building (Locher et al., 2015). Thus, generally, only a few additional accessories are on display so as to not distract from the beauty of the room. This said, pictures and accessories are still important. Many Japanese homes feature in-

built alcoves (tokonomas) which are beautifully decorated e.g. with a delicately framed Japanese scroll (kakejiku: painting on paper/silk or white satin) plus a flower arrangement, bonsai plant or small piece of sculpture. Those decorations are often changed according with the season (Yagi, 1982) .

Accessories bring nature into the home. Flower arrangements (e.g. Ikebana), orchids or traditional plants such as bonsai or bamboo potted in sleek minimalist containers (made from wood or stone) add immediately a Japanese feel.

Other types of accessories frequently found in Japanese homes are wood sculptures, painted sliding doors, and folding screens (used as wall décor, see (Rao et al., 1997)). Apart from these - rather authentic - decorations, other popular objects that help create a Japanese ambiance are lacquer trays (urushi), food boxes, kimonos (used as wall hangings), Japanese dolls, samurai swords, sake bottles, or obis converted into table runners, pillow cases or wall hangings.

Again, as Yagi (1982) noted, understatement is key. Decorating with these accessories will only accomplish its objective if they are used sparingly and in the right context.

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