

# Chapter 5

## Graphic Design

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**T**HIS chapter provides an overview of the history and defining characteristics of graphic design in Japan, tracing its development from the early Meiji era to the present. While Japanese graphic design incorporates international trends, traditional arts and crafts remain significant influences on contemporary practice. The chapter first clarifies the term “graphic design,” then examines the rapid modernization of the Meiji era and the profound changes leading up to the Second World War. It also surveys developments from the postwar period to the present. Finally, the chapter highlights key characteristics, such as distinctive approaches to typography and innovative uses of colour and motifs, that reflect the enduring impact of Japanese arts and crafts traditions.

## 1 A Word about Graphic Design

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify the meaning of the term graphic design. The designation “graphic designer” originated in the early twentieth century, during a period when

Japan, alongside Western Europe and the United States, experienced rapid modernization following the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution. Graphic design is fundamentally concerned with mass communication, specifically the creation of visual imagery through mass production. To illustrate the scope of graphic design by the early twenty-first century, design historian John Heskett described its pervasiveness as follows:

Switch on the television, browse the Internet, walk down a street, read a magazine, or go into a store, and we are confronted with a huge array of signage, advertising, and social advocacy on a variety of scales. Some images will be permanent – a street sign, for example – but ... a much greater proportion of communications is ephemeral, such as newspapers and advertising materials.<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of size, scale, or duration, the primary responsibility of a graphic designer is often described as “making visuals and type play nice in space.”<sup>2</sup> In essence, graphic designers construct visual compositions that integrate imagery and typography, guided by established design elements and principles. As with graphic design globally, Japanese graphic design exhibits similar foundational concerns of ...

an insistence upon [characteristics such as] contrast, planned visual hierarchy, and typographic continuity ... In large part, this is due to intercultural exchange between Europe, Russia, the Americas, and Japan that has occurred since the Meiji Restoration of 1868.<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Early Modernization

Japanese graphic design is generally thought to have begun shortly after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The Meiji era introduced Western printing and advertising methods, including new forms of graphic printing. This period also saw the influence of European art movements such as Art Nouveau (1890s-1910s) and Art Deco (1920s-1930s), as well as Western methods of product packaging and movable type.<sup>4</sup>

By the early twentieth century, commercial art — referred to as *shōgyō bijutsu* in Japanese — had become established.<sup>5</sup> Department stores, publications, and emerging brands played a significant role in shaping modern visual culture during this period (Figure 1).

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<sup>1</sup>John Heskett. *Design: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2005, 55.

<sup>2</sup>Rebecca Hagen and Kim Golombisky. *White Space Is Not Your Enemy: A Beginner's Guide to Communicating Visually Through Graphic, Web & Multimedia Design*. 4th ed. CRC Press, 2024, 1.

<sup>3</sup>Ian Lynam. *Fracture: Japanese Graphic Design 1875–1975*. Set Margins, 2024, 31.

<sup>4</sup>Lynam, see n. 3.

<sup>5</sup>F. Fu. *Japanese Typography, Lettering, and Commercial Art in the Early Twentieth Century*. Conference presentation, ATypI. 2019. URL: <https://atypi.org/presentation/japanese-typography-lettering-and-commercial-art-in-the-early-twentieth-century/>.



Figure 1: The first issue of the magazine *Fujin Gabō* (Illustrated Women's Gazette), published in 1905. The work shows a clear influence of European art movements such as Art Nouveau.

A notable development was the decision by several Japanese designers and artists to study at the Bauhaus (1919-1933), a leading design school and movement that influenced design education worldwide, including in Japan.<sup>6</sup> After the Bauhaus closed under increasing Nazi pressure, these designers returned to a Japan marked by rising nationalism and imperial expansion, which ultimately led to conflict in the Asia-Pacific. During this era, many Japanese designers — including Iwao Yamawaki (1898-1987), Michiko Yamawaki (1910-2000), and Yusaku Kamekura (1915-1997) — were involved in producing state propaganda.<sup>7</sup> Japanese design at this time combined traditional motifs with the modernist aesthetic associated with the Bauhaus (Figure 2).

### 3 Postwar Modernism and the Rise of Corporate Identity

In the early postwar era, a new modernism was taking hold in Europe and America, which had a strong influence on Japanese design by the 1960s. A representative and noteworthy work from this era was Yūsaku Kamekura's design for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, which had a distinctly international outlook and appeared to avoid any overt references to Japanese motifs, due to sensitivities over any strongly nationalist sentiment in the wake of the Second World War.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Paul Haimes. "On Japanese Minimalism." In: *Contemporary Aesthetics* 18 (2020). Accessed: 2026-04-28. URL: <https://contempaesthetics.org/2020/09/24/on-japanese-minimalism/>.

<sup>7</sup>Lynam, see n. 3.

<sup>8</sup>Toshino Iguchi. "Reconsideration of the World Design Conference 1960 in Tokyo and the World Industrial Design Conference 1973 in Kyoto: Transformation of Design Theory." In: *Proceedings of*



Figure 2: The first issue of Nippon magazine with a cover designed by Ayao Yamana (1897-1980), a periodical aimed at an international audience, published in 1934.

Kamekura's design integrated a Japanese sense of spatial balance with what was known as the International Typographic Style, characterized by clean, minimalist typefaces such as Helvetica (Figure 3).<sup>11</sup>

During the 1960s and 1970s, designers such as Ikko Tanaka (1930-2002) and Hiromu Hara (1935-2006) further developed a Japanese aesthetic that merged Western modernism with traditional Japanese visual motifs, influencing corporate identity, packaging, and poster design for companies like Mitsubishi, Nissin, and MUJI. By the late twentieth century, Japanese graphic design began to be recognized internationally, as seen in work produced by Tanaka and others for MUJI and other global-facing Japanese companies.<sup>12</sup>

## 4 From the Bubble Era to Contemporary Minimalism

During the 1980s and 1990s, as Japan's economic bubble deflated, the nation's visual culture became closely associated with bright neon colours. This aesthetic notably influenced the futuristic visuals of Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner*, which depicted a dystopian Los An-

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*the 5th International Congress of International Association of Societies of Design Research (IASDR 2013)*. Tokyo: Chiba University, 2013. URL: <http://www.design-cu.jp/iasdr2013/papers/1183-1b.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup>Josef Müller-Brockmann and D. Q. Stephenson. *Grid Systems in Graphic Design: A Visual Communication Manual for Graphic Designers, Typographers, and Three-Dimensional Designers*. 19th ed. Niggli, 2022.

<sup>12</sup>Lynam, see n. 3; Kenya Hara. *Designing Design*. Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2007.

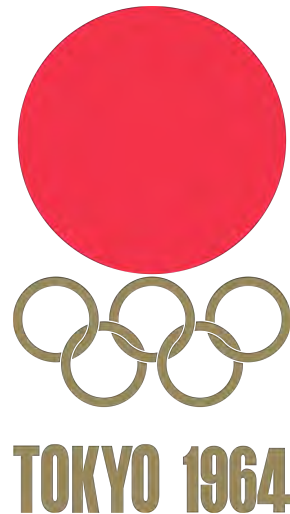


Figure 3: Yūsaku Kamekura’s logo for the Tokyo 1964 Summer Olympics.<sup>10</sup> Kamekura insisted that the red circle represented the sun and not Japan’s flag.

geles characterized by neon-lit, Japanese-inspired imagery.<sup>13</sup> The highly saturated visual style was often accompanied by dense informational content, a feature still observable in the busiest districts of Tokyo and Osaka (e.g., Figure 5), but also in the web and software interfaces of many Japanese companies.<sup>14</sup> Some analyses suggest that the popularity of cluttered and information-rich designs may reflect consumer preferences or the implicit and ambiguous nature of communication in Japanese society.<sup>15</sup>

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, however, Japanese design began to adopt a more subtle and introspective character.<sup>16</sup> As I have previously observed, “much contemporary Japanese graphic design has a tendency to use ample negative space and wide letter-spacing.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the prevalence of cluttered advertising and digital interfaces in the contemporary era may represent exceptions within the broader trajectory of Japanese visual culture.

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<sup>13</sup>David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, eds. *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015.

<sup>14</sup>Paul Haimés. “Zen and the Art of Website Maintenance.” In: *Interactions* 23.1 (2015), pp. 20–21. DOI: 10.1145/2847596.

<sup>15</sup>Haimés, “Zen and the Art of Website Maintenance,” see n. 14.

<sup>16</sup>Lynam, see n. 3.

<sup>17</sup>Haimés, “On Japanese Minimalism,” see n. 6.



Figure 4: By the 1990s, MUJI's branding, despite the company's name literally meaning "no brand," was internationally recognized.



Figure 5: The Shin-Ōkubo neighbourhood in Shinjuku, Tokyo.

## 5 Characteristics and Practices in Contemporary Japanese Graphic Design

Japanese graphic design – and logos especially – often draws on elements of traditional Japanese culture. This trend has continued despite the adoption of modernist – and later postmodernist – design principles from the United States and Europe from the early postwar period onwards.

For example, family crests (*kamon*) are sometimes adapted into logos. The tradition of *kamon* stretches back over a thousand years and remains an influence in contemporary visual identity design – for example, the Japanese passport features the Chrysanthemum Crest (*kikumon*) of the Japanese imperial family. Seal culture (*inkan*, *hanko*) has also played a role: these



Figure 6: The Japanese passport, which features the Chrysanthemum Crest (*kikumon*) of the Japanese imperial family.<sup>19</sup>

personal signature stamps were adopted in Japan from China around the seventh century, and their graphic form continues to influence mark-making in Japanese design (Figure 7).<sup>20</sup>



Figure 7: *Inkan* design by Chisato Sato, 2023.

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<sup>20</sup>Lynam, see n. 3.

## 6 Typography and the Japanese Writing System

Japanese typography occupies a central place in the country's design identity. It's not unusual to see Japanese characters combined in interesting and novel ways. The structure of these characters lends itself well to being joined through strokes, creating logo marks in creative ways.



Figure 8: Example logo saying eel (*unagi* in Japanese) where the first character is elongated and made to look like an eel. This is a common logo motif for restaurants specializing in eel.

It is also common to see hybrid combinations of Japanese characters and Latin-based letters (*rōmaji*), especially in branding contexts. Such mixtures create fresh opportunities, but also design challenges around font pairing, hierarchy, and balance.<sup>21</sup> A classic example of typographic iconography is the word *unagi* (eel). The first character (*u*) is often stylised in restaurant logos to resemble an eel, turning the writing itself into a pictorial logo (Figure 8). That the Japanese writing system has its origins in logographic characters — meaning those where a single character represents an entire word or idea — means that the characters lend themselves well to the creation of logos.

Font categories familiar to Western designers — such as serif and sans serif — also exist in Japanese typography, but with particularly expressive ranges (Figure 9). Serifs may be very thick or very thin; sans serif fonts may range from rigid to fluid. Script fonts can mimic elegant calligraphy, messy handwriting, or even children's writing for a playful feel. Some typefaces used in formal contexts, such as the passport shown in Figure 6, use a *shōten* — a small type of *tensho* (seal script) — strongly influenced by the design of *inkan* and *hanko*.

Because Japanese designers often incorporate multiple scripts (*kanji*, *hiragana*, *katakana*) alongside *rōmaji* (for transliterating Japanese words into Latin-based characters), typographic decision-making is more complex than in many Western contexts. Despite this complexity, many Japanese designs achieve clarity, balance, and visual harmony. Kyoto-based designer Motoyasu Okumura explains his inspiration behind the design decisions made in the branding

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<sup>21</sup>K. Ong. “Typography in Contemporary Japanese Branding.” In: *Visual Culture Journal* 12.3 (2019), pp. 45–61.

工芸デザイン  
工芸デザイン  
工芸デザイン  
工芸デザイン

Figure 9: Four different typefaces spelling out the word *kōgei dezain* (craft design). From top to bottom, a serif script, a sans serif script, a brush script, and a *shōten* small seal script.

shown in Figure 10 (Original in Japanese, translated by the author):

I wanted to incorporate a Japanese pattern, so I used ginkgo leaves as the background design, in keeping with the shop’s name, which means “Ginkgo” in Japanese. The navy blue colour is inspired by the indigo of a kendo uniform, since the owner has experience in kendo. The layout (of both text and visual elements) was designed with both Japanese and modern elements in mind. The sign is made of rain-resistant tarpaulin and was designed with a *noren* (a traditional Japanese curtain) in mind.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond the tasteful use of both Japanese and Western typography, the design illustrates how contemporary branding can draw on traditional Japanese motifs, materials, and spatial concepts to create a strong sense of cultural identity, while still retaining a sense of newness.

## 7 Japanese colour theory

Another important aspect of Japanese graphic design is the approach to colour. Traditional Japanese aesthetics continue to exert a strong influence on how Japanese graphic designers use colour. There is generally a tendency toward restrained palettes, though this was sometimes ignored during the final decades of the twentieth century, reflecting the extravagances of the bubble-economy era. Otherwise, there is a strong preference for harmony and balance in colour combinations.

Seasonal associations are particularly prominent. For example, it is not unusual to see packaging and branding featuring cherry blossoms (*sakura*) in spring, or muted reds, oranges, and browns to symbolise the changing leaves of autumn.

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<sup>22</sup>Motoyasu Okumura. Personal communication. 2026.



Figure 10: Branding and signage created for a yakiniku restaurant, by Motoyasu Okumura in 2020. The branding incorporates a script-style font, plus a *hanko*-style element, and latin-based characters.

A seminal contribution to colour theory in Japan came from Sanzo Wada (1883-1967), a painter and art educator. Wada created a work, referred to in English as *A Dictionary of Colour Combinations* (*Haisboku Sōkan*), which was first published in 1933.<sup>23</sup> This work was intended as a practical guide for designers and artists to work with harmonious colour combinations at a time when systematic approaches to colour were not fully developed in design theory.

Wada drew on colour combinations found in traditional Japanese crafts, including kimono fabrics, lacquerware, ceramics, and, importantly, nature – reflecting the cultural symbolism of seasonal changes in Japan. His system was considered a better representation of Japanese sensibilities regarding colour than the Western colour wheel and has remained highly influential in Japanese visual culture, providing ample references for Japanese artists and designers.<sup>24</sup> The examples shown in Figure 11 are just a few among hundreds that Wada created.

## 8 Summary

This chapter examined the historical development of graphic design in Japan, highlighting its close relationship with the nation’s engagement with the Western world, the impact of the Second World War, and subsequent periods of reconstruction, economic growth, and stagnation. It also addressed the ways in which contemporary Japanese graphic design continues to draw

<sup>23</sup>Sanzo Wada. *A Dictionary of Color Combinations: Vol. 1*. Seigensha Art Publishing, 2018.

<sup>24</sup>Wada, *A Dictionary of Color Combinations: Vol. 1*, see n. 23; Sanzo Wada. *A Dictionary of Color Combinations: Vol. 2*. Seigensha Art Publishing, 2020.



Figure 11: Colour combination samples drawn from Wada, originally presented in sets of two, three, and four colours with CMYK values (converted here to hexadecimal). Examples include a two-colour pairing of blue (#0063b0) and seashell pink (#fdceb5); a three-colour combination of pale burnt lake (#752323), ochraceous salmon (#d2996f), and diamine green (#007d3b); and a four-colour grouping of warm grey (#97998f), red (#9d1f3c), calamine blue (#6dc6ca), and pale lemon yellow (#ffeca4).

from cultural traditions, the influence of the writing system and traditional practices on typography, and the distinct evolution of Japanese colour theory compared to Western approaches.

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