

## Muromachi Period (1392–1573)

The era when members of the Ashikaga family occupied the position of [shogun](#) is known as the Muromachi period, named after the district in Kyoto where their headquarters were located. Although the Ashikaga clan occupied the shogunate for nearly 200 years, they never succeeded in extending their political control as far as did the [Kamakura bakufu](#). Because provincial warlords, called daimyo, retained a large degree of power, they were able to strongly influence political events and cultural trends during this time. Rivalry between daimyo, whose power increased in relation to the central government as time passed, generated instability, and conflict soon erupted, culminating in the Ōnin War (1467–77). With the resulting destruction of Kyoto and the collapse of the shogunate's power, the country was plunged into a century of warfare and social chaos known as the Sengoku, the Age of the Country at War, which extended from the last quarter of the fifteenth to the end of the sixteenth century.

Despite the social and political upheaval, the Muromachi period was economically and artistically innovative. This epoch saw the first steps in the establishment of modern commercial, transportation, and urban networks. Contact with [China](#), which had been resumed in the Kamakura period, once again enriched and transformed Japanese thought and aesthetics. One of the imports that was to have a far-reaching impact was [Zen Buddhism](#). Although known in Japan since the seventh century, Zen was enthusiastically embraced by the [military class](#) beginning in the thirteenth century and went on to have a profound effect on all aspects of national life, from government and commerce to the arts and education.

Kyoto, which, as the imperial capital, had never ceased to exert an enormous influence on the country's culture, once again became the seat of political power under the Ashikaga shoguns. The private villas that the Ashikaga shoguns built there served as elegant settings for the pursuit of art and culture. While tea drinking had been brought to Japan from China in earlier centuries, in the fifteenth century, a small coterie of highly cultivated men, influenced by Zen ideals, developed the basic principles of the tea (*chanoyu*) aesthetic. At its highest level, *chanoyu* involves an appreciation of garden design, architecture, interior design, calligraphy, painting, flower arranging, the decorative arts, and the preparation and service of food. These same enthusiastic patrons of the [tea ceremony](#) also lavished support on *renga* (linked-verse poetry) and [Nō](#) dance-drama, a subtle, slow-moving stage performance featuring masked and elaborately costumed actors.

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