



## Yoshimasa and the Silver Pavilion: The Creation of the Soul of Japan (Asia Perspectives: History, Society, and Culture)

By Donald Keene

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During Yoshimasa's reign, the aesthetic taste of the Japanese was shaped: the *nō* theater flourished, Japanese gardens were developed, and the tea ceremony had its origins in a small room at the Silver Pavilion. Flower arrangement, ink painting, and *shoin-zukuri* architecture began or became of major importance under Yoshimasa. Poets introduced their often barely literate warlord-hosts to the literary masterpieces of the past and taught them how to compose poetry. Even the most barbarous warlord came to want the trappings of culture that would enable him to feel like a civilized man. This long-neglected but critical period in Japanese history at last has the thorough treatment it deserves.

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### Editorial Review

From [The New Yorker](#)

This enterprising account by the doyen of Japan studies demonstrates that the quintessential Japanese aesthetic—which characterizes Noh drama, sand gardens, monochrome ink painting, shoji panels, tatami floors, and the tea ceremony—was the creation of a staggeringly incompetent fifteenth-century shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimasa. His military record was dismal and his domestic life a shambles: his domineering wife abandoned him, his nanny (who probably doubled as his mistress) may have intrigued against him, and a favorite concubine took up with his dissolute son. While warfare destroyed Kyoto and the corpses of famine victims clogged the Kamo River, Yoshimasa squandered his treasury, bringing obsessive perfectionism to such matters as perfume blending. He ultimately abdicated to become a Buddhist priest, devoting himself to the development of the restrained, Zen-influenced style exemplified in his famous Silver Pavilion. Keene's multifarious learning and engaging manner illuminate the improbable story of the fastidious aesthete whose taste has been so important in forming the look of the modern world.

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From [Booklist](#)

Medieval Japan was a brutal, violent epoch in which local lords strived to carve out their own power niches. The best hope for stability was a strong, ruthless shogun, a type of military dictator who supposedly ruled on behalf of the emperor. Based on that necessity, the fifteenth-century shogun Yoshimasa was particularly ill suited for the job. He seems to have been repelled by the military arts, and he had little taste for the political manipulations required to control the ambitious feudal barons. He presided over the virtual destruction of the power of the shogunate. Yet Keene (*Emperor of Japan: Meiji and His World*, 2002) is not writing a hatchet job. Rather, he shows how this monkish aesthete sponsored a great flowering and diffusion of Japanese culture, including theater, poetry, and architecture, and the influence of that flowering is still felt in modern Japan. This is a book that requires patience and at least a rudimentary knowledge of Japanese history. But for those who wish to fully appreciate the roots of Japanese culture, it has value. *Jay Freeman*

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### Review

Keene's multifarious learning and engaging manner illuminate the improbable story of the fastidious aesthete whose taste has been so important in forming the look of the modern world.

(*The New Yorker*)

Keene has crafted a small gem that provides a fresh and penetrating study of 15th-century Kyoto and the role of the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa.... Keene is a master at placing Yoshimasa in his time and drawing out the cultural influences flowing from the Silver Pavilion. A well-written and accessible essay. Highly recommended [for] readers at all levels interested in Japanese history and culture.

(*Choice*)

[An] elegant, incisive new biography... *Yoshimasa and the Silver Pavilion* is a dense little book, packed almost to overflowing with information, and one that richly rewards the careful reader. Keene is a graceful,

entertaining companion, writing with a refreshing lack of pomposity.... Yet the book is always authoritative and lucid. Anyone curious about the development of the legendary style of Japan will find it an invaluable and charming guide.

*(Time Magazine)*

With such admirable industry did then Yoshimasa create "the soul of Japan." And his assiduity has been matched by that of Keene, who in this short and elegant book contributes a popular account of the man and his times.

*(Donald Richie The Japan Times)*

Keene has outdone himself with this exceptional book, which is based on the idea that the modern Japanese aesthetic was the creation of an exceptionally incompetent fifteenth-century shogun.

*(Colorado Springs Independent)*

*Yoshimasa and the Silver Pavilion* gives this long-neglected but critical period in Japanese history the thorough treatment it deserves.

*(Sushi and Tofu)*

This is a book not only for all students of Japanese history but also for all who want to understand what Keene calls "the soul of Japan."

*(Hugh Cortazzi The Royal Society for Asian Affairs)*

Keene, the prominent scholar of Japan, brings together a masterful account.

*(Yumi Sakugawa Pacific Citizen)*

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