

Haniwa Figures

The Japanese word haniwa means "circle of clay," and it refers to the unglazed red clay cylinders which were placed around imperial burial mounds to stabilize the ground and support the roof of the tomb. First produced by guild craftsmen of the Kofun period, Japan's Iron Age (3rd-6th centuries), [haniwa](#) evolved from simple cylinders into representations of people, animals, and houses. They kept their cylindrical bases and simplicity of form, but were transformed by skillful artisans into men and women of the Iron Age court, dancers, warriors, musicians, horses, monkeys, and birds. Facial features are mask-like, indicated by holes or slits punched into the clay. Details of clothing, saddles, and bridles are represented by ropes and ribbons of clay attached to the basic shape. Haniwa were sometimes painted, but never glazed. Most haniwa were about two feet high.

Chinese tomb figures of the same period show more modeling and naturalistic detail than the Japanese haniwa. That does not mean that the Japanese artisans were less observant than their Chinese counterparts. The whimsical features and attention to gesture show that the artisan was aware of the nature of the animals and people he sculpted, but he was more concerned with capturing the essential features of the figures. When details like the texture of the horses' manes and the applied clay ropes are added, they never overpower the basic shape. This respect for and sensitivity to materials is a feature of native Japanese art that reappears throughout the centuries of Chinese and Western influence.

We sometimes refer to this aspect of art production as "truth to materials." The material, in this case the clay, is never forced by the artist. He never tries to make it too thin, too big, or too perfect. The rough red surface texture is not hidden under fancy glazes. The natural qualities of the materials are important to the finished product.

The truth to materials follows another typically Japanese idea, one that relates to aesthetics and beliefs about art. It is the concept of [wabi-sabi](#), which is summed up by one writer in three simple sentences that almost read like poetry:

Wabi-sabi is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. It is a beauty of things modest and humble. It is a beauty of things unconventional.

(Koren, p. 7)

According to this philosophy, truth comes from observing nature, especially the small and inconspicuous things which may be more important in a work of wabi-sabi art than other details. The artist must accept the limitations of his materials and his tools, as well as his own limitations. Beauty can come from ugliness, as the haniwa figures were formed from mud. They have a "natural" look, like the surface of a rock. They are earthy, irregular, simple and unpretentious. They possess a wonderful intimacy, however, and are greatly loved in Japan.

An ancient Japanese legend tells of the horseman Hakuson who, while riding in the moonlight, encountered a strange man mounted on a beautiful red horse. After they rode alongside each other for awhile, the stranger, knowing that Hakuson envied the red horse, offered to exchange mounts. Hakuson rode home on his wonderful new horse, and happily placed him in the stable. However, the next day, when Hakuson went to check on

the horse, it was gone and a haniwa horse of red clay stood in its place. Following the trail where he had met the strange rider, he passed by the Honda Imperial tomb which was guarded by a ring of red clay haniwa horses. He found his own horse standing among them.

The rough red clay from which the haniwa figures are made is much like the earthenware clay used in most art classrooms. Students may already be familiar with making simple shapes from clay by the slab or coil methods. However, a wabi-sabi exercise asks that they look at the materials and at their artmaking in a new way. How is the idea of wabi-sabi different from the western way of making art? Do we generally think of art as being irregular, earthy, and unpretentious? What Western artists might show evidence of a wabi-sabi aesthetic in their work?

References

Koren, L. (1984). *New fashion Japan*. Tokyo: Kodansha International.