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Collected Noh Plays
Japanese Dance-Dramas



EASTERN  TREASURES

A Collection of
NOH – JAPANESE DANCE-DRAMAS

(fl. 14th-16th century)



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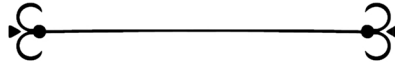
NOH – JAPANESE DANCE-DRAMAS



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Collected Noh Plays – Japanese Dance-Dramas



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The Translations



Jacob van Meurs's 1680 engraving of Kyoto — according to tradition, Noh was founded in Kyoto by the legendary statesman Hata no Kawakatsu in the sixth century.



A nineteenth century portrait of Hata no Kawakatsu from Zenken Kojitsu by Kikuchi Yōsai



Kyoto today

Brief Introduction: Noh Theatre



Still often performed today in Japan, Noh is a major form of classical dance-drama that originates from the fourteenth century. These plays are often based on tales from traditional literature featuring a supernatural being transformed into a human hero that narrates the story. Noh integrates masks, costumes and various props in a dance-based performance, requiring highly trained actors and musicians. Emotions are primarily conveyed by stylised gestures while the iconic masks represent specific roles such as ghosts, women, deities and demons. Having a strong emphasis on tradition rather than innovation, Noh is highly codified and regulated by the *iemoto* system.

The kanji for Noh (能) means “skill”, “craft” or “talent”, particularly in the field of performing arts. One of the oldest forerunners of Noh was *sangaku*, which was introduced to Japan from China in the eighth century. *Sangaku* referred to various types of performance featuring acrobats, song and dance, as well as comic sketches. Its subsequent adaptation to Japanese society led to its assimilation of other traditional art forms. According to legend, the Konparu School, now considered to be the oldest tradition of Noh, was founded by Hata no Kawakatsu in the sixth century. However, the founder of the Konparu school, which is widely accepted among historians, was Bishaō Gon no Kami during Nanboku-chō period in the fourteenth century. Studies on the genealogy of the Noh actors in fourteenth century reveal that they were members of families specialising in the performing arts.

During the Muromachi period of 1336-1573, Kan’ami Kiyotsugu and his son Zeami Motokiyo reinterpreted various traditional performing arts and re-designed Noh in a significantly different form from the traditional model, essentially bringing it to the structure that we recognise today. They are the authors of many of the most celebrated and exemplary Noh dramas. Zeami also famously formulated the principles of the Noh theatre that guided its performers for many centuries. Kan’ami was a renowned actor with great versatility playing roles from graceful women and twelve-year-old boys to martial men. When he first presented his work to the seventeen-year-old Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, Zeami was a child actor in his play, around the age of twelve. Yoshimitsu fell in love with Zeami and his position of favor at court caused Noh to be performed frequently for Yoshimitsu thereafter. In time, Zeami would be recognised by many as the greatest playwright and theorist of the Noh theatre.

During the Edo period, Noh continued to be an aristocratic art form supported by the shōgun, the feudal lords and wealthy commoners. While *kabuki* and *yoruri* were popular for the middle classes, being focused on new and experimental entertainment, Noh strived to preserve its established high standards and historic authenticity, remaining largely unchanged throughout the era. To capture the essence of performances given by great masters, every detail in movements and positions was reproduced by others, generally resulting in an increasingly slow, ceremonial tempo. In this era, the Tokugawa shogunate appointed the Kanze school as the head of the four schools. Kita Shichidayū (Shichidayū Chōnō), a Noh actor of the Konparu school who served Tokugawa Hidetada, founded the Kita school, which was the last established of the five major schools.

The fall of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1868 and the formation of a modernised government resulted in the end of financial support by the state and so the Noh theatre practice experienced a major financial crisis. Shortly after the Meiji Restoration both the number of performers and stages greatly diminished. The support from the

imperial government was eventually partly regained due to Noh's appeal to foreign diplomats. The companies that remained active throughout the Meiji era also significantly broadened Noh's reach by catering to the general public, performing at theatres in major cities such as Tokyo and Osaka.

In 1957 the Japanese Government designated Noh as an Important Intangible Cultural Property, affording a degree of legal protection to the tradition as well as its most accomplished practitioners. The National Noh Theatre founded by the government in 1983 stages regular performances and organises courses to train actors in the leading roles. Noh was inscribed in 2008 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO as *Nōgaku* theatre.

There are four major categories of Noh performers: shite (main protagonist), waki (the counterpart to the shite), kyōgen (chorus) and hayashi (instrumentalists). A typical Noh play always involves the chorus, the orchestra, and at least one shite and one waki actor. Of the approximate 2,000 plays created for Noh that are known today, about 240 make up the current repertoire performed by the five existing Noh schools. The current repertoire is heavily influenced by the taste of aristocratic class in Tokugawa period and does not necessarily reflect popularity among the commoners.

Noh plays have been classified into three broad categories:

- Genzai Noh (present Noh) features human characters and events unfold according to a linear timeline within the play. This form uses internal and external conflicts to drive storylines and bring out emotions
- Mugen Noh (supernatural Noh) involves supernatural worlds, with gods, spirits, ghosts or phantasms in the shite role. Time is often depicted as passing in a non-linear fashion and action may switch between two or more timeframes from moment to moment, including flashbacks. This type of Noh utilises flashbacks of the past and the deceased to invoke emotions.
- Ryōkake Noh (mixed Noh), a hybrid of the above with the first act being Genzai Noh and the second act Mugen Noh.

All Noh plays are divided by their themes into the following five categories. This classification is still used in formal programming choices today. Traditionally, a formal five-play program is composed of a selection from each of the groups.

- Kami mono (god plays) or waki Noh typically feature the shite in the role of a deity to tell the mythic story of a shrine or praise a particular god. Many of them are structured in two acts, the deity takes a human form in disguise in the first act and reveals the real self in the second act. (e.g. *Takasago*, *Chikubushima*)
- Shura mono (warrior plays) or ashura Noh takes its name from the Buddhist underworld. The protagonist appearing as a ghost of a famous samurai, who pleads to a monk for salvation and the drama culminates in a glorious re-enactment of the scene of his death in a full war costume. (e.g. *Tamura*, *Atsumori*)
- Katsura mono (wig plays) or onna mono (woman plays) depict the shite in a female role and feature some of the most refined songs and dances in all of Noh theatre, reflecting the smooth and flowing movements representing female characters. (e.g. *Basho*, *Matsukaze*)
- There are about 94 miscellaneous plays traditionally performed in the fourth place in a five-play program. These plays include subcategories kyōran mono (madness plays), onryō mono (vengeful ghost plays) and genzai mono (present plays).
- Kiri Noh (final plays) or oni mono (demon plays) usually feature the shite in the role of monsters, goblins or demons, and are often selected for their bright colours and fast-paced,

tense finale movements. Kiri Noh is performed the last in a five-play program. There are approximately 30 plays in this category, most of which are shorter than the other dramas.

Noh plays are usually accompanied by an instrumental chorus of four musicians, who play a flute (*nōkan*), small hand drum (*ko-tsuzumi*), large hand drum (*ō-tsuzumi*) and large drum (*taiko*), they are also accompanied by a *jiutai* chorus consisting of eight to ten singers. The recitation is one of the most important elements in the performance. Each section of the written text carries a prescription of the mode of recitation, as well as an accompanying movement or dance, although the application of this element can be varied from time to time. Each type of dialogue and song has its own name: the *sashi* is like a recitative; the *uta* are the songs proper; the *rongi* is intoned between chorus and shite; and the *kiri* is the chorus with which the play ends.

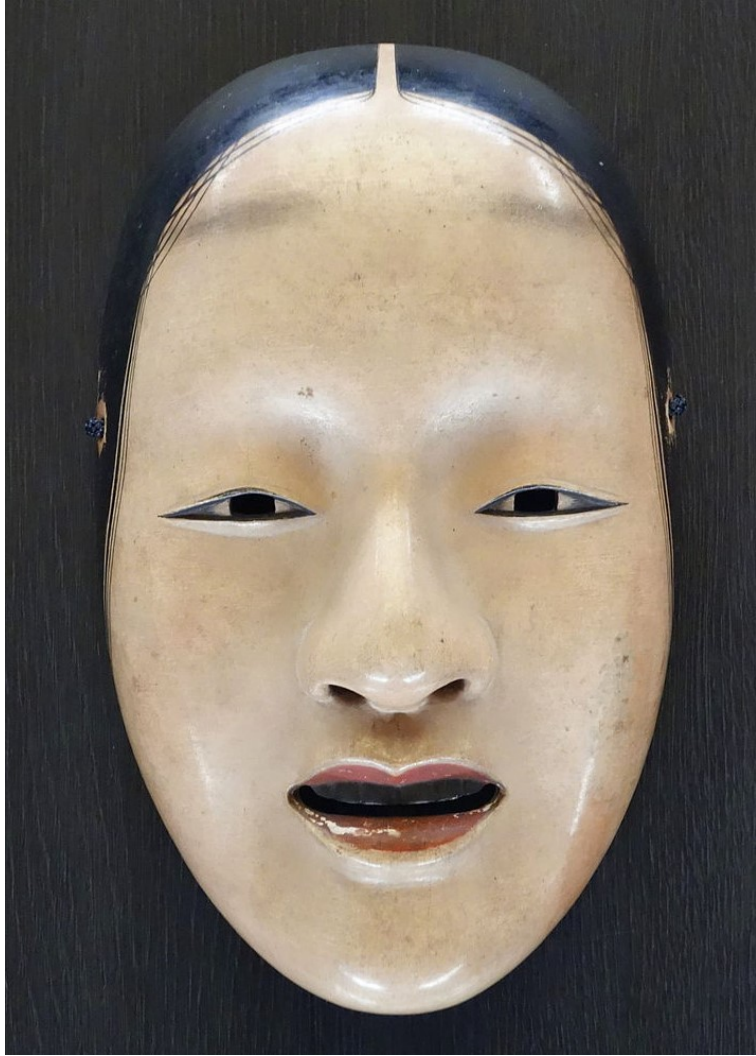
Two factors have enabled Noh to be transmitted from generation to generation and still remain close to its original form. Firstly, there is the unique preservation of texts, containing detailed prescriptions of recitation, dance, mime and music. And, secondly, there is the direct and exact transmission of performing skills. Still, there was constant refinement of received forms to express more clearly or intensely the objectives of Noh, though these were always minor deviations from the traditional form. Even the differences between the five schools of shite performers represent only minor variations in the melodic line of the recitation or in the patterns of the mime and dance. Nonetheless, Noh remains popular today in Japan, where there are nearly a hundred Noh theatres nationwide, each filled with hundreds of people whenever a performance takes place. Indeed, it is the oldest surviving drama form in the world, boasting a history of over 700 years.



An illustration of positions of players on a Noh stage: center: shite; front right: waki; right: eight-member jiutai (chorus); rear center: four hayashi-kata (musicians); rear left: two kōken (stage hands)



The world's oldest Noh stage at Miyajima, Itsukushima, on an island in the western part of the Inland Sea of Japan



A traditional Noh mask, c. 1870



A Noh costume in the Art Institute of Chicago, c. 1790



The Shiba Noh Theatre constructed within the grounds of Tokyo's Shiba Park in the Meiji Period



Ukiyo-e print of a Noh performance by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, c. 1870

The Maiden's Tomb (c. 1400) by Kan'ami Kiyotsugu



OR, MOTOMEZUKA

Translated by Joji Sakurai, 1913

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DRAMATIS PERSONÆ
THE MAIDEN'S TOMB



Ukiyo-e print of this Noh play, c. 1898

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