Japan

Section 2

MAIN IDEAS

1. Japanese nobles created great art in their court at Heian.
2. Buddhism changed in Japan during the Heian period.

Key Terms and People

court  group of nobles who serve as advisors to a ruler
Lady Murasaki Shikibu  Japanese writer credited with writing the world’s first novel
Zen  form of Buddhism involving quiet, thoughtful meditation

Section Summary

JAPANESE NOBLES CREATE GREAT ART

In 794 the emperor and empress of Japan moved to Heian (HAY-ahn), a city now called Kyoto. The nobles who followed created an imperial court. These nobles had little to do with the common people of Heian. They lived apart from poorer citizens and seldom left the city. They loved beauty and made the court at Heian the center of a golden age of art and learning between 794 and 1185.

These nobles dressed in beautiful silk robes and carried decorative fans. They were also lovers of the written and spoken word, and spent many hours writing in journals. Several women of the Heian court wrote in the Japanese language, although Chinese was the official language. As a result, women wrote most of the major works of early Japanese literature.

Probably the greatest of these early writers was Lady Murasaki Shikibu (mooehr-ah-sahk-ee shee-kee-boo). Around 1000, she wrote The Tale of Genji, often considered the world’s first full-length novel. It is the story of a prince named Genji and his quest for love. During his search he meets women from many different social classes.

Why do you think the nobles of Heian devoted so much time to the promotion of the arts?

Circle the name of the author of what is considered the world’s first novel.
Visual arts were also popular, particularly painting, calligraphy, and architecture. The paintings were made in bright, bold colors. Most Heian architecture was based on that of the Chinese capital. Other architectural styles were simple and airy. Wood houses with tiled roofs featured large open spaces surrounded by elegant gardens. Performing arts also flourished at the Heian court, particularly a form of drama called Noh, which combined music, dance and speaking parts. Noh plays often presented the feats of great Japanese heroes.

**Buddhism Changes**

Common Japanese people had no time for the long, elaborate rituals practiced by the court. Both groups were deeply religious, however. The Japanese introduced important changes to the Buddhism, which had been brought from China. Some new forms of Buddhism blended elements of Shinto. Other forms were unique to Japan. One very popular form, called Pure Land Buddhism, did not require any special rituals. Instead, Pure Land Buddhists chanted the Buddha’s name over and over again.

In the 1100s a new form of Buddhism called Zen developed. Zen Buddhists believed that neither faith nor good behavior led to wisdom. Instead, people should practice self-discipline and meditation, or quiet thinking. These ideas appealed to many Japanese, especially warriors. As these warriors gained more influence in Japan, so did Zen Buddhism.

**Challenge Activity**

**Critical Thinking: Drawing Inferences** If you were a noble in the Heian court who did not have to work, what would you do all day? Write a journal entry in the style and manner of a Japanese noble, describing a typical day.