

What's JDM?

The Timeless Allure of Japan's Rad Era Cars.

トヨタ博物館
TOYOTA AUTOMOBILE MUSEUM

prologue

In recent years, the culture of importing and enjoying Japan Domestic Market cars become popular in the United States and the United Kingdom. In particular, Japanese cars in the 1980s ~ 90s were very popular, and they have even pushed up the used car market. At the World Forum for Motor Museums held at the Toyota Automobile Museum in 2024, presentations on the theme of Japanese cars were presented by overseas automobile museums, which spoke to the popularity of Japan cars in recent years.

In this special exhibition, we exhibited valuable Japanese cars from the 1980s~90s, which are highly popular overseas, with the cooperation of automobile manufacturers and museums. Why are Japan cars at that time so popular overseas now? In addition to exploring the reasons for this, you will feel that Japanese cars are attractive things that you can be proud of in the world, and what are the Japan cars that will be popular in the future? Why don't you think about it?

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Toyota Automobile Museum

What's JDM?

JDM stands for Japan Domestic Market, In the automobile industry, it refers to cars sold exclusively in Japan, and Nissan's Skyline GT-R is one of the representative JDM cars. In the United States, there is a system that allows cars that have been manufactured for 25 years to be imported as classic cars, making it easier to register even right-hand drive cars, which are usually difficult to register.

The type BNR32 Skyline GT-R, which was released in 1989, was able to be registered in the United States using this system in 2014, and the JDM boom sparked. Not only Skyline GT-R, but also cars that have appeared in movies and anime, such as the Sprinter Trueno, RX-7, and Supra, which were officially exported to the United States, are becoming popular as JDM cars.

In addition to sports cars, sedans, wagons, and kei cars from various categories have also gained popularity as part of JDM cars. The popularity of JDM has extended to car-related culture elements such as Japanese license plates, vehicle inspection stickers, and anime-inspired replica designs. Enthusiasts enjoy customizing in their own unique ways.



Various types of JDM cars



Japanese license plates

Anime replica

Photo credit: JAPANESE CLASSIC CAR SHOW

Spread of JDM

As the number of people who love Japan cars expands, the number of events for Japan cars is increasing. A Japan car owners' club has also been established, and the number of participants is increasing year by year. In addition, the number of exhibits dealing with Japan cars is increasing at the world's traditional automobile museums with a long tradition, and the popularity of Japan cars, including JDM, is spreading around the world.

[Event]

JAPANESE CLASSIC CAR SHOW is a Japanese car event held every October in Long Beach, on the west coast of the United States. The first event took place in 2005, with members of the Toyota, Datsun, and Mazda clubs. Since then, it has grown steadily and is now a large-scale Japanese car event attracting more than 500 participants and 10,000 visitors. At first, American car fans criticized that Japanese car is not classic cars, such as American classics. However, Yamaguchi-san, the organizer of JCCS, worked to promote understanding of Japanese classic cars. The event was featured in the Los Angeles Times during its second edition, and gradually, classic Japanese cars began to gain recognition in the United States. In 2025, the event will celebrate its 20th anniversary as a traditional event.



Photo credit: JAPANESE CLASSIC CAR SHOW

[Owners' Clubs]

Owners' clubs and specialty stores for JDM cars are also found in various countries. Nissan's FIGARO, a car sold in Japan in 1991, has been popular in the UK since the late 2000s. It is said that more than 3,000 of the approximately 20,000 FIGAROs produced were imported into the UK.

The FIGARO Owners Club in the UK regularly holds meetings and events not only within the UK but also across European countries. Many FIGARO owners gather to show off their favorite cars and enjoy the community. The club's website supports communication among owners, allowing them to exchange information on parts supply and restoration, and is active in a wide range of activities.



Photo credit: FIGARO Owners Club

[Automobile museum exhibit]

JDM culture began with core Japan car fans, but now it is also featured in traditional automobile museums. LeMay - America's Car Museum in the United States will hold a themed exhibition of Japan cars titled "SHINKA" in 2024. AutoWorld, an automobile museum in Belgium, will also hold an exhibition titled "Big in Japan" in July 2025, and "Japan cars" have been featured in many museums around the world.

Why are Japanese cars popular worldwide?

Since the latter half of the 1970s, Japan's automobile production increased dramatically, and exports to overseas markets also grew. In the 1980s, Japanese manufacturers accelerated production overseas as well. At that time, Japanese cars were regarded as affordable and reliable (with fewer breakdowns), and they quickly gained popularity around the world. However, Japanese engineers felt that their cars were still inferior in basic performance—such as driving, steering, and braking—compared to European cars. As a result, each company began striving to become the world's best in automotive technology.

By the 1990s, Nissan launched the "901 movement" to achieve global technological leadership, while Mazda and Toyota challenged themselves to catch up with European cars by repeatedly testing their vehicles on European mountain passes and circuits like the Nürburgring in Germany.

In order to prove they were the best in the world, Japanese manufacturers continued to participate in global racing competitions. Japanese cars often won prestigious races such as the World Rally Championship (WRC), gradually improving their reputation. However, when these cars first debuted, they did not receive as high praise as they do today. Even when their performance matched that of European cars, European vehicles were regarded more highly. Despite this, Japanese engineers persevered, driven by determination and a desire to improve. More than 30 years after Japanese cars debuted internationally in the 1980s, why have they become so popular worldwide? According to a survey conducted by the Lane Motor Museum in the United States among JDM vehicle owners, there are three main reasons why Japanese cars are preferred: technology, styling, and ease of maintenance, including reliability. The renowned reliability of Japanese cars stems from these factors, along with advanced technologies such as engines and electronic controls developed since the 1980s, and their unique designs. ↗

Furthermore, the current generation that highly values JDM cars is mostly in their 30s to 40s—people who were born around the time Japanese cars became popular worldwide. This generation, having grown up with Japanese cars at home, evaluates vehicles objectively, regardless of whether they are European or Japanese. The popularity of Japanese cars is now surging as adults are able to purchase cars featured in games they played as children, animations they watched, and movies they enjoyed. This special exhibition showcases the popularity of Japanese cars from three perspectives: "State-of-the-Art Technologies of the Time," "Unique Design," and "Compact with High Performance."

[State-of-the-Art Technology of the time]

Japanese car manufacturers have been using electronic control technologies developed since the 1970s to comply with exhaust gas regulations in their cars. Electronic control technologies, such as electronically controlled suspension that improves steering stability without sacrificing ride comfort, and torque distribution systems that enable quick driving on circuits and stable performance on snowy roads, may be viewed overseas as attractive features that Western cars do not have.

[Unique Design]

Each Japanese car manufacturer has traditionally developed its designs through collaboration with European designers. Since the 1980s, in-house designers at each company have taken charge of design, resulting in unique designs for Japanese cars. Each car is designed to meet various functional requirements, such as cooling and aerodynamics, and is loved as a one-of-a-kind vehicle.

[Compact with High Performance]

Kei cars are a unique Japanese automobile category with strict regulations on engine displacement and body size. As manufacturers competed to create attractive cars within these limits, a variety of models emerged, including sports cars like the AZ-1, Beat, and Cappuccino, as well as off-road vehicles such as the Jimny. Kei cars, which have developed independently in Japan through various miniaturization techniques to fit on small bodies while being equipped with features comparable to regular cars, can be considered a symbol of JDM.

What's JDM?

The Timeless Allure of Japan's Rad Era Cars.



Name	Sprinter Trueno	Vehicle Type	AE86
Manufacturer:	Toyota	Model year:	1986
L/W/H (mm):	4,215/1,625/1,335		
Wheel base (mm):	2,400	Weight (kg):	980
Engine Name:	4A-GEU		
Engine Type:	Water cooled Inline 4 cylinder DOHC		
Engine displacement (cc):	1,587		
Max power (PS/kW/min ⁻¹):	130/96/6,600		
Source:	Toyota Automobile Museum		



Name	Skyline GT-R	Vehicle Type	BNR32
Manufacturer:	Nissan	Model year:	1989
L/W/H (mm):	4,545/1,755/1,340		
Wheel base (mm):	2,615	Weight (kg):	1,430
Engine Name:	RB26DETT		
Engine Type:	Water cooled Inline 6 cylinder DOHC Turbo		
Engine displacement (cc):	2,568		
Max power (PS/kW/min ⁻¹):	280/206/6,800		
Source:	Toyota Automobile Museum		



Name	Efini RX-7	Vehicle Type	FD3S
Manufacturer:	Mazda	Model year:	1991
L/W/H (mm):	4,295/1,760/1,230		
Wheel base (mm):	2,425	Weight (kg):	1,260
Engine Name:	13B-REW		
Engine Type:	Water cooled 2 rotor Turbo		
Engine displacement (cc):	1,308		
Max power (PS/kW/min ⁻¹):	255/188/6,500		
Source:	Mazda Motor		



Name	Lancer Evolution VI Tommi Mäkinen Edition	Vehicle Type	CP9A
Manufacturer:	Mitsubishi	Model year:	2000
L/W/H (mm):	4,350/1,770/1,415		
Wheel base (mm):	2,510	Weight (kg):	1,260
Engine Name:	4G63		
Engine Type:	Water cooled inline 4 cylinder DOHC Turbo		
Engine displacement (cc):	1,997		
Max power (PS/kW/min ⁻¹):	280/206/6,500		
Source:	Mitsubishi Motors		



Name	Impreza WRX STi	Vehicle Type	GC8
Manufacturer:	SUBARU	Model year:	1994
L/W/H (mm):	4,340/1,690/1,405		
Wheel base (mm):	2,520	Weight (kg):	1,220
Engine Name:	EJ20		
Engine Type:	Water cooled flat 4 cylinder DOHC Turbo		
Engine displacement (cc):	1,994		
Max power (PS/kW/min ⁻¹):	250/184/6,500		
Source:	SUBARU		



Name	PAO Canvas top	Vehicle Type	PK10
Manufacturer:	Nissan	Model year:	1989
L/W/H (mm):	3,740/1,570/1,480		
Wheel base (mm):	2,300	Weight (kg):	760
Engine Name:	MA10S		
Engine Type:	Water cooled inline 4 cylinder SOHC		
Engine displacement (cc):	987		
Max power (PS/kW/min ⁻¹):	52/38/6,000		
Source:	Nissan Motor		



Name	Integra Type-R	Vehicle Type	DC2
Manufacturer:	Honda	Model year:	1998
L/W/H (mm):	4,380/1,695/1,330		
Wheel base (mm):	2,570	Weight (kg):	1,100
Engine Name:	B18C		
Engine Type:	Water cooled inline 4 cylinder DOHC		
Engine displacement (cc):	1,797		
Max power (PS/kW/min ⁻¹):	200/147/8,000		
Source:	Honda Collection Hall		



Name	Charade De Tomaso	Vehicle Type	GII
Manufacturer:	Daihatsu	Model year:	1984
L/W/H (mm):	3,600/1,575/1,390		
Wheel base (mm):	2,320	Weight (kg):	690
Engine Name:	CB-50		
Engine Type:	Water cooled 3 cylinder SOHC Turbo		
Engine displacement (cc):	993		
Max power (PS/kW/min ⁻¹):	80/59/5,500		
Source:	Daihatsu Motor		



Name	Cervo Mode	Vehicle Type	CN31S
Manufacturer:	Suzuki	Model year:	1990
L/W/H (mm):	3,295/1,395/1,370		
Wheel base (mm):	2,335	Weight (kg):	670
Engine Name:	F6B		
Engine Type:	Water cooled inline 4 cylinder DOHC Turbo		
Engine displacement (cc):	658		
Max power (PS/kW/min ⁻¹):	64/47/7,000		
Source:	Suzuki Motor		



Name	Mira TR-XX	Vehicle Type	L70V
Manufacturer:	Daihatsu	Model year:	1987
L/W/H (mm):	3,195/1,395/1,400		
Wheel base (mm):	2,250	Weight (kg):	570
Engine Name:	EB		
Engine Type:	Water cooled 3 cylinder SOHC Turbo		
Engine displacement (cc):	547		
Max power (PS/kW/min ⁻¹):	52/38/6,500		
Source:	Motorcar Museum of Japan		



Name	Civic Type-R	Vehicle Type	EK9
Manufacturer:	Honda	Model year:	1997
L/W/H (mm):	4,180/1,695/1,360		
Wheel base (mm):	2,620	Weight (kg):	1,070
Engine Name:	B16B		
Engine Type:	Water cooled inline 4 cylinder DOHC		
Engine displacement (cc):	1,595		
Max power (PS/kW/min ⁻¹):	185/136/8,200		
Source:	Honda Collection Hall		



Name	Figaro	Vehicle Type	FK10
Manufacturer:	Nissan	Model year:	1991
L/W/H (mm):	3,740/1,630/1,365		
Wheel base (mm):	2,300	Weight (kg):	810
Engine Name:	MA10ET		
Engine Type:	Water cooled inline 4 cylinder SOHC Turbo		
Engine displacement (cc):	987		
Max power (PS/kW/min ⁻¹):	76/56/6,000		
Source:	Motorcar Museum of Japan		



Name	Autozam AZ-1 Prototype	Vehicle Type	PG6SA
Manufacturer:	Mazda	Model year:	1993
L/W/H (mm):	3,295/1,395/1,150		
Wheel base (mm):	2,235	Weight (kg):	720
Engine Name:	F6A		
Engine Type:	Water cooled inline 3 cylinder DOHC Turbo		
Engine displacement (cc):	657		
Max power (PS/kW/min ⁻¹):	64/47/6,500		
Source:	Mazda Motor		



Name	Beat	Vehicle Type	PP1
Manufacturer:	Honda	Model year:	1991
L/W/H (mm):	3,295/1,395/1,175		
Wheel base (mm):	2,280	Weight (kg):	760
Engine Name:	E07A		
Engine Type:	Water cooled inline 3 cylinder SOHC		
Engine displacement (cc):	656		
Max power (PS/kW/min ⁻¹):	64/47/8,100		
Source:	Toyota Automobile Museum		



Name	Cappuccino	Vehicle Type	EA11R
Manufacturer:	Suzuki	Model year:	1995
L/W/H (mm):	3,295/1,395/1,185		
Wheel base (mm):	2,060	Weight (kg):	700
Engine Name:	F6A		
Engine Type:	Water cooled inline 3 cylinder DOHC Turbo		
Engine displacement (cc):	657		
Max power (PS/kW/min ⁻¹):	64/47/6,500		
Source:	Toyota Automobile Museum		

On display Full term

On display Until January 12

On display From January 14

epilogue



Since the 1980s, many famous cars have been born out of Japan's challenge to catch up with and surpass the rest of the world, and JDM culture began when some overseas Japanese car enthusiasts imported and enjoyed these vehicles.

Nowadays, JDM cars are loved worldwide and have been featured in special exhibitions at automobile museums overseas. Even cars produced after the 2000s, when Japanese cars were said to be the best in the world, continue to gain popularity globally as JDMs. Even among Japanese cars sold today, there will surely be models that become popular in the future if they are outstanding on a global scale. What kind of car will it be? Please think about it, too.

クルマの図書室

AUTOMOBILE DISCOVERY LIBRARY



The "Automobile Discovery Library" on the 3rd floor of the Cultural Gallery is holding a limited-time book exhibition linked to the "What's JDM?" special exhibition. We have a wide collection of automotive materials, ranging from car catalogs to picture books for children. Please be sure to visit us as well.