Beat: Arts

JAPAN TAKES CENTER STAGE AT CANNES FILM MARKET COUNTRY OF HONOUR STATUS CROWNS

A DEEPENING FRANCE–JAPAN TIE

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USPA NEWS - This article is prepared in advance of the 79th Festival de Cannes and its Film Market (12–23 May 2026) and does not aim to report live from the Croisette. It draws instead on official communiqués from the Marché du Film, the French and Japanese foreign ministries and cultural agencies to explain why Japan's designation as Country of Honour at the world's largest film market matters for cinema and for Franco Japanese relations. As President Emmanuel Macron prepares to travel to Japan with Culture Minister Catherine Pegard from 31 March to 3 April, France is also launching a broader "Japan year", with cherry blossom themed exhibitions and cultural events across the country, underlining how film diplomacy now sits alongside security, economic and Indo Pacific cooperation at the heart of the partnership.

This article is written by our accredited senior cultural and geopolitical correspondent. It is based on official material from French and Japanese public institutions and the Cannes Marché du Film, combined with years of on the ground reporting on the Festival, to offer an independent reading of what Japan's "Country of Honour" status really means beyond the press releases.

A "PARTENARIAT D'EXCEPTION" BETWEEN PARIS AND TOKYO

Behind the cultural spotlight of Cannes runs a much denser diplomatic conversation between France and Japan. Meeting on the sidelines of the G7 foreign ministers' gathering, Jean Noel Barrot and Toshimitsu Motegi once again described the bilateral relationship as a "partnership of exception", insisting on the shared democratic values and strategic interests that underpin it. They see the forthcoming visit of President Emmanuel Macron to Japan as an opportunity to push cooperation up a gear, from defence and Indo Pacific security to economic security and high tech supply chains. In the background sit the same dossiers that dominate most Western chancelleries, North Korea's programs, the war in Ukraine, tensions in the Middle East, yet here they are filtered through a Franco Japanese lens that also places great emphasis on resisting economic coercion and keeping a rules based trading system alive.

JAPAN NAMED 2026 COUNTRY OF HONOUR AT THE CANNES FILM MARKET

Within this broader context, the Marché du Film, the business hub of the Festival de Cannes and the world's largest international film market, has named Japan its Country of Honour for the 2026 edition, which runs from 12 to 20 May. The announcement was made in Tokyo during the Tokyo International Film Festival by Junichi Sakomoto, chair of the executive committee for Japan's participation, and Guillaume Esmiol, the market's executive director. Japan will co host the Marché du Film's Opening Night and will be placed at the centre of the market's flagship programmes throughout the week.

PROGRAM: ANIMATION, GENRE CINEMA AND INDUSTRY SUMMIT

As Country of Honour, Japan will be woven into every layer of the Marché's programming. Panels, networking sessions and project showcases will spotlight Japanese animation, genre cinema and new talent, while a dedicated industry summit will examine the structure and prospects of Japan's audiovisual sector. A special day of screenings devoted to Japanese cinema is also planned, creating a showcase for both established auteurs and emerging voices in live action and animation. The stated objective from Tokyo is to build lasting professional networks with the global film community and to position Japanese film and content industries for future growth in international markets

A CENTURY OF JAPANESE CINEMA AT CANNES

Choosing Japan as Country of Honour also means recognising a long, patient conversation between its cinema and the rest of the world. For more than a hundred years, Japanese filmmakers have been sending images that quietly rewired how other directors think about framing, time and the everyday, from Akira Kurosawa's epics to the intimate worlds of Yasujiro Ozu and Kenji Mizoguchi. Their

films have regularly surfaced in Cannes' Official Selection and beyond, not as exotic curiosities but as works that other film-makers study, quote and sometimes try to emulate. The 2026 spotlight does not freeze this heritage in nostalgia; it is explicitly designed to connect that lineage to a new generation of directors, animators and showrunners whose work now circulates via anime franchises, streaming platforms and genre cinema that speaks fluently to global audiences.

A ROBUST DOMESTIC MARKET AND GLOBAL AMBITION

Behind the Cannes spotlight lies a powerful home market. Japan still produces around 1,200 films a year and attracts over 150 million cinema goers annually, with box office revenues exceeding 200 billion yen roughly 1.3 billion dollars despite growing competition from streaming and gaming. Animation has become a global cultural phenomenon, driving exports and merchandising, while live action titles from drama to horror continue to generate remakes and adaptations abroad. For the Marché du Film, highlighting this ecosystem is a way to connect one of the world's most resilient theatrical markets with international financiers, distributors and platforms looking for content with proven audience appeal.

LONG STANDING PRESENCE AT THE MARCHÉ DU FILM

Japan is not a newcomer to the Palais des Festivals. Its sales companies have long been among the most established at the market, and the Japan Pavilion, coordinated by UniJapan, is a familiar anchor of the Village International. The 2026 Country of Honour label formalises and amplifies that presence, with Japanese producers, distributors and institutions expected to feature across all major sections, from project development platforms to market screenings. The participation is being organised by a dedicated executive committee in cooperation with the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) and the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), underscoring the industrial and trade dimension of the initiative.

CANNES AS A STAGE FOR CULTURAL AND STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

Japan's prominent role at Cannes also dovetails with France's broader Indo Pacific and economic security agenda. As Paris and Tokyo coordinate on issues such as supply chain resilience, freedom of navigation and responses to regional crises, culture and content industries offer a complementary channel of influence and dialogue. The Film Market, with its mix of state backed pavilions, private companies and financiers, becomes a visible arena where diplomatic narratives about "exceptional partnership" are translated into co production agreements, distribution deals and joint investments.

Japan's turn as Country of Honour at the Film Market comes at a moment when the Franco Japanese relationship is tightening on almost every front, from security and economic resilience to the quiet work of cultural diplomacy. In a year shaped by a presidential visit to Tokyo and a cascade of "Japan season" events across France, Cannes becomes one of the few places where this partnership can be read in images and contracts rather than in communiqués alone, through films, co production meetings and industry forums on the Croisette. This piece does not pretend to settle the debate on Japan's soft power or on the future balance of the Cannes ecosystem; it offers one carefully argued reading, built on official French and Japanese documents and years of festival reporting, from an inclusive newsroom that deliberately includes disabled journalists and treats intellectual honesty and source transparency as the baseline for covering the global film industry.

This editorial does not claim to provide definitive answers about the future of Japanese cinema or the evolution of the Cannes market. It offers one informed viewpoint from our in house senior correspondent, grounded in official documents and long familiarity with the Festival, in the hope of shedding light on what is really at stake behind the polished language of cultural diplomacy. True to our newsroom's inclusive values, it is produced within a team that deliberately includes journalists with disabilities and that treats intellectual integrity, source transparency and rigorous analysis as non negotiable standards for covering the global screen industry.

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:
UPA United Press Agency LTD
483 Green Lanes
UK, London N13NV 4BS
contact (at) unitedpressagency.com
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