

Edo Avant Garde

How did Japanese Buddhism inspire and influence Edo era art?

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

HIGH SCHOOL LESSON

In this lesson, students will consider how and why images combined with text are used in a wide variety of **Edo** period (1615-1868 CE) arts. Students will have the opportunity to connect the texts to Buddhism to determine how this belief system influenced the art of the Edo period.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- How can the viewer “read” a work of art as text?
- Under what conditions is text considered as visual art?
- How does the inclusion and appearance of text change our understanding of an image? Of an object?
- How can Buddhist beliefs be reflected in images? In text?

ACTIVITIES:

1. Students should begin by watching *Edo Avant Garde* starting at 1:01:00 through 1:07:29 and should be directed as they are watching to jot down notes – words, thoughts, images – that they are unfamiliar with or that caught their attention. Students should watch the same segment to refine notes. To meet the needs of students who are English Language learners, the speaker’s comments have been transcribed and are included at the end of this lesson. Teachers should use student notes and thoughts as a basis for a class discussion about the segment viewed.
 - If students have little knowledge of the Japanese writing system, teachers could spend some time addressing the basics of the three systems using the resources listed below:
<https://www.dartmouth.edu/~introjpn/text/writing.html>
<https://www.japanpitt.pitt.edu>
<https://www.japanpitt.pitt.edu/essays-and-articles/language/japanese-writing-system-i>
 - Teachers should ensure students understand the term calligraphy as well as *tarashikomi*
An excellent resource for Japanese art techniques is *Sōtatsu’s Methods: The Visibility of Craft* from the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Asian Art -
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72-UbC-LnKg>
Other images from the film to consider when addressing *tarashikomi* include the following:
 - *Poem Scroll with Deer* – Sōtatsu and Kōetsu
 - *Poem Card* – Sōtatsu and Kōetsu
 - *Anthology with Crane Design* – Sōtatsu and Kōetsu
 - *Bull Scrolls* – Sōtatsu and Karasumaru Mitsuhiro

2. As Brenda Jordan notes in her essay “The Tradition of Text and Image in Edo Period Art,” neither image nor text mirror one another, but rather, the two complement one another to evoke a mood or feeling. The instructor could show the images addressed in Dr. Jordan’s essay and have students in a variety of Humanities courses discuss what the text might be based upon the image. From that point, using the wealth of images available in the film, students should select one as a prompt for writing. The instructor could also select the images and provide students with a link to the image or a high resolution print. Have students start by studying the image to determine the feeling the artist is trying to evoke as well as consider the style in which the subject is rendered. Students will write down words or phrases they feel are suggestive of the image. From there, the instructor will have students exchange their list of words with another student, and the student will write a short story or poem based solely upon their peer’s list of words and phrases without access to the image. As a culminating activity, the original list of words and phrases and the writing inspired by the list will be paired with the original image and the class will determine the success of the collaboration.
3. As a final project in either a literature or studio-based course, students could experiment with various fonts and lettering styles before taking the writing by their peer and inscribing it on a teacher-provided printout of the image. If working from a short story or lengthy poem, the student can select those words or phrases that he or she feels best suits the image. Note that the style of lettering used was also an important part of Edo era images as Dr. Jordan explains in her essay. In discussing **Utagawa Kuniyoshi**’s image “Collecting Brine,” the scene and lettering both suggest strong winds and the rhythmic pulse of waves.
4. Students enrolled in a course that uses Adobe or other software to enable layering imagery and text could use a personal photograph, and this lesson could be adapted as a way in which to have students learn how to work in layers. Excellent resources can be found in contemporary magazines with advertisements that students can study as a resource, understanding how different fonts can impact our understanding of text.
5. Studio art students and art history students should watch the Art21 segment on Shahzia Sikander, a contemporary artist who works in miniature painting and talks about the use of text in her work.

<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s1/shahzia-sikander-in-spirituality-segment/>

The website offers interviews as well as still images of the artist and her work. Comparisons between the individual way in which Sikander works versus the collaboration of Sōtatsu and Kōetsu should be noted, as well as the painting traditions each artist builds upon and imbues with a sense of vitality and innovation. From this study, studio students can be directed to find a writing that speaks to them, and use this as the basis for a work of art, ultimately including the text or part of the text in the image. Art History students could be involved in a similar project where they are able to marry text and image of their choosing, or use this knowledge to seek the work of other artists who can extend the conversation between Sōtatsu and Sikander.

6. For a Non-Western history course or in a World Religions class, students should then be shown the segment of *Edo Avant Garde* that begins at 15:30, stopping at 21:00. This segment addresses Buddhism. Buddhist priest, **Miyamoto Sōtō** notes that “all of

nature ... has its own spirit that can reflect the Buddha.” In discussing artist **Itō Jakuchū**, students learn that he is a deeply religious man, but was initially also very much of the urban, contemporary world of Edo period Japan. Students could consider how the works in this segment by both Jakuchū and **Maruyama Ōkyo** are reflective of nature as well as Buddhism.

- Two Cranes - Jakuchū (1795)
- Rooster and Family - Itō Jakuchū (1797)
- White Cockatoo - Jakuchū (1755)
- New Years Sun - Jakuchū (1800)
- Moonlight through Plum Blossoms - Jakuchū (1755)
- Heron on a Willow Branch - Maruyama Ōkyo (late 1700s)
- Carp - Maruyama Okyo (late 1700s)
- Sudden Rain Over a River Village - Ōkyo (late 1700s)
- Dragon - Ōkyo (late 1700s)
- Buddhism resources:

<https://asiasociety.org/education/buddhism-japan>

Asia for Educators

Keith Brown’s essay: <https://www.japanpitt.pitt.edu/essays-and-articles/culture/buddhism-and-shintō>

To bring the lesson to completion, students should work collaboratively with the instructor and their notes to revisit *Bull Scrolls* by Sōtatsu and Mitsuhiro (film segment 1:05:26 and ending at 1:07) to address how the inscription and image is reflective of Buddhist beliefs. Using this model, students could search for additional images of Edo era works that feature writing and are reflective of Buddhist beliefs to reinforce student understanding of the time period and the ability to recognize calligraphy. Students could expand their search beyond painting of the Edo period to include ceramics, metalwork or fibers. An excellent starting point is *How to Look at Japanese Art* by Stephen Addiss.

Transcription of the film segment (1:01:00 through 1:07:29) is on the next page. See below.

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Transcription of the film segment (1:01:00 through 1:07:29):

The visual quality of the Japanese language had a profound impact on the evolution of Japanese art.

Hand scrolls had always combined paintings and text, and in some cases text was inscribed on top of the painting. My favorite is the Crane poem scroll, where Sōtatsu painted the cranes and Kōetsu added his calligraphy of classical poems celebrating nature. Sōtatsu and Kōetsu respected each other and I'm sure they were good friends. It is truly joyful collaboration.

I've been thinking about how this work might have been created. There are places where the poetry is very leisurely spaced and places where it is tightly packed. He forgot two of the 36 poems celebrating nature, and so he added them later in tiny script. I think these irregularities indicate that they probably created it together in one place. You can just feel the improvisation in this work. I believe this work was created as a live performance using gold and silver wash. If there had been an audience of people watching it being painted, they would have wondered "What is that?" when they saw the first beak tip. And as he kept painting, they would have been thrilled to see the scene unfold.

The cow on the right is melting into the mist around it. It's *tarashikomi* taken to an extreme. The poem on the left is in Chinese, on the right in Japanese. Both poems say "It is best for cows to be untethered." It's especially clear in the Japanese version. It is best to be unchained. They projected what they felt about their own lives on the cows. In the poem and the paintings, I think they were passionate about freedom.