

Edo Avant Garde

Worldviews: How did Japanese Buddhism and Shintoism influence Edo era art?

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS MIDDLE SCHOOL LESSON

In this lesson, students will explore the concepts of time and space while examining the influence of **Shintoism** (pronounced: “SHIN-toe-ism”) and Buddhism on the development of the unique spirit seen in **Edo period** (江戸, 1615-1868 CE, pronounced: “eh-DOUGH”) art.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- How did Japanese Buddhism and Shintoism influence Edo art?
- How do the spirits of objects inspire artists to create great works?
- Using perspective and space, what are some examples of the ways in which Edo artists captured “the universe in a folding screen”?

ACTIVITIES:

1. As an introduction to these two worldviews, use the following brief film segments to explore a Buddhist temple (15:34-19:14) and a **Shintō** shrine (also spelled **Shinto**, 神道, pronounced: “SHIN-toe”) (26:55-28:42) in order to learn more about the artworks inspired by these belief systems.
 - Ask students to use a T-chart to create a list of the items they see at the temple and at the shrine. Make sure to remind students to include both natural and human-made features in their lists. Then, have students visit the film’s website to access more photos and links to the temples and shrines referenced in the film: <http://www.edoavantgarde.com/temples-and-shrines>
 - How do the environments of a Buddhist temple and Shintō shrine compare? In what ways do they differ? Consider not only the architecture and artwork but also the ways in which gardens and objects from nature are incorporated into the environments of the temples and shrines.
 - Ask students to write two brief, descriptive summaries, one of a Buddhist temple and the other of a Shintō shrine, using the lists they created.
 - Additional resources:
Buddhism: <https://asiasociety.org/education/buddhism-japan>
Shintoism: http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_1000bce_shinto.htm
2. Consider this quote from Buddhist priest **Miyamoto Sōhō** (pronounced: “me-YAH-MOE-toe | SOH-hoh”): “Here in Japan, Shintō and Buddhism are highly intertwined. And that is because they share the belief that everything is endowed with a spirit, that is why they are so deeply entwined.”
 - How might one describe the “spirit” referenced in this quote as it is represented in the following two works? Whose spirit is being captured—the animals’ or the artist’s? View film segment 44:12 - 44:52 after hearing student responses.
 - After viewing the film segment, examine the following work. Ask students to identify key objects in this work and describe the spirits expressed by the artist in those objects.

How do the spirits of animate objects intermingle with the spirits of inanimate objects in this work? How does this relate to traditional Shintō beliefs?



Soga Shōhaku (曾我蕭白, 1730-1800 CE, pronounced: “so-GAH | SHOW-HA-ku”)
Lions at the Stone Bridge of Mount Tiantai (pronounced: “tea-EHN-tie”)
Metropolitan Museum of Art

- After viewing the film segment, ask students to describe how this artwork shows harmony between the spirits of the animals and that of the artist.



Shōhaku
Horses and Cranes
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

3. Explore the ways in which Buddhist and Shintō writings relate to the work of Edo period artists.
 - *The Lotus Sutra* (pronounced: “suu-TR-AH”) (noted in film segment 15:20) is one of the most influential Buddhist sutras, or sacred scriptures. In these teachings, **Gautama Siddhartha** (pronounced: “GAH-tum | SID-hearth”) explains more about his attainment of

enlightenment and the truths of life while emphasizing the importance of compassion, wisdom, and courage through empowerment. Search “Lotus Sutra” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for several versions of this written work.

- Ask students to describe how the teachings of *The Lotus Sutra* might have influenced the artists who created these works:



Unsigned
Quail and Autumn Grasses (1590-1600)



Unsigned
Tale of Genji (pronounced: “GEH-N-gee”)

- While Shintoism (noted in film segment 26:55) has no official scriptures, there have been many written works that embody Shintō beliefs. One such work, compiled during the **Nara** Period (奈良, 710-794 CE, pronounced: “NAH-rah”), is a collection of poems known as the *Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves* or *The Man'yōshū* (万葉集, pronounced: “man-YOH-shoe”). See <https://www.gwern.net/docs/japanese/1940-nippongakujutsushinkokai-manyoshu.pdf> to read translated excerpts from this work.

- Ask students to describe how the mountain described in the poem found on pages 144-145 *In praise of Mount Futagami* (二上山, pronounced: “foh-TA-gah-me”) compares to the mountains seen in the following work:



Maruyama Ōkyo (円山応挙, 1733-1795 CE, pronounced: “ma-RUH-YAH-MA | OH-kyoh”)

Mt. Fuji (富士山, pronounced: “FUH-jee”), **Seikenji** (清見寺, pronounced: “SAY-ken-jee”), and **Miho no Matsubara** (三保松原, pronounced: “me-HOH | no | mat-SUE-bah-rah”) (late 1700s)

- Create a list of items seen in each of the following screens—animals, plants, landforms, etc. What poetic words might be used to describe the spirits of those items?



Unsigned
Bamboo and Moonlight (early 1500s)



Unsigned
Mt. Yoshino, Cherry Trees in Bloom (1550s) (吉野, pronounced: “yoh-SHE-no”)



Unsigned
Cockscombs, maize and morning glories (1600s)

4. Continue to explore the spiritual ideas that inspired artists and the environments that they helped to create by examining the role of perspective. View film segment 30:50-33:47.
 - In what ways can artists show a sense of other-worldliness? Where do we seem to be standing as we view these works? What elements or objects have been brought together by the artists of these works? In what ways does this screen show a different time or place?
 - How do the following statements made by the narrator relate to the artwork seen in the film? Give students one of the following three quotes and ask them to complete the statement based on one piece they remember in particular.
 - “Not the world as humans see it . . .”
 - “Through the eyes of the gods . . .”
 - “The universe in a folding screen . . .”
 - Examine the following two screens to provide more specific examples, asking students to describe the perspective of the artist/viewer:



Unsigned
Whose Sleeves (1700s)



Sakai Hōitsu (酒井抱一, 1761-1828 CE, pronounced: “SAH-kai | HOH-eet-sue”)
The Ivy Way through Mt. Utsu (宇津の山, pronounced: “UUT-sue”) (early 1800s)
Harvard Art Museum



Unsigned
Bugaku (舞楽 pronounced: “BOO-gah-ku”) (1600s)

5. Summarize this exploration of environment and space by examining the following screen painted by Maruyama Ōkyo in the 1770s, viewed by candlelight. Consider the following response from **Matsumoto Kenjirō** (pronounced: “maht-SUE-MOE-toe | ken-JEE-row”) in an interview with film director Linda Hoaglund as it relates to this screen:

- Linda Hoaglund: “As you said earlier, all this empty space liberates the viewer’s imagination, but compared to that, Western paintings with its single point perspective, tells you where to stand to view it, with determined depth and light and shadows. Why do you think this Japanese art was so free?”
- Matsumoto Kenjirō: “Unlike Western art, in Japanese art, the subject matter itself had meaning and chickens signified being blessed with children. This depicts a landscape, but it also is a wish to be blessed with children, so all the empty space allows the viewer to imagine that as well.”¹
- Linda Hoaglund: “So there’s plenty of space for its potential meaning as a metaphor.”
- Matsumoto Kenjirō: “It leaves it up to the viewer’s interpretation.”



Maruyama Ōkyo
Rooster (1700s)

- Ask students to describe how the artist’s use of space might affect someone’s interpretation of this screen. How would that interpretation change as they view this screen throughout the day and into the night?
 - Consider the use of open space in this screen and the open spaces seen in the first lesson segment exploring the Buddhist temple and Shintō shrine. How might someone’s Buddhist and Shintō beliefs impact their interpretation of this screen?
- Finally, have students imagine that the artist painted their portrait onto this screen. Where would they be placed? How would the chickens react to their “entry” into the screen? What sort of a pose would they have so that their spirit would be at peace with the chickens already there.
 - Students could either write a short descriptive essay about this adventure into the artwork or draw a replica screen with themselves as part of the scene.

¹ Editor’s note: It isn’t true that Western painting subjects don’t contain symbolism (meanings); a classic example is Jan van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434). However, we decided to quote Matsumoto’s comments directly from the transcript, as he is speaking about the use of a viewer’s imagination in Japanese painting.

Angie Stokes is the art teacher at Wayne Trace Junior/Senior High School in Haviland, Ohio. She received her undergraduate degree in art and history at the University of St. Francis and her Master's in Teaching from Chatham University. She spent five years with Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh before returning to the classroom where she has spent 15 years teaching courses in social studies and art for grades 1 through 12. She currently enjoys teaching her AP Art History, East Asian Art History, and a variety of studio courses along with working with the Freeman Foundation's National Consortium for Teaching About Asia as one of their NextGen Teacher Leaders.

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