

Edo Avant Garde

Introducing the Edo era: Why did Japanese artists create so much innovative art?

Part II

The Art of Play in Japanese Art

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS: IDEAS FOR TEACHING PLAYFULNESS

Through these activities, students will examine work from the film that exemplify playfulness and be inspired to create work that speaks to contemporary notions of joking and parody.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- What is “playfulness” and how has it traditionally been expressed in Japanese art?
- How can this concept of *mitate* (見立て, pronounced: “me-TAH-tay”) be translated into our modern day culture?
- How can visual art reflect a sense of playfulness or the concept of parody?

ACTIVITIES:

1. **Ideas for High School Students:** Graffiti at Coffee Time. As noted in the introductory essay, there is evidence of graffiti in the joints of pedestals for statues and underneath wooden surfaces, such as those found at **Tōshōdaiji** (唐招提寺, pronounced: “TOE-SHOW-die-jee”) in **Nara** (奈良, pronounced: “NAH-rah”). These kinds of drawings were not limited to Japanese buildings, as evidence of notes, scribbles, doodles and the like can be found in texts old and new. The word marginalia may initially make one think of Illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages in Europe, yet marginalia can be defined today as any kind of mark made in the margins of a book or document. Even in this digital age, there continues to be a fascination with the notes, scribbles, comments, and drawings of others found on a page of text or within an image.
 - a. The article “The Marginal Obsession with Marginalia” is a quick read and excellent place to start for examples of the kinds of marginalia that can be found in the books owned and read by famous writers. Teachers of literature could use this as a prompt to have students “creatively annotate” a text or writing in the voice of an author who they admire. History teachers could use significant historical documents and educators in the science field could consider works by Sir Isaac Newton or more contemporary authors such as Rachel Carson, adding marginalia that explains the concepts in contemporary language or add drawings to aid in comprehension. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-marginal-obsession-with-marginalia>
 - b. Studio students should create an altered book, individually or as a group. A hardback book works best, and the pages must be able to be bent. If the page breaks when it is bent, the book is too old to act as a suitable support for drawing, painting, stamping and the like. Additional tips can be found by checking out artist Lisa Vollrath’s “Crash Course on Altered Books” at <https://mixedmedia.club/a-crash-course-on-altered-books/>. From there, a quick google search of the term “altered book” will provide hundreds of examples to

inspire and delight. Art from the Dada period as well as work by collage artists will also offer visual inspiration and examples that reflect playfulness and parody. One activity that echoes the group painting and poetry parties of the **Edo** period (江戸, 1615-1868 CE, pronounced: “eh-DOUGH”) would be to have one student circle words on the two pages, blocking out the rest with gesso. The book would then be passed to another student to create imagery based on the words emphasized.

2. **Ideas for Middle School Students:** Tasteful Poetry. The playfulness seen in the art of the Edo period, which included parodic forms such as *mitate*, can be attributed in part to the growing rate of literacy from an education system of temple schools combined with increased access to written works in Japan. With a rapidly developing print industry and extensive lending libraries, more people had access to literature and could thus understand the symbolism and parodies used in the artwork itself. Many of the playful objects seen in the screens and scrolls of the Edo period might have been considered common or even mundane (See *The Turnip* by **Itō Jakuchū**, 伊藤若冲, 1716-1800 CE, pronounced: “ee-TOE | JAH-ku-chew”), but innovative artists of this era gave these objects a new “twist” by playing on the knowledge of the growing middle class.
 - a. Challenge students to take a contemporary approach in creating their own playful scroll by having them select a fast-food item. Using the traditional *haiku* (俳句, pronounced: “hi-EE-ku”) poetry form, have students write a 5-7-5 poem about the item they selected; this form is best handled in English by thinking in terms of short-long-short rather than trying to match the Japanese syllabary with English words. Then exchange the *haiku* and have students add to the poem by writing an additional two 7-7 (or long-long) lines, transforming the *haiku* into a *renga* (a Japanese style of collaborative poetry, 連歌, pronounced: “REHN-gah”). Finally, give the *renga* to another student and have them create a drawing or a painting of the object based on the poem that has been created.
 - i. This activity can easily be adapted to a virtual teaching context whereby the students share their works in the first step of writing the *haiku* in a system such as Google Classroom and then students can select from the submitted works which they would like to use for the next steps of writing the additional *renga* lines and/or illustrating.
 - ii. This lesson can also be adapted so that students choose only one of the three parts of the assignment to complete: the *haiku*, the *renga*, or the illustration.
3. **Ideas for Elementary Students:** The Elephant in the Room. Some of the best examples of this concept of playfulness can be seen in the works of **Nagasawa Rosetsu** (長沢芦雪, 1754-1799 CE, pronounced: “nah-GAH-SAH-wah | ROW-set-sue”), *Chinese Children Playing with an Elephant*, from the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art and *Puppies* from the **Shōeidō** Gallery (pronounced: “SHOW-A-E-dough”), and **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”) from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
 - a. Ask students to create a thought-bubble caption for one of the animals seen in these works. Then have students design their own playful animal that could be painted on an

- accompanying screen or scroll and create a caption that responds to the thoughts that they wrote for the original work.
- b. You can use traditional materials such as crayon and paper or be more creative, using a brush and watercolor or ink on paper. Students could even use shaving cream and finger painting on a larger page or design a sculpture using clay and other found materials.
 - c. Students can also look at examples of **Jōmon** pottery (縄文, ca. 10,000 BCE. to ca 250 CE pronounced: “JOE-mown”) and **haniwa** (埴輪, pronounced: “ha-KNEE-wah”) pieces for inspiration in designing their animals.
 - i. To learn more, read about the Jōmon pottery examples described in the following article from *The Japan Times*:
<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2018/07/24/arts/jomon-art-japans-prehistoric-charm/>
 - ii. Be inspired by an example of a *haniwa* horse at the Art Institute of Chicago:
<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/3719>
4. Additional Lesson Ideas: NCTA Lesson **Chōjū giga** (Scroll of Frolicking Animals, 鳥獸戯画 pronounced: “CHOH-JEW GEE-gaah”) <https://www.colorado.edu/ptea-curriculum/sites/default/files/attached-files/heian-handouts.pdf>

Kachina Leigh is an artist and educator who teaches studio art and art history at Muhlenberg High School in Reading, Pennsylvania. She earned her undergraduate degree in English literature, French, and art history at Albright College and holds an MA from Temple University in art history, where she focused on 19th century French artists. She recently completed her MFA at the University of the Arts. Kachina has spent over 20 years at Muhlenberg and is part of a team-taught course called Global Studies in which she, a music teacher, English teacher, and social studies teacher work collaboratively to introduce students to cultures around the globe. She has written about lessons for journals such as *Art & Activities*. Her work with the Freeman Foundation’s National Consortium for Teaching About Asia has led to numerous educational opportunities for her and her students, as well as the privilege of writing for *Education About Asia*. Kachina completed her NCTA seminar work in 2009 and traveled to Japan as part of a study tour in 2010. Kachina teaches AP Art History as well as AP studio and maintains an independent studio at the GoggleWorks Center for the Arts in Reading, Pennsylvania where she focuses on teaching advanced textile techniques. Her work can be seen at www.kachinaleigh.com.

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