

Edo Avant Garde

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

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

MIDDLE SCHOOL LESSON

In this lesson, students will explore the development of art during the **Edo** period (江戸, 1615-1868 CE, pronounced: “eh-DOUGH”), investigating factors which led to the increased demand for art and some of the factors which led to new, innovative features in these works. They will also explore the ways in which artists of the Edo period worked together to influence one another in the production of screens and scrolls.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- How did the political and cultural environment of the Edo period help to promote the development of the arts?
- How might artists influence the work of each other?
- What is the role of a signature on a work of art?

ACTIVITIES:

1. As the result of political stability and an extended period of economic growth which began in Japan during the early 1600s, by the end of the century, the population of the capital city of Edo had grown to over one million people. With the support of the **daimyo** ([*daimyō*], 大名, pronounced: “DIE-me-yoh”) (who were competing to have the finest homes in Edo) and a rapidly expanding merchant class, new styles of art and architecture developed.
 - Watch the following video clip: 13:24-15:00. How does a time of peace help to promote the arts? Consider this quote from **Mitsui Takatoshi** (pronounced: “MEET-sue-ee | tah-KAH-toe-she”): “A great peace is at hand. The *shōgun* ([*shogun*] 将軍, pronounced: “SHOW-guhn”) rules firmly and with justice at Edo. No more shall we have to live by the sword. I have seen that great profit can be made honorably.” What does this suggest about the possibilities for artistic development during this time?
 - Source: http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/japan_1450_merchant.htm
 - Watch the following video clip: 1:09:32-1:10:22. How did new commissions from people outside of the government encourage innovation and change in art?
 - Watch the following video clip describing the use of space in Edo art: 6:40-8:08. How might you explain the term “ambiguous space”? How does the use of space help to create a sense of rhythm and movement in these works? In what ways were these ideas different from the values of Western artists?
 - Watch the following video clip: 1:10:38-1:12:06. What impact might the government’s (relatively) isolationist policies have had on the development of new artistic ideas during the Edo period, as seen in **Maruyama Ōkyo’s** (円山応挙, 1733-1795 CE, pronounced: “ma-RUH-YAH-MA | OH-kyoh”) 18th century work *Billowing Clouds*? In what ways did those developments impact the work of European artists (especially the Impressionists) when the exchange of art between Western Europe and Japan began to grow in the late 19th century?

2. Being associated with a specific “school” (style) was one way in which artists could find others with whom they could collaborate, become better recognized as professionals, and receive commissions from wealthy merchant patrons.
- Watch the following video clip: 14:36-15:10. Collaborative work was standard before the Edo period, but with the growing demand for large folding screens to separate spaces in larger homes and castles, size dictated necessity and artists often worked together, with each specializing in one specific part of the project. What are some of the possible benefits of working collaboratively on a project such as the sliding doors, scrolls, or screens seen in this video clip?
 - During the Edo period, the numerous studios of the academic **Kano** School (also written Kanō, 狩野派, pronounced: “kah-NO”) helped to meet a growing demand for art. Other schools or groups with different styles of art began to emerge as well. The work of artists who followed the **Rinpa** style (also written Rimpa, 琳派, pronounced: “RIN-pah”) reflected their interest in classical Japanese literature and were inspired by the traditional use of gold and silver, but they also began to use bolder colors, more complicated patterns, and more abstracted forms to capture the new energy of the Edo period. Watch video segment 1:08:17-1:09:30 before examining several works from Rinpa artists.
 - Compare the following three works from the studio of **Tawaraya Sōtatsu** (俵屋宗達, d. 1643 CE, pronounced: “ta-WAH-RAH-yah | SOH-taht-sue”):



Studio of Sōtatsu
Summer and Autumn Flowers
Freer Gallery



Studio of Sōtatsu
Waves at Matsushima (松島図屏風, pronounced: “maht-SUE-she-mah”)
Freer Gallery



Studio of Sōtatsu
Dragons and Clouds
Freer Gallery

- Compare the following two works by **Ogata Kenzan** (尾形乾山, 1663-1743 CE, pronounced: “OH-GAH-tah | KEN-zahn”) and **Ogata Kōrin** (尾形光琳, 1658 - 1716 CE, pronounced: “OH-GAH-tah | KOH-REEN”):



Kenzan
Plum Trees and Hollyhocks (side 1)
Minneapolis Institute of Art



Kenzan
Plum Trees and Hollyhocks (side 2)
Minneapolis Institute of Art



Kōrin
Red Plum White Plum
 National Treasure

- One of the most famous painters of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, Ogata Kōrin revived the Rinpa style with the help of his brother, ceramic artist Ogata Kenzan. The two brothers often collaborated on works in painting designs and calligraphy.
 - Of the three works from each artist, which do students feel is more “truthful” in expressing the thoughts and ideas of the artist? Which is more “accurate” in creating works that are scientifically correct? What evidence led you to make those assessments?
 - Consider which is more valuable in a work of art: truth or accuracy? Why?
3. This entirely new level of artistic innovation reached during the Edo period expressed itself in a variety of forms. Beyond paintings, ceramics, metalwork, and textile designs (such as those seen on kimono) artists were also inspired by the use of poetic images and writing. Although images and text were combined like they had been during the **Heian** period (平安, 794-1185 CE, pronounced: “HEY-yawn”), such as can be seen in the Cleveland Museum of Art’s *The Youth Seitaka* (制多迦童子, pronounced: “say-E-TAH-kah”) 1972.162, a new look to these designs emerged during the Edo period.
 4. Watch the following video clip: 1:01-1:04:40. Collaborative works were an important part of this period of artistic innovation. Compare the following works made by Sōtatsu and **Hon’ami Kōetsu** (本阿見光悦, 1558-1637 CE, pronounced: “HOHN-ah-me | KOH-eh-t-sue”), describing the unique features of each. How could one describe the style in which the animals are painted? How might you describe the use of space in each composition? In what ways does the calligraphy on these three works differ?



Sōtatsu and Kōetsu
Anthology with Crane Design (early 1600s)
 Kyoto National Museum



Sōtatsu and Kōetsu
Poem card (1606)
 Cleveland Museum of Art



Sōtatsu and Kōetsu
Poem Scroll with Deer (1610s)
 Seattle Art Museum

- How might collaboration encourage innovation in art?
 - Another major innovation of the Edo period was the development of new painting techniques such as *tarashikomi* (溜込, pronounced “ta-RAH-SHE-koh-me”). *Tarashikomi* is a technique where the artist drops paint or ink into an already painted area while still wet, allowing the colors to move and settle without interference by the brush. Watch video segment 1:05:26-1:07:34 to see examples of the use of calligraphy and painting and to examine an example of “*tarashikomi* taken to an extreme.”
 - How are the artists of this period “unchained,” as seen in the images of cows in these two hanging scrolls?
 - How might the incorporation of poetry, using two different types of calligraphy, help to enhance this work of art?
5. During this time of growth and competition in the arts, more artists began to sign their works which helped to elevate the artist as a professional worthy of individual recognition. Many of the artworks in the film were made by town artists (*machi eshi*, 町絵師, pronounced: “ma-CHEE | EH-she”) who developed their own unique style, often after studying in one painting school or another and then becoming independent.
- Watch video clip 45:05 - 45:44 to see examples of the use of the seal and signature. Provide examples of these signatures using the examples below and ask students to make a visual comparison to their own signatures.

- Works by **Itō Jakuchū** (伊藤若冲, 1716-1800 CE, pronounced: “ee-TOE | JAH-ku-chew”):



Jakuchū
Two Cranes
Metropolitan Museum of Art



Jakuchū
Rooster and Family
Minneapolis Institute of Art



Jakuchū
White Cockatoo
Yale University Art Gallery



Jakuchū
Moonlight Through Plum Blossoms
Metropolitan Museum of Art

- Works by Maruyama Ōkyo:



Ōkyo
Dragon



Ōkyo
Goose and Reeds
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Ōkyo
Cranes
Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Ōkyo
Gamboling Puppies
Minneapolis Institute of Art

- Work by **Ishida Yūtei** (石田幽汀, 1721-1786 CE, pronounced: “ee-SHE-dah | YOU-tay”):



Yūtei
Flock of Cranes
Minneapolis Institute of Art

- Works by **Mori Sōsen** (森狙仙, 1747-1821 CE, pronounced: “moh-REE | SOH-sen”):



Sōsen
Monkeys
Asian Art Museum



Sōsen
Silkies
Metropolitan Museum of Art

- Work by **Nagasawa Rosetsu** (長沢芦雪, 1754-1799 CE, pronounced: “nah-GAH-SAH-wah | ROW-set-sue”):



Rosetsu
Puppies
 Shōeidō Gallery (pronounced: “SHOW-A-E-dough”)

- Watch the following video segment: 38:55-39:36 to learn more about unsigned works. Ask students to explain whether or not they agree or disagree with the ideas of the commentator.
6. Students should now be ready to use these ideas for the creation of their own innovative, collaborative work. Watch video segment 49:50-51:29 showing Sōtatsu’s early 17th century *Scattered Fans* for inspiration.



Sōtatsu
Scattered Fans
 Freer Gallery of Art

- Ask students to select an episode from either one of the following two Edo period primary sources. Using the descriptions in the writing, possibly a little bit of additional research, and some innovative ideas of their own, have each student design a scene from the story to use as a theme for decorating a paper fan.

- *On the Codes of the Merchant's Houses*, excerpts from *The Testament of Shimai Soshitsu* (島井宗室, pronounced: "SHE-my | SO-sheet-sue")
http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/japan/shimai_soshitsu.pdf
- Excerpts from *The Great Learning for Women (Onna Daigaku, 女大学)*, pronounced: "oh-NAH | die-GAH-ku") by **Kaibara Ekken** (貝原 益軒, pronounced: "ka-I-BAH-rah | EH-ken")
http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/japan/ekken_greaterlearning.pdf?menu=1&s=4
- Provide students with a piece of 11" x 17" paper and a fan-shaped template (cut from cardboard such as a cereal box) to trace onto the paper. Have students consider the terms and techniques they saw in the works from this lesson: What are the essential shapes and figures to include in their designs? How will they arrange these items and use the space inside the fan? Will they include a poem or some writing on their fan or not? Will they draw/paint their scene using more traditional or more innovative techniques?
 - Students can draw their designs in pencil and outline the fan with permanent marker before filling in the designs using watercolors, crayons, oil pastels, or colored pencils.
 - When students are finished drawing and coloring their fans, they should let them dry (if painted) and then cut around the outline of the shape.
- As students begin to complete their works, have students collaboratively "play with time" by rearranging the fans on a large piece of paper or cardboard in order to create one (or two if you would like to keep the two sources separated) composition(s). How will they work with space to create a sense of rhythm and movement in arranging the fans? Make sure to have students work with several different arrangements, critiquing various positions, before adhering the works to the final masterpiece for display.

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(2020; updated 2022)ⁱ

ⁱ The following publication was referenced in the writing of this document:
Neave, Dorinda, Blanchard, Lara C.W., and Sardar, Marika. *Asian Art*. Pearson, 2015.