

Edo Avant Garde

Why do Ōkyo's puppies look so cute?
The significance of Edo period artists observing nature to create art.
Module 3

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS MIDDLE SCHOOL LESSON IDEAS

In this lesson, students will discover some of the ways in which careful observation helps to develop artistic skills and ways in which some of the most highly skilled artists are recognized for their work in Japan.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- How did the natural environment of Japan inspire artists of the **Edo** period (江戸, 1615-1868 CE, pronounced: “eh-DOUGH”)?
- How did Edo artists capture both stillness and movement in their work?
- What is the value of a National Treasure and the significance of a UNESCO World Heritage Site designation?

ACTIVITIES:

1. Consider the opening quote of the film, written by 18th century painter **Itō Jakuchū** (伊藤若冲, 1716-1800 CE, pronounced: “ee-TOE | JAH-ku-chew”): “Flowers, birds, grasses, and insects each have their own innate spirit. Only after one has actually determined the true nature of this spirit through observation should painting begin.”
 - Discuss the idea of learning more about something through observation. What can you discover about a bird or a puppy or a flower by carefully looking at it? How difficult is it to draw or paint something that you have not observed?
 - Partner students for a drawing activity that will help them to better understand the importance of observation. Ask students to play rock, paper, scissors to determine a winner who will be the “describer” for this activity. The other students will be the “drawer.” Provide each “drawer” with a pencil and sheet of white paper.
 - With the “drawers” backs turned to the board, show the “describers” a picture of a plant or an animal. It is the “describer’s” task to carefully describe the object you have shown them to their partner so that their partner can accurately draw a picture of the object.
 - The “describer” is only allowed to look at the object; they are never allowed to peek at what the “drawer” is doing until the exercise is complete.
 - The “drawer” is not allowed to talk at all; they cannot ask any questions for clarification, so please make sure your “describers” are speaking up.

- Give students two minutes to describe and draw the object. When the time is up, have students share their work and discuss the challenges of drawing something without being able to observe it. If time allows, have students trade roles and show a second picture for another round of the activity.
- Use Jakuchū's *Rooster and Family* (below) from the Minneapolis Institute of Art as an example for a discussion of discovering details through careful observation. If possible, provide students with their own copies of the work or have them bring up the image on their devices to allow them the opportunity to zoom in on the details.
 - How do the feathers of the bird mimic the leaves and flowers of the plant?
 - What might be the most challenging part of this composition to draw? Why?
 - If the students were the artists, where might they suggest beginning to draw a piece like this—with the birds or the background? Which birds or what part of the background might they paint first? Why?
 - Ask students to honestly answer the following question: When they draw or paint, do they put this much detail into their pieces? Why or why not?



Itō Jakuchū

Rooster and Family (1797)

Minneapolis Institute of Art

See: <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/37184/rooster-and-family-ito-jakuchu>

Read the following excerpt from the transcript interview between film director Linda Hoaglund and Buddhist priest **Miyamoto Sōhō** (pronounced: “me-YAH-MOE-toe | SOH-hoh”):

“In that life of practice, here in **Jōdoin** (浄土院, pronounced: “JOE-dough-een”), there is no TV or radio or newspapers or magazines, nothing of that sort. Here, we simply live with nature. Living with nature like that, the human body and the human spirit, organically adapt and become energized. Living in human society, we encounter so many sounds and images that wear down our nerves and sap our innate human strength. Through a Buddhist practice and living with nature, we can resurrect our strength.”

Ask students to explain how this type of lifestyle might help to facilitate the development of the arts.

2. Some of the artists who have demonstrated their talents through the achievement of a high level of perfection have received special designations, and their master works are recognized today by the Japanese government as National Treasures.
 - Watch the video segment 57:03-59:05. Ask students to provide visual evidence of the ways in which **Ogata Kōrin** (尾形光琳, 1658-1716 CE, pronounced: “OH-GAH-tah | KOH-REEN”) “embraced” or “channeled” the power of nature in this National Treasure.



Ogata Kōrin
Red Plum White Plum (late 1700s)
MOA Art Museum, Atami, Japan

- If you were to design a folding screen to place to the right side or to the left side of Kōrin’s work in order to divide a room, what would you draw on that screen and why? What colors and materials would you use to add to the visual effects of the existing work?
 - Students could choose to either describe or draw the design of their accompanying screen.
 - Have students explain how their accompanying screen would add to the story being told by this National Treasure.

- How does Kōrin’s work in this masterpiece compare to the second work seen in the video segment, *Wisteria, Lotus and Maple* by **Sakai Hōitsu** (酒井抱一, 1761-1828 CE, pronounced: “SAH-kai | HOH-eet-sue”)? In what ways do their colors, shapes, lines, subject matter and seasons differ? How would you describe the styles of the two artists?



Sakai Hōitsu
Wisteria, Lotus and Maple, (early 1800s)
 MOA Museum of Art

3. Watch film segment 10:25-12:22. Ask students to describe the details that they see in this screen and explain how its presentation in this location enhances those details. How does it feel to be “in the painting” as the narrator describes? How does the display of this artwork in that particular setting affect this feeling?



Unsigned
Cockscomb (1600)
 MOA Museum of Art

- The work *Cockscomb* as seen in the film is being displayed at the MOA Museum in Atami, Japan. Have students visit the museum’s website <http://www.moaart.or.jp/en/> and

- by clicking on “The Collection,” have students select another work of art (one could be a National Treasure if they select that specific search).
- Through careful observation of various parts of the artwork, have students focus on drawing three thumbnail sketches (2” x 2” each) of their selected work.
 - Have students bring in a leaf or flower to observe and draw for an additional activity and discussion. *Shasei* (写生, sketching from nature; depicting optical reality, pronounced: “shah-SAY”) helps to demonstrate the significance of artists observing nature in order to create detail in their works.
 - If possible, collaborate with the science teacher to use a variety of botanical slides for students to draw using microscopes. If you want to go one step further, check out the online resources from the Japanese tech company JEOL and make drawings from the Scanning Electron Microscope images shown on their student site: <https://www.jeol.co.jp/en/science/>
 - Discuss how students’ experience in drawing the three thumbnails from a computer screen, drawing an object from real-life observation, and drawing from scientific slides compares. Which one is the “easiest” to draw the most accurately? How so?
4. Read one of the following two segments from the transcript interview with Buddhist priest, **Miita Myōkyū** (pronounced: “MEE-tah | MEYOH-cue”):
- “I used to be an artist. The Kyoto National Museum has a conservation center and that was where I worked. I was creating replicas of Buddhist Art National Treasures. I encountered so many images of Buddha in that art. There is a conservation center in the Kyoto National Museum. In that restoration center there is a replication room where National Treasures are copied. Most people translate it as “copy” but that’s not correct. We journey towards the spirit of the artist who created the original art, whether in the 8th century or the 13th century or the 17th century, to restore their art.”
 - “There are many images of Buddha in that art and I began to wonder how I could journey to the world of Buddha and so I decided to enter the priesthood. I was a painter of Japanese-style paintings, my interest in Buddhism kept growing through Buddhist art and that’s how I entered the gates of Buddhism. Their art is a manifestation of those artists’ spirits, which cannot be articulated in words. Their profoundly mysterious worlds. A world for which there are no words, which cannot be articulated. But they wanted to somehow reveal it. That’s what I sense.”
 - Ask students to describe the role of painters like Miita Myōkyū in preserving history. Why do they “copy” these great works? Who is their audience? What role do they play in teaching others? In what ways does art allow them to share their beliefs?
 - Reference the following articles from *The Japan Times* to learn more about National Treasures and Living National Treasures:
 - <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2017/10/31/arts/makes-national-treasure/>
 - <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2001/06/16/national/nine-nominated-as-living-treasures/>
 - Explore the Living National Treasures Museum in **Yugawara** (湯河原町 pronounced: “you-GAH-WAH-RAH”), Japan: <http://www.nikobi.com/english/about.html>
5. Not only can artworks receive a special designation that reflects their importance, but places can also be recognized for their beauty and cultural significance. Three of Japan’s most scenic

places, Miyajima, Matsushima, and Amanohashidate, have been recognized for their grandeur by modern day tourists while their natural beauty has also been captured by many artists over time.

- **Miyajima** (宮島, pronounced: “me-YAH-gee-mah”) is a sacred island that includes a floating *torii* gate (鳥居, pronounced: “toe-REE”) that marks the entrance to the **Itsukushima Shrine** (厳島神社, pronounced: “eat-SUE-ku-she-mah”), a famous **Shintō** shrine (also spelled **Shinto**, 神道, pronounced: “SHIN-toe”) as well as a famous UNESCO World Heritage Site: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/776>
- **Matsushima Bay** (松島図屏風, pronounced: “maht-SUE-she-mah”) includes dozens of pine clad islets.



Tawaraya Sōtatsu (俵屋宗達, d. 1643 CE, pronounced: “ta-WAH-RAH-yah | SOH-taht-sue”)

Waves at Matsushima (1630)

National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian

- **Amanohashidate** (天橋立, pronounced: “ah-MA-NO-ha-she-dah-tay”) is a pine tree covered sand bar that stretches across a bay.



Unsigned

View of Amanohashidate (1600-1625)

Private Collection

After careful observation of the two folding screens featured in the film, ask students to respond to the following questions:

- How do the artists capture stillness and movement in these two screens? How do the elements of art (line, shape, space, color, value, texture, form) help the artist to achieve the goal of either stillness or movement?
- Which screen is more effective in communicating the power of nature—the close-up view seen in *Waves at Matsushima* or the overview seen in *View of Amanohashidate*? Why?

Ask students to select one of the two locations, either Matsushima or Amanohashidate, to research and find a variety of present-day photographs that reflect the natural beauty of the location and the impact of development on the environment.

- After analyzing the Edo period screens of the location selected and the modern-day photographs of the same place, have students write a tourism blog promoting the site, speaking about both the beauty and the fragility of nature. Make sure that students use specific visual evidence from both the artwork and the online pictures to help them develop their argument.
- Suggested resource: <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2250.html>

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.

(2020; 2022 update)