

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 HIGH SCHOOL LESSON IDEAS

In this lesson, students will consider how the close study of nature is reflected in the arts of the **Edo** (江戸, 1615-1868 CE, pronounced: “eh-DOUGH”) period.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- Can art capture both appearance and feeling?
- How does memory impact our understanding of the appearance of an object?
- How can the artist draw attention to the mundane or ordinary? When or how do daily events become noteworthy?
- What senses other than sight can aid in our understanding and appreciation of an object?

ACTIVITIES:

1. Students should be shown and asked to compare the following:
 - **Ishida Yūtei** (石田幽汀, 1721-1786 CE, pronounced : “ee-SHE-dah | YOU-tay”), *Flock of Cranes*
 - **Maruyama Ōkyo** (円山応挙, 1733-1795 CE, pronounced: “ma-RUH-YAH-MA | OH-kyoh”), *Cranes*

This activity will serve as a way to introduce students to the film clip from *Edo Avant Garde*, starting at 19.18 through 26.49. As they are watching, students should be directed to jot down notes – words, thoughts, images – that they are unfamiliar with or that caught their attention. Students should watch the same segment again to refine notes. Teachers can then use student notes and thoughts as a basis for a class discussion about the segment viewed. Teachers should ensure students have a working definition for the term realism (rendering subjects as they appear), *shasei* (写生, portraying an object as it appears to the eye, which extends to the artist’s ability to capture the liveliness the object, pronounced: “shah-SAY”), and magical realism (the term is used here to suggest the replication of surface details while simultaneously suggesting the personality of the subject). Brenda Jordan’s essay that introduces this module is an excellent resource for teachers.

2. For students in art history or Asian studies courses, the notes from the film would form the basis of a research project in which students would compare the works of the three artists addressed in the segment – Ishida Yūtei, Maruyama Ōkyo, and **Mori Sōsen** (森狙仙, 1747-1821 CE, pronounced: “moh-REE | SOH-sen”).

3. Students should be asked to consider why the film shows art historian **Yamashita Yūji** (pronounced: “yah-MA-SHE-tah | YOU-jee”) searching for a text. The action of this mundane task underscores an important concept in the art of the Edo period; the attention artists gave to the everyday. Not only did Ōkyo render dragons, but he also painted puppies and other animals that would be seen on a daily basis. Ōkyo was not alone in this, as Jordan notes in the introductory essay, explaining that “**Yosa Buson** (与謝蕪村, 1716-1783 CE, pronounced: “yo-SAH | BOO-sohn”) emphasized the mundane in both his haiku and his paintings, as seen in *Horse* from the late 1700s. Instead of representing the horse within scenes of military valor, Buson paints a horse in an almost sketch-like fashion, unencumbered by reins or saddle, and appearing more like a farm animal than the type of steed that would have been ridden by a **daimyo** (大名, pronounced: “DIE-me-yoh”).” Students should be asked to compile a list of daily activities (brushing one’s teeth, walking to school, etc.) as well as of animals and objects that are a part of everyday life (toothbrush, shoes, pets in the house). Students in a literature-based course could be asked to write a poem or short story that celebrates a seemingly mundane activity or object. Students in a drawing or studio-based course could use a daily object as the focus of a highly detailed rendering of the object. If the object is small, such as a spider or pencil, students could enlarge the drawing in a series of pieces that makes the mundane monumental. Students in a sculpture class could render the object in 3D. Depending upon the finished size of the work, papier-mâché with a foam core or poster board base would be an ideal and inexpensive medium.
4. For students in an art or literature course, the teacher should collect tree bark or another easily found natural object that can fit in one’s hand (branch, pinecone, grass). Students will first study the object carefully, noting characteristics and appearance. From that point, students should not look at the object, but rather only hold the object in their closed hand, feeling the object. Students can write a highly detailed and descriptive account of the object or draw the object. Once this exercise is complete, the teacher should engage students in a discussion about how their different senses – sight versus feeling – aided in their understanding of the object. The instructor can expand this lesson for drawing students, noting the different ways in which artists work from life. As Jordan notes in the introductory essay, painter **Kawanabe Kyōsai** (河鍋曉齋, 1831-1889 CE, pronounced: “kah-WAH-NAH-bay | KYOH-sigh”) would study subjects such as birds and animals from life and memorize their gestures and poses, until he was able to recreate a pose or figure from memory. This stands in contrast to artists such as Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), a Northern Renaissance artist who traveled extensively throughout Europe, studying the work of the European Renaissance masters. His careful study of perspective and proportion enabled him to work in a highly realistic manner, but with the underlying mathematical structure of the object never too far below the surface. As most students in drawing class have already sketched from a still-life – looking and drawing like Dürer – the teacher could create an assignment that requires students to work in the manner of Kyōsai, who relied on trained memory when painting. Students would study an animal or bird from a series of short video clips that the student has created from a variety of vantage points, making quick sketches to train the eye, hand, and brain, and work to render the final iteration entirely from memory.

5. An option for cross-curricular study would be for students in an art class to pair off with students in a biology class for close study of an animal. With the wealth of videos available, students could select from a wide variety of animals and start by creating a short film based on clips of the animal sleeping, eating, moving, hunting, etc. For the biology student, this investigation would lead to a study of the bones and muscles that enable these movements. The art student could illustrate the information shared by the biology student, and the final product could be a presentation to the class that shows film segments of the animal moving with explanatory drawings of the underlying bones and muscular structures.
6. Another significant concept addressed in this section of *Edo Avant Garde* is the artist's ability to capture the "essence" of the subject of the work. This is referenced when the terms *shasei* (portraying an object as it appears to the eye, which extends to the artist's ability to capture the liveliness the object), and magical realism (the term is used here to suggest the replication of surface details while simultaneously suggesting the personality of the subject) are addressed in the first section of the film clip. This idea is further emphasized in art historian Yamashita Yūji's discussion of Ōkyo's puppies. The ability of the artist to capture the essence or "soul" of the subject is often what differentiates the great artists from the rest of the field. An interesting study for art history students would be to consider contemporary artists, including photographers, who have this ability. Although a subjective measure of the quality of a work, this study would prove useful for students in literature class as well as it demonstrates the ability to research as well as argue a point.

A contemporary artist who has engaged in this sort of in-depth study, but with far different results is the South Korean artist **Do Ho Suh** (서도호, b. 1962, pronounced: "dough | HOE | saw"). In the segment entitled "Stories," from the second season of *Art 21* (<https://art21.org/artist/do-ho-suh/>; 27.40 to 31.35; or <https://art21.org>), Suh speaks of his longing for home, which leads to the recreation of his childhood home in fabric that he can carry with him. In creating this piece, he talks about the careful way in which he measured his home and the memories and feelings it inspired in him. Viewing this segment with students after seeing the clip from *Edo Avant Garde* would lead to interesting discussions as well as provide other prompts for writing and drawing that involve concepts of memory, longing, and the ability to recreate not only how something appears but the way in which something makes us feel.

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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