

Edo Avant Garde

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

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS HIGH SCHOOL LESSON 1

In this lesson, students will explore references to Japanese traditions, folk tales, literature, and poetry that would be familiar to the intended viewer of these works, recognizing the existence of a shared knowledge and culture.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- What is creativity and what factors may impact its development?
- How do shared knowledge and experience shape the creation of art?
- How is shared knowledge expressed in contemporary works of art?

ACTIVITIES:

Students should be shown both a still image of *Dragons and Clouds* by **Tawaraya Sōtatsu** (俵屋宗達, d. 1643 CE, pronounced: “ta-WAH-RAH-yah | SOO-taht-sue”) as well as the moving clip numerous times and prompted to answer the questions on the worksheet following this lesson. Students should have access to the image or clip throughout the duration of this activity and it should be done without the use of additional resources or information to encourage students to carefully and closely study the work.

- <https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/dragons-and-clouds/>
- <https://vimeo.com/289562072>

1. Using their understanding of the artist’s use of the elements and principles as a way to substantiate their assertions, students should consider the subject matter, mood, and style of the work. Examples may include:
 - This work makes me feel anxious, like something is about to happen due to the large amount of inky black clouds.
 - The dragons look like they are about to fight based on how there is an implied line that travels between their eyes.
2. Students should then create a series of questions based on the prompt “I wonder.” Examples could include:
 - I wonder why the subject is dragons?
 - I wonder who the artist is?
 - I wonder when and where this artwork was made?
 - I wonder what a Japanese dragon is? Is it the same thing as my idea of a dragon?

Encourage students to create a lengthy list of things they are wondering about. This could be done independently or as a small group. The class could also work collaboratively to create a list of questions.

3. If students have access to a personal computer in class, or as a homework assignment, students should be asked to answer the list of “I wonder” questions by researching this work, and the instructor should now share the name and title of the work. Students should be encouraged to determine how the subject matter relates to the artist’s culture and the time period in which it was created. For example, dragons in East Asia are very different creatures from dragons in Western Europe. As such, simply “Googling” the title or artist is not sufficient, and the teacher may need to review research techniques, suggesting students look up the phrases found within their research. For example, when going to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Asian Art website (<https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/dragons-and-clouds/>), students will learn this is an ink painting and should be prepared to discuss this. Instructors may decide to complete this task as a group as well. Ultimately, students should come to the understanding of the significance of the style, medium, culture and time period that created *Dragons and Clouds*.
4. With this knowledge, students should be shown the following section of the film, starting at 47:34 and continuing through 55:00, stopping for commentary.
 - During the clip, a 1906 photo of Charles Lang Freer is shown. Pause and have students discuss. Not only will students be intrigued by the dress of the Japanese, but of Freer himself, which is a good example of how fashion changes through the ages. What is considered “well dressed” in the culture of the students?
 - Sōtatsu was a commoner, but painted works for a very elite and wealthy class. How might that have shaped his subject matter or style? Students could explore the work of contemporary artist Kehinde Wiley, who uses the work of Old Masters as a setting for portraits of contemporary African-American youth. <https://hypebeast.com/2020/1/kehinde-wiley-jacques-louis-david-brooklyn-museum-exhibition-napoleon-bonaparte-painting>
 - Sōtatsu uses a technique with ink called *tarashikomi* (溜込, pronounced: “ta-RAH-SHE-koh-me”). This is a type of wet-on-wet painting in which the artist drops color or ink into an already painted area and allows the dropped paint to flow without intervention from the brush. Both studio and non-studio students could experiment with this technique to better appreciate the skill and care this technique requires. If supplies are not available, there are numerous videos available online that illustrate this technique, such as this: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2swPcSz5AI> – it is recommended to use without sound. Art students could also drop ink onto wet areas to encourage it to spread and once dry, use different media to draw and embellish the shapes to create a realistic or imaginary animal.

5. Other works that could be used to help students appreciate the concept of a shared culture or cultural knowledge featured in *Edo Avant Garde* include:
- *Tale of Genji* (源氏, pronounced: “GEHN-jee”) – Unsigned
film 30:40 to 33:40
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Tale-of-Genji>
 - *Scattered Fans* – Sōtatsu (early 1600s)
film 49:52 to 51:28
<https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/screen-with-scattered-fans/>
 - *Illustrated Legends of the Kitano Tenjin Shrine* (北野天神縁起絵巻, pronounced: “key-TAH-no | ten-jean”) - Unsigned (late 1200s)
<https://mymodernmet.com/what-is-cubism-art/>
 - *Wind God Thunder God* – Sōtatsu (early 1600s)
film 55:44 to 57:00
Addiss, Stephen. *How to Look at Japanese Art*. Vermont: Echo Point Books, 1996, pages 66 to 69.
https://tsumugu.yomiuri.co.jp/en/gallery/fuujin_raijinn_top.html
6. As a culminating activity, students will select a work of literature, song or artwork that is contemporary and speaks to a contemporary audience. Using the tools explored through this lesson, students will situate their selected piece in a context that those lacking in this shared cultural knowledge can understand and perhaps even appreciate. The selected example should be the pinnacle of genre – for example, the screens featuring the Wind God and Thunder God are national treasures. The work of Kehinde Wiley is recognized throughout the world; he was commissioned by former President Barack Obama to paint his official portrait for the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. Students should be given guidelines to assure that they are not simply picking any work, but an excellent exemplar of a particular art form.

Analyzing the Art Elements & Principles of Art¹
[see next page for worksheet]

¹ NB: The included worksheet is based on a document that was initially found at <http://unr.edu/homepage/vwein/Kunst.html> and was altered by the author of this lesson over many years. The link is no longer active, and I have made every effort to credit this resource appropriately.

Analyzing the Art Elements & Principles of Art
A close study of *Dragons and Clouds* by Sōtatsu

Use the following questions as a guide to aid you in your study of *Dragons and Clouds*. Answers should be written in complete sentences on another sheet of paper or via Google.docs.

Art Elements:

- Has the artist used **lines** in the artwork? Describe the lines (straight, curving, squiggly, jagged, horizontal, vertical, diagonal, dotted, etc.).
- What kinds of **shapes** are in the artwork (round, rectangular, triangular, geometric, irregular, organic, large, small, worm-like, etc.)?
- What kinds of **textures** did the artist use? Can you find a place where the artist used a rough texture? Smooth? Bumpy? Is the texture something you can feel or is it only an illusion?
- What **colors** has the artist used? Has the artist used one color more than others? Are the colors warm or cool? Are they bright or are they neutral?
- Do some areas look darker than the others do? Can you find the lightest area? Does the artist use any **value** gradations?
- Does the **space** feel full or empty?

Principles of Design:

- When you look at the artwork, is there a part or object you look at first? How has the artist **emphasized** this part? Is this part different from the rest? How is it the same? Where do you look next?
- Are there any art elements (lines, shapes, colors, textures) that are used throughout the artwork to keep the artwork **unified**?
- Are there any art elements the artist repeats or makes a pattern with? Does anything about the work create a **rhythm**?
- Can you see parts of the artwork that look like they are **moving**?
- Can you locate any art elements the artist has changed or **varied** to make the artwork more interesting?
- When you look at both sides of the artwork, does each side look almost the same (**symmetrical**)? Does each side look different (**asymmetrical**)?
- Do the visual elements combine in a pleasing way (**harmony**), or are they jarring? How?
- Are there many **contrasts** in the painting? What kind?

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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