

## *Edo Avant Garde*

### **Formats and Techniques: How did Edo Period Japanese Live with Art?**

#### Module 4

#### **CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS**

#### **ELEMENTARY LESSON**

In this lesson, students will explore how **Edo** period (江戸, 1615-1868 CE, pronounced: “eh-DOUGH”) artists’ use of materials inspired the work of many others for centuries.

#### **ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:**

- What materials were used to create paintings during the Edo era?
- In what ways can science impact art?
- How can the creation of a work of art be a performance in itself?

#### **ACTIVITIES:**

1. Begin by showing students the following three works from the film, each featuring a different format of scrolls and screen.



Itō Jakuchū

*Moonlight through Plum Blossoms* (1755)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Viewed in film segment 18:00 to 19:15.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/53408>



Unsigned  
*Willows, Bridge and Water Wheel* (1580-1600)  
 Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
 Viewed in film segment 9:12 to 9:34  
<https://collections.lacma.org/node/2244970>



Sōtatsu and Kōetsu  
*Anthology with Crane Design* (early 1600s)  
 Kyoto National Museum.  
 Viewed in film segment 1:01:41 to 1:05:25  
<https://www.kyohaku.go.jp/eng/syuzou/meihin/kinsei/item02.html>

Ask students to describe the following for each piece, referring to the Introductory Essay for Module 4 for answers:

- What is the work's orientation—horizontal or vertical?
- What materials were used to create this painting?
- Where might this work have originally been displayed?

Ask students the following questions, specific to individual pieces:

- How would you describe the shapes seen in the detail of **Itō Jakuchū's** (伊藤若冲, 1716-1800 CE, pronounced: "ee-TOE | JAH-ku-chew") *Moonlight through Plum Blossoms*, as seen in film segment 18:00 to 19:00?



- What does the unfolding of a screen do to the location in which it is displayed? (Watch extended film segment 9:12 to 10:23 and compare the screens.) How did the people of the Edo period view these screens differently than we do today?
- If you were watching **Tawaraya Sōtatsu** (俵屋宗達, d. 1643 CE, pronounced: “ta-WAH-RAH-yah | SOO-taht-sue”) and **Hon’ami Kōetsu** (本阿見光悦, 1558-1637 CE, pronounced: “HOHN-ah-me | KOH-eht-sue”) create the *Anthology with Crane Design* “as a live performance,” what other objects might you see in the space where the artists were working? (For example: paper, weight stones to hold the paper in place, an ink stone, water cup, brush rack and brushes, etc.)

2. Explore the ways in which the production of art has changed over time by comparing Jakuchū’s *Moonlight through Plum Blossoms* (1755) with 19<sup>th</sup> century Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh’s *Almond Blossoms* (1890).

- Van Gogh’s 28 <sup>4</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inch by 36 <sup>2</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inch oil on canvas is smaller than Jakuchū’s 55 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inch by 31 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inch ink and color on silk. Van Gogh benefited from the 1841 invention of oil paints in tubes and preferred painting on canvases made of machine-made linen. See <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/terminology.html> for more details on materials.
- Although their materials are much different, how are the painting techniques of these two artists similar?



Jakuchū’s *Moonlight through Plum Blossoms*  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/53408>



Vincent Van Gogh’s *Almond Blossoms*  
<https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0176V1962>



- Before starting a hands-on project, explore another example of painted blossoms in **Ogata Kenzan's** (尾形乾山, 1663-1743 CE, pronounced: "OH-GAH-tah | KEN-zahn") *Plum Trees and Hollyhocks* by watching the film segment 34:15 (front side) to 34:35 (back side).
  - What does the narrator say about Ogata Kenzan's use of gold in *Plum Trees and Hollyhocks*? In what ways does it "interact with the viewer's imagination"?
  - This technique of *kirikane* (截金, pronounced: "key-REE-kah-neh ) is the use of gold foil cut into strips or other desired shapes and affixed to surfaces, such as paper or silk, ceramics, lacquer, etc.



Ogata Kenzan  
*Plum Trees and Hollyhocks* (mid-1700s)  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/54781>

- Provide each student with a sheet of blue colored paper (metallic paper can also be purchased from a craft or art store), two cotton swabs, a straw, and a small cup of white tempera, a small cup of red tempera, and a small cup of black ink (or watered-down black or brown tempera paint). Using one end of the cotton swab, have students apply a generous amount of ink to the bottom center of the piece of paper, creating the trunk of a tree. Before it dries, have students use the straw to blow the ink across to the top of the page, forming the branches of a tree. More ink can be added in places to help extend branches. Allow the ink to dry before students use the other cotton swab to apply white blossoms and then red blossoms on the branches of the tree.

3. Examine the 16th century screen *Willows, Bridge and Water Wheel*. Challenge students to identify objects on this screen that show movement.

- One of the objects visible in the bottom, left-hand corner of the screen is a water wheel, an ancient invention that uses flowing water to create power. These water wheels were the primary source of mechanical power in pre-industrial Japan (Ryoshin Minami, "Water Wheels in the Preindustrial Economy of Japan")
  - Ask students to imagine themselves walking across the bridge and through this screen. What would they hear? What else might they see?

- Compare *Willows, Bridge and Water Wheel* to *Willow Bridge*. Both of these works were unsigned—do you believe they could have been made by the same painters or team of painters? What evidence can you provide to support your response?
- Both screens strongly feature the use of gold. Take a look at film segment 1:14:30 to 1:14:49 and ask students to describe how they think the artist applied the sheets of gold, like those seen hanging in that film clip, to the background of the screen.
  - To learn more about the use of gold and silver in Edo works, please refer to the Introductory Essay for Module 4.



Unsigned  
*Willows, Bridge and Water Wheel* (1580-1600)

Viewed in film segment 9:12 to 9:34



Unsigned  
*Willow Bridge* (late 1500s)  
MOA Museum, Atami, Japan

Viewed in segment 12:26 to 13:22

4. Continue exploring the theme of movement by watching the film segment from 1:14:29 to 1:18:20.

- How does the work of these modern artists compare to the brushstrokes and calligraphy lines of Edo artists?
- Compare Sōtatsu and Kōetsu's *Anthology with Crane Design* with the upper right-hand corner of **Shiraga Kazuo's** (白髪 一雄, 1924-2008 CE, pronounced: "SHE-rah-gah | kah-ZOO-oh") 1959 painting *Untitled*.
  - Are there any similarities in the lines created by these artists using two very different mediums and very different styles?
  - In close-looking, can students see the marks left by the artist's brush (Sōtatsu and Kōetsu) or foot (Kazuo)?



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



**Shiraga Kazuo**  
*Untitled* (1959)

- Compare the qualities of oil paint with ink with a visual comparison of the mediums, if possible. 20th century **Gutai** group (具体美術協会, pronounced: “gu-TAH-EE”) painters like **Motonaga Sadamasa** (元永定正, 1922-2011 CE, pronounced: “moe-TOE-nah-gah | sah-DAH-mah-sah”) experimented with oil and resin which is much heavier than traditional inks and hand-ground paints.
  - The weight of these pigments required a much stronger surface for painting, such as canvas mounted on board rather than paper or silk. What types of brushes would an artist need in order to use such heavy paint?
  - The brushes used by Edo artists were made of a variety of materials, from animal hair to plant material, depending upon the function of the brush.
  - To learn more about pigments and brushes, please refer to the Introductory Essay for Module 4.
- Watch video segment 51:53 to 53:38, inspiring students for their final project.
  - Provide each table of students with a butcher-block sheet of paper, containers of water, small containers of ink, several paint brushes and toothbrushes to share.
  - Following the directions provided in the video clip, have students apply water to the paper first, then add brushstrokes of ink to the wet paper in a traditional *tarashikomi* (溜込, pronounced: “ta-RAH-SHE-koh-me”) technique. Finally, have students dip the tips of the toothbrushes into the ink and demonstrate how to carefully “spray” the ink onto the paper by rubbing their thumbs across the bristles of the brush.
    - Gold tempera or acrylic may also be used in place of the ink in order to create a spattered-gold effect.
    - Students may also scrape black chalk or charcoal onto the wet paper using the end of a plastic knife in order to create a charcoal spray effect.
    - Play the sound of ocean waves crashing into the shore to help students experience the mood of their work.
    - Display works collectively on one wall to simulate a screen effect.

## Sources

Ryoshin Minami. “Water Wheels in the Preindustrial Economy of Japan.” *Hitotsubashi Journal of Economics*. Hitotsubashi University: [Vol. 22, No. 2, February 1982](#). 1-15.  
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