

Edo Avant-garde

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

Module 4

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS HIGH SCHOOL LESSON

In this lesson, students will study how the Japanese of the **Edo** Period (江戸, 1615-1868 CE, pronounced: “eh-DOUGH”) lived with the art of the period in both formal and domestic settings. Students will also learn more about *kōzo* (mulberry tree bark, 楮紙, pronounced: “KOH-zoh”), one of the key materials used to make the works of art featured in *Edo Avant Garde*.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- How does art shape our understanding and appreciation of interior space?
- How does working with art materials impact our understanding of craftsmanship?

ACTIVITIES:

1. To further students’ understanding of Japanese aesthetics, students will watch *Edo Avant Garde* from 10:11 to 13:20. Japan was and is a sitting culture. That is, rather than use chairs, Japanese sit on the *tatami* (畳, pronounced: “tah-TAH-me”) mat floors in traditional settings. Thus, folding screens would be observed from the viewpoint of the floor, surrounding the viewer as illustrated in this segment. This portion of the film is also significant as it shows the environment in which a screen would have been placed, viewed, studied, and enjoyed. Students in math or technology education classes could work collaboratively with studio art or art history students to recreate traditional architectural spaces appropriate for the three main kinds of painting formats used in the Edo period. Brenda Jordan offers explanations and definitions of *fusuma* (襖, pronounced: “fuh-SUE-mah”), the *byōbu* (屏風, pronounced: “BEYOH-boo”), and the *kakemono* (掛物, pronounced: “kah-KEH-moh-no”) in her introductory essay for these lessons. Using CAD or another drafting program, technology education students would complete a series of drawings of the structure appropriate to house the work of the art students. A scaled model could be built, giving students in math, tech ed, and physics classes the opportunity to study Japanese building techniques. The studio art students would be tasked with creation of a *fusuma* or *byōbu* either to scale or a model; suggestions for how students could do this can be found in Module One, High School Lesson Two. Art history students can work with the multiple examples available in the film or design their own *fusuma* or *byōbu* by combining imagery from existing works. By working together to create both the art object as well as space that it would occupy, students would gain an understanding of Japanese domestic and public spaces during the Edo period, the kinds of works of art created for these spaces, and the function of these pieces.

2. Students in theater arts or art history could select a *fusuma*, *byōbu*, or *kakemono* and design a traditional interior space that would house such a work, using structures from the Edo period. Students could also be tasked with creating a contemporary environment that speaks to the selected work and its function. Using a large open room such as a gymnasium or stage would enable students to measure out the space and use masking tape to indicate walls, doors, and alcove spaces. Allowing students to move within these spaces will help students understand the actual size and scope of these rooms. Theater students could use space for dramatic readings of poetry and prose from the Edo era. A good source is Donald Keene, *Anthology of Japanese Literature: from the earliest era to the mid-nineteenth century* (Grove Press: 1994). Another possibility is *A Haiku Menagerie: Living Creatures in Poems and Prints by Stephen Addiss with Fumiko and Akira Yamamoto* (available in used copies) (Weatherhill: 2006).

3. To better understand the process of papermaking, students should be shown the following brief video clip featuring a couple making *washi* (hand-made paper, 和紙, pronounced: “WAH-she”) used to restore folding screens – <https://vimeo.com/295684590>. The video also introduces students to **Oka Iwatarō** (pronounced: “OH-kah | ee-WAH-TAH-row”), the master folding screen restorer in **Kyoto** (京都, pronounced: “KYOH-toe”). Although the clip is in Japanese, the lengthy and demanding process of making paper is evident. A lengthier clip can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1nWz-amHfs>, created by the **Sekishu-Banshi** (Craftsmen Association, pronounced: “say-KEY-SHOE-BAN-she”). Another resource with images and brief written explanation is available via <http://monme.net/en/process>.

In a studio-based setting, students can be introduced to *kōzo* (mulberry tree bark). Japanese *kōzo* can be expensive, however, *kōzo* from Thailand is less expensive and easily available. *Kōzo* can be prepared in a stainless steel or aluminum pot with soda ash (calcium carbonate); cover the *kōzo* with water and add ½ cup soda ash for each pound of *kōzo*. Bring to a boil, and then simmer for two hours.



Photo courtesy of Kachina Leigh

Once the *kōzo* has cooled enough to handle, students should be given small pieces to fold and compress to remove excess water, carefully opening the pieces and stretching them. The fibers can be stretched over a glass and once they dry completely, the *kōzo* will hold the form (top right). *Kōzo* can also be pulled into strips and used in a variety of ways. It can be wound about itself to create beads, sculptural forms, or stretched on a frame to create words or recognizable symbols. Contemporary fiber artist Jo Stealey's works *Kozo* and *Wait/Weight* are stunning examples of how strong and flexible *kōzo* can be (<http://www.jostealey.com/sculpture/>). Working with *kōzo* in this way should help students appreciate the process of making thin sheets of paper from this sinewy fiber.

4. Art students as well as students in World Literature or history classes that focus on Japan would benefit greatly from reading excerpts from writer **Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's** (谷崎 潤一郎, 1886-1965 CE, pronounced: "juhn-ECHEE-row | tah-KNEE-zahkey") slim text, *In Praise of Shadows* (Leete's Island Books translation: 1977). Tanizaki discusses the aesthetics of Japan in contrast to how he sees the aesthetics of the West. The way in which light interacts with objects is of tremendous importance to the appreciation of Japanese architecture, works of art, and utilitarian pieces, according to Tanizaki. Using their cell phone, tablet or computer, students will take a series of photographs of a three-dimensional object from a variety of vantage points, using different filters that change the lighting. These photographs can be projected and shared, enabling students to see how light and shadow impact the viewer's understanding and appreciation of the object. Depending upon the time available and the class with which the instructor is working, art students who are tasked with creating a screen can use this as their object for a series of studies with light; the instructor could also select objects for use. Items that are old, worn, tarnished would be best. Tanizaki writes about the beauty of objects that show repeated use, indicating their value to the owner and speak to the passage of time, versus objects that are shiny and new, favored in the West.
5. Both biology and history teachers could address how Japan's relative isolation during the Edo Period delayed the advent of industrialization. Many things that were being made by machine elsewhere - such as paper - were still being made by hand in Japan in the mid-19th century. As such, techniques and knowledge regarding how to make things by hand is still evident in contemporary Japanese culture. That said, there is a growing lack of interest in making some art forms with today's younger generations. Equally detrimental to the creation of objects made by hand is global warming and other environmental conditions that threaten the availability of the materials used in a variety of forms of art. It is interesting to note that during the Edo period, there was no word for trash per se, as materials were reused and recycled. For example, a kimono that showed wear would be taken apart and restitched into a *futon* (布団, pronounced: "fuu-TOHN") cover or other domestic textile product. As the fabric became more worn, it could be resewn into cushions, and finally, it would become a rag for washing, finally becoming fertilizer, enriching the soil. A wonderful resource for information about Japan prior to industrialization is Susan B. Hanley's readable text, *Everyday Things in Premodern Japan* (University of California Press: 1999). By exploring the material culture of the

Japanese - food, transportation, housing, sanitation - students can learn a great deal about how ordinary people can better utilize and conserve available resources.

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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