

National Art Education Association

Instructional Resources: The Floating World Revisited: 18th Century Japanese Art

Author(s): Amy Boyce Osaki

Source: *Art Education*, Vol. 49, No. 3, Metaphor and Meaning (May, 1996), pp. 25-28+33-36

Published by: [National Art Education Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3193589>

Accessed: 13/02/2011 12:51

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=naea>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



National Art Education Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Art Education*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE FLOATING WORLD REVISITED:

18TH CENTURY JAPANESE ART



Chobunsai Eishi (1756-1829), *The Courtesans Hanaogi and Kasugano of the Gomeiro with Their Attendant Kumegawa*, c. 1795. Woodblock print, double *oban*, 37.5 cm x 50.7 cm.
Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon. Mary Andrews Ladd Collection, 1932.264.

THE FLOATING WORLD REVISITED:

18TH CENTURY JAPANESE ART

BY AMY BOYCE OSAKI

This instructional resource includes background information and discussion questions to assist you and your students in understanding the people, time and place shown in Japanese woodblock prints. In addition, these four prints include poems as well as images, providing a unique opportunity to see how artists and writers work together. The activities suggest ways to link visual art with literary art and teach across two disciplines. Additional information is provided in a glossary and bibliography.

The students will be able to:

- Identify several characteristics of late 18th century ukiyo-e art.
- Name the types of people who were involved in the Floating World.
- Describe the general context in which this art was created.
- Apply this knowledge to projects that incorporate text and image.

INTRODUCTION:

In late 18th century Japan, Japanese society was firmly hierarchical, with the shogun on top, then the lords (daimyo) and soldiers (samurai), and at the bottom the merchants. Though unable to officially change their social status, the wealthy merchants of Edo (Tokyo) gained

prominence through their role in the arts and socially interacted with the samurai. With their patronage, painting, printmaking, literature, music, theater, and the pleasure quarters flourished. The distinctively urban way of life which evolved, resembling in many ways the glitter of Hollywood, was known as the “Floating World.” It symbolized a certain defiant creativity at odds with the sober Confucian morality espoused by the authoritarian shoguns. A multitude of images from this time survive, many of which were created by various artists and writers collaborating at elaborate parties organized by samurai and merchants and involving many classes of society. These images are called ukiyo-e, literally pictures of the Floating World.

These images were the focus of an exhibition “The Floating World Revisited.” Through a careful examination of prints, scrolls, screens, paintings, and books by artists such as Hokusai, Utamaro, and Eishi we gain greater understanding of the time, place, and society in which the art was created. Woven throughout these images are poems, references to Japan’s classical past, and signs of the social ties linking artists, writers, actors, and courtesans of the period. Examples of lacquer writing boxes, writing implements, and tobacco boxes similar to those depicted in ukiyo-e further illustrate the sumptuous society of the Floating World.

The Courtesans Hanaogi and Kasugano of the Gomeiro with Their Attendant Kumegawa

CHOBUNSAI EISHI (1756-1829)

c. 1795. Woodblock print, double *oban*, 37.5 cm x 50.7 cm. Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon.
Mary Andrews Ladd Collection, 1932.264.

The artist depicts three women inside a courtesan’s apartment: one courtesan in the foreground seated on three large cushions arranging her hair pins, another courtesan on the left holding the mirror, and an attendant looking up from her reading. The women are dressed in many layers of kimono with intricate designs. The screen behind them separates them from the rest of the sparsely furnished room. Their elaborate butterfly coiffures were very fashionable.

Emphasis on patterns and line reinforces the overall flatness

of the composition; the women appear as elongated flat shapes rather than three-dimensional masses. The figures are arranged on strong diagonals. The head of the courtesan on the left indicates the point of a triangle that continues diagonally down her robes, past her colleague’s head and to the corner of the print. A second diagonal connects the attendant’s face back to the courtesans by following her gaze toward the woman looking into the mirror and the pile of fabric in the lower left-hand corner.

A Competition Among the New Beauties of the Yoshiwara, Mirrored in Their Writing

KITAO MASANOBU (1761-1816)

Spring 1784. Folding album, 37 cm x 25 cm. Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon. Mary Andrews Ladd Collection, 1966.84.

This image is two pages of a fourteen-page book illustrated by Kitao Masanobu (born Iwase Jintaro Denzo). He was raised in a merchant-class family, but his tremendous success as both an artist and a writer gave him the freedom to associate with samurai and merchants, actors and courtesans. Masanobu's freedom was curtailed by a change in government, and after being fined and imprisoned he opened a tobacco shop and his art became more limited and restrained.

The album contains a preface by Ota Nampo, the prominent samurai writer who helped launch Masanobu's career. Masanobu knew the courtesans depicted here and eventually married a courtesan. Each pair of pages shows two famous courtesans with poems in their own handwriting inscribed above them.

In this view, the standing courtesan on the left is in the process of writing a poem on a long thin piece of paper (*tanzaku*) while her kneeling attendant holds the inkstone. Deep in thought with her brush in hand, she contemplates the poem (haiku) scrawled above her head which reads:

"Though the raindrops gather, the scent of the plum lingers on." Seated next to her, another courtesan is reading and her poem appears on the right in restrained handwriting. This poem compares falling cherry blossoms to fluttering butterflies. The scene indicates the beginning of the new year when poems written on long slips of paper were hung on a branch with many other poems as part of the New Year's celebration. The blooming plum in the right foreground is a harbinger of spring.

The woman seated on the far right is a geisha with her musical instrument on the floor next to her, perhaps preparing to play. Geisha, literally "accomplished person," was an entertainer who danced, played music, sang and conversed with guests in the pleasure quarters. Standing in the doorway is an attendant holding a tea pot. Compositionally, the figures are arranged in a triangle with the standing courtesan forming the point of the triangle and the beginning of a diagonal line that connects her to the seated geisha.

A Competition Among the New Beauties of the Yoshiwara, Mirrored in Their Writing

KITAO MASANOBU (1761-1816)

Spring 1784. Folding album, 37 cm x 25 cm. Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon.
Mary Andrews Ladd Collection, 1966.84. (detail)

This print is an elegant example of *woodblock printing* and illustrates why this period is referred to as the Golden Age of ukiyo-e. Carved in wood, the individual strands of hair and strokes of calligraphy are so fluid they realistically imply brush strokes. The artist designed the image; craftsmen carved the blocks; a printer actually printed the image; and the process was coordinated by a publisher who then distributed the completed print.

With her long hair, the writing courtesan would remind

18th century Japanese viewers of Lady Murasaki who wrote the *The Tale of Genji* seven centuries earlier. The courtesan's outer kimono has, at the bottom, two scenes from the *The Tale of Genji* to reinforce this reference to the past. In one scene a visitor is calling on a lady; in the other is a boating scene. Draped down the front of the courtesan's kimono is her sash, or obi, used to tie the kimono. In contrast to other women, a courtesan always tied her obi in the front.

Women Mimicking the Rokkasen

KITAGAWA UTAMARO (1753-1806)

c. 1792. Woodblock print, *oban* diptych, 39.5 cm x 24.5 cm (right panel), 38 cm x 25.1 cm (left panel). Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon. Mary Andrews Ladd Collection, 1932.295.

The women arranged here are acting out a parody of six famous Japanese poets often called the Immortals of Poetry (*rokkasen*). This charade-like activity formed the basis for many social gatherings. The challenge was to identify each of the

classical poets through the use of contemporary props. The creativity of the participants is indicated by the "bald heads" represented by handkerchiefs draped over their heads, the "fan" actually made up of love letters, and a "courtly hat" symbolized by



Kiyagawa Utamaro (1753-1806), *Women Mimicking the Rokkassen*, c. 1792. Woodblock print, *aban* diptych, 39.5 cm x 24.5 cm (right panel) and 38 cm x 25.1 cm (left panel). Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon. Mary Andrews Ladd Collection, 1932.295.



Kitao Masanobu (1761-1816), *A Competition Among the New Beauties of the Yoshiwara, Mirrored in Their Writing*, Spring 1784. Folding album, 37 cm x 25 cm. Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon. Mary Andrews Ladd Collection, 1966.84.

an open book. The poems above the women's heads are parodies of poems written by the immortal poets. The first poem on the right is a parody by poet Yashoku Katamura of the following poem attributed to the 9th century classical poet Otomo no Kuronushi:

*Kagamiyama
iza tachiyorite
mite yukamu
toshi henuru mi wa
oiyashinuru to*

which translates as: "If I were to go to Mirror Mountain, would I

see in my reflection there how much I have aged?" The other classical poets are Ariwa no Narihira (bow and quiver of arrows), Ono no Komachi (with the fan), Bunya no Yasuhide (hat), Sojo Henjo and Kisen Hoshi (priests with shaved heads).

This print documents the collaboration of women, poets, the artist, and the publisher. The rectangular box at the beginning of each poem contains the name of the woman below, and underneath the box is the name of the poet. The artist's signature and the publisher's seal (a flower and three mountains) appear at the right and left edges of the print. The poems are read from right to left, top to bottom, in Japanese style.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The following questions apply to each of the four images. Select one of the images and explore it in depth, looking carefully and drawing answers from student observations.

Begin with a careful exploration of the image. How many people are in this work? Describe the lines you find in the image (thick/thin, long/short, straight/curved/jagged, implied/actual). Point out the different patterns of the fabric; how many different ones can you find? Identify the shapes found in the work (circles, triangles, squares, rectangles; geometric or organic).

Describe how your eye moves from one area of the work to another. Identify what the artist has done to lead your eye (use of shapes, lines, repetition, line of sight between figures). Does your eye continually move around the work or do you find you focus on one area more than any other?

Identify the technique used to make this work (woodblock printing). If a different block was needed for each color used, how many blocks were needed to make this print? Imagine how this work might appear differently if it were a painting, or if the artist had taken a photograph of the scene.

Locate the writing in this work. Does all of the writing appear to have been done by the same person with the same handwriting? Name all of the areas of this print that resemble brushed or painted lines.

Imagine yourself in this scene. What are you doing? Saying? What are you holding? Wearing? What does it feel like? How would the scene be different if the figures were in western clothes in a contemporary room?

2. Now look at all four images simultaneously, select one question, and compare the responses from different prints. These questions are suggested:

- Describe how your eye moves from one area of the work to another.
- Locate the writing in each work.
- Imagine yourself in this scene.

Describe similarities and differences between the prints.

3. Share the background information on the artist, subject, time period, and woodblock printing with the students. Does this change their observations about the prints? In what areas? (Be specific.)

Discuss the small size of these images and the fact that there

were multiple copies made and then owned by many people.

What are some images that we trade or exchange today?

(Baseball cards, photographs, business cards). List ways that we collect images of beautiful or famous people (magazines, sports cards, record albums). List other places where text and images are combined to send a message (T.V. ads, billboards).

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES FOR GRADES 6-12

Note: These activities may be altered to match your classroom, students, and curriculum.

1. Activities Related to Literature

a. The Masanobu print includes several direct references to Lady Murasaki's *The Tale of Genji*. Focus on the designs on the standing courtesan's kimono. These relate to a scene from *Genji* when a courtly man is calling on a lady and to a boating scene.

Read passages from *The Tale of Genji* aloud to the group or assign passages or the entire book to your class. Class discussion could focus on the plot, images that are similar or different from the four images provided in this instructional resource, and descriptions of specific details of daily life in Heian Period Japan.

The Tale of Genji was written 700 years before Masanobu made this print. Masanobu's familiarity with classical Japanese literature was typical in 18th century Japan. A popular card game included images of famous writers and a line from one of their famous works. The players had to match the writer's card with one that includes a second line from that writer. What writer or writers are we that familiar with? Select a historical writer, perhaps Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, or Twain, and incorporate a reference to his or her work in a piece created by the student. You might assign a literary reference or pun (For instance a line of poetry such as "to see or not to see" makes a nod in Shakespeare's direction). Refer to Utamaro's print and the puns of classical Japanese poets. Students could also make a visual reference by incorporating an image from a scene in an artwork they create (perhaps a scene from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in a narrative about a vacation or family trip they took). The reference could also be incorporated into a theatrical piece, perhaps drawing on charades. Do not have the student's write the name of the piece of literature or author they are referring to on their artwork or in the title of their piece.

To test the effectiveness of the references, exhibit all student

work and then distribute a list of the literature and authors referred to. As a class, attempt to match the student art work with the appropriate piece of literature. Complete the assignment by having each student read the passage from a "classical" piece of literature to which they referred. The entire class should discuss the success of the references and skills or techniques that seem to be the most or least utilized. The class could then brainstorm additional areas they wish to explore.

b. Review the structure and format of haiku (seventeen syllable poem, usually with five syllables in the first line, seven syllables in the second, and five syllables in the last line). Haiku usually describes something observed in nature.

Brainstorm descriptive words either in the classroom or on a field trip. If in the classroom, images from art books or photographs of nature can be particularly effective at generating good words. On a field trip, select an environment that is particularly evocative (a park, museum, monument). Have the students focus on one object or area and list as many adjectives, adverbs, verbs, and nouns as they can that capture the essence of the object.

Return to the classroom and compose poems. Encourage them to experiment with several good ideas. Share the works in progress out loud, listening to how the words sound. Remind the students that these are still draft poems. Then have the students select the one or two they are most pleased with and write them on narrow slips of paper like *tanzaku*. Hang the completed poem slips on a dried branch in a corner of your classroom, or on a bulletin board. Try to capture the fluttering effect of *tanzaku* suspended on branches outside during the Japanese New Year's.¹

2. Activities Related to Art

a. Summarize the symbols repeated throughout these works of art, listing what each symbol means. (Obi tied in front = courtesan, mountain and flower = publisher's mark, long flowing hair = Lady Murasaki and other classical women, book on head = hat of a particular writer). As a class, list symbols that we see every day (octagonal stop sign, one-way arrow, handicap accessible symbol, children walking [school nearby]). Then, list words that symbolize your classroom. Students may also list words or ideas that they feel express themselves. Have each student design a seal, symbol, or crest drawing on characteristics of themselves or the classroom. They should think about what color, shape, and possibly word they want to emphasize and then explain why they made that choice. The final symbols may be done on stickers, banners, T-shirts, hats, notebooks, folders, portfolios or any other surface and material available.

b. Develop a project that incorporates image with text. Determine what media you wish the students to work with, then have them select an idea to pursue. Perhaps they will refer to a particular event, place, or person. Begin either by sketching images or writing words. A brainstorming exercise would be particularly effective. Once they have a portfolio of both images and words, they should begin to fuse them. Encourage manipulation of letters into objects, and objects into letters. Discuss the origin of letters as symbols, and introduce basic calligraphic figures such as mountain. Review the calligraphic words found in the four images of this instructional resource.

Have each student share two or three draft concepts with the entire class. After discussion, let each student select one piece to develop into a final work.

GLOSSARY

courtesan—term usually employed in English when referring to higher-ranking prostitutes of the Edo Period.
daimyo—feudal lords, given estates in provinces (domains) by the "shogun."
geisha—literally, "accomplished person;" entertainers who dance, play music, sing and converse with guests.
haiku—a term invented late in the nineteenth century to designate a poem which is complete in seventeen syllables and is not part of a sequence.
oban—standard size print, approximately 37.5 cm x 25.5 cm.
obi—long sashes of various widths wound around the waist or hips to fasten garments securely in place.
rokkasen—the six immortals of poetry.
shogun—term for the military dictator of Japan from 1185 to 1868.
tanzaku—narrow strip of tinted or decorated paper used for inscribing poetry.
woodblock printing—technique in which all white areas were carved away, while the colored areas remained raised and received the ink. Multiple blocks were used to accommodate the intricate design and the many separate colors of ink used.

REFERENCES

- Bates, M. (1993, July). "Imitating the greats: Art as the catalyst in student poetry." *Art Education*, 46(4), 41-45.
 Brower, R. H. and Miner, E. (1961). *Japanese court poetry*. Stanford JCA: Stanford University Press.
 Clark, T. T. (1992). *Ukiyo-e paintings in the British Museum*. London: British Museum Press.
 Jenkins, D. (1993). *The Floating World revisited*. Portland, OR: Portland Art Museum.
 Keene, D. (1976). *World within walls, Japanese literature of the pre-modern era, 1600-1867*. New York: Grove Press.
 Lane, R. (1978). *Images of the Floating World: the Japanese print*. New York: Putnam.
 Murasaki, S. (1960). *The Tale of Genji*. Arthur Waley, Trans. New York: The Modern Library.
 Seigle, C. S. (1993). *The Yoshiwara, The glittering world of the Japanese courtesan*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.

NOTE

- ¹ Marilyn Bates's article, "Imitating the Greats: Art as the Catalyst in Student Poetry" in the July 1993 issue of *Art Education* is an excellent resource for creative writing based on experiencing art objects.

AUTHOR NOTE

Special thanks to Donald Jenkins, Curator of Asian Art and Judy Schultz, Associate Curator of Education at the Portland Art Museum, and Jeffrey York, Director of Education, Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama for assistance in preparing this article.

Amy Boyce Osaki is former Curator of Education, Portland Art Museum, Portland Oregon. Interested readers may contact the Education Department, Portland Art Museum, (503) 226-2811, x 225, to order slides or to receive more information on the objects.



Kitao Masanobu (1761-1816), *A Competition Among the New Beauties of the Yoshiwara, Mirrored in Their Writing, Spring of 1784*, Folding album, 37 cm x 25 cm.
 Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon. Mary Andrews Ladd Collection, 1966.84 (detail).