



## Teaching Primary Children about Japan through Art

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Traditionally, early childhood educators have been expected to concentrate social studies upon such topics as "Myself," "My Family," and "My Community." The primary grades comprise a formative period in which children's minds are open and unbiased--when they begin to view the world as interesting and compelling. However, children with no exposure to lives dissimilar to their own are at risk for looking at cultures in the world as different, as other, as not right. Without a wide world view, today's children will not be able to fulfill the responsibilities of their generation--to save animals, to protect the environment, to conserve resources, and to promote world peace. For these reasons, primary teachers should consider accepting the challenge of moving their teaching beyond the limited scope traditionally prescribed.

There are many reasons for teaching about Japan. Many U.S. students have a Japanese heritage; Japan is the United States' second largest trading partner; and some healing still needs to occur between the U.S. and Japan after the damage and pain of World War II. The U.S. and Japan share the Pacific, its waters and fisheries. Mutual cultural understanding and good communication skills are vital for dealing with these common resources.

Many primary teachers excel at teaching about Japan through concrete means such as food, language, holidays and artifacts. Visual art should be added to this list. Two and three dimensional representations are powerful ways in which to integrate Japanese studies into curricular areas and into critical thinking skills.

### Understanding Japanese Art

Some familiarity with Japanese aesthetics will enhance any exploration of Japanese art. *Wabi*, *sabi*, and *suki* are important, yet illusive, concepts that explain the essence of Japanese beauty. *Wabi* defines that which is simple and quiet and incorporates rustic beauty, such as patterns found in straw, bamboo, clay or stone. It refers to both that which is made by nature and that which is made by man. *Sabi* refers to the patina of age, the concept that changes due to use may make an object more beautiful and valuable. This incorporates an appreciation of the cycles of life and careful, artful mending of that which is damaged. *Suki* means subtle elegance, referring to the beauty found as a result of accidental creation or that found in unconventional forms.

### Visual Literacy

In this age of instant response to increasingly fast moving images, some aspects of our visual thinking are in danger of being lost. One is the ability to focus on an image, looking carefully at it in order to recall and reproduce it later. Another is the ability to delve into an image in order to understand its deeper implications.

A third is the ability to take time to look. Learning to take this time can provide a place of serenity and quiet in the midst of a fast, harried world.

### Deep Looking

Exploring a piece of art involves asking a series of questions. To begin, make sure the children know the origin of the piece and can locate Japan on a map. Then ask, "What is the artist showing you in this piece of art from Japan?" or "What does this piece of art show you about life in Japan?" As each child provides an answer, paraphrase it for the whole group and ask either, "Do the rest of you agree with what \_\_\_ said?" or "What else can you tell us about this picture?" "What color palette is the artist using?" "What shapes do you see?" "Where?" "Do you see places where some shapes are repeated?" "Where are these?" "Why do you think the artist repeated the shapes?" "Tell me about the lines you see." Ask the children to describe specific features of the image. Ask them how these features are the same or different from what they know of their own area. Ask the children to imagine that they could walk into the work of art. "Where would you walk into this picture?" "Where would you go once you were in the picture and what would you do there?" The children can draw their answers to the last question and share these later with the group.

Not all of the above questions need to be explored at once. If the class were studying color or shape, for example, a few images could be shown and only the relevant questions asked. The class might explore the images looking at a theme topic, for example, the weather, homes, or seasons. Remember that repeated viewings of the images are important. Working with two visual images is a favorite activity for primary age children as they discover similarities and differences. The study of families, homes or food is an excellent place to juxtapose an image of Japan with an image from the children's lives. In telling how the Japanese image is different from and similar to theirs, the children come to own what they see. Although they have described how the Japanese image is different, it is now a part of them, no longer foreign. To facilitate understanding, ask questions such as, "What can you tell me about the \_\_\_?" This is also a good place to juxtapose traditional and contemporary images of Japan. A further extension of this would be to compare a similar image from our modern culture and from our past with those from Japan's past and present. Architectural forms such as homes are useful for exploring in this fashion.

Any collection of objects from Japan can be classified as art pieces. These might be dishes or cups, objects of traditional clothing, containers, decorative papers, or origami. These can be used for visual thinking exercises as well. Ask the children to group the items as to use or kind. Ask "What makes you say that?" after each response, then "Does anyone else have a different idea?" Students could also group these items by color or

shape. The same techniques could be used with collections of pictures of art pieces. Give small groups of children each a different collection and ask them to divide it into categories. Ask them to explain their choices to the larger group. Alternatively, copies of a single collection could be given to each group so that all students are exploring the same collection of images.

### **Infusing Japanese Art into Existing Curricula**

It is possible to initiate a unit on "Japan through Art" by addressing a global issue connected to art, such as recycling and reusing paper. Tell students that in Japan, paper is treasured and that historically, Japanese people have found many ways to recycle and reuse their special papers. A study of an array of Japanese papers can be followed by a technology lesson where the children make paper. This can include a study of recycling if the children use paper which would otherwise be thrown away. A fascinating connection with Japanese history can be made back to the Heian Period (794-1191) by having the children recycle cards or letters from people they love into new paper. This was done by aristocrats of that period. They then inscribed sutras (prayers) for the dead on the paper. An historical recycling connection can be made by teaching the Japanese art form of *yaburitsugi*. Paper was once so precious that even tiny scraps were saved. In this case raggedly torn pieces of paper too beautiful to be thrown away can be collaged together on a backing sheet to make a piece of art paper. Imagine using this technique with bits and pieces of old Christmas, valentine, and birthday cards, and wrapping paper.

An elementary school in Japan once displayed a large outline of a Japanese character which had been filled with small pieces of unusual papers. The same could be done in any school. Show students the outline of a Japanese character (or an outline of Mt. Fuji, the Great Wave, a pagoda, temple, or the like) and ask them how long they think it will take to fill it with interesting papers which would otherwise be thrown away. Ask them how many beautiful examples of paper they think they can find and save to use in Japanese art projects which would otherwise be garbage? This tells the students to begin looking at paper with a new eye: they begin to practice *sabi*. Brainstorm where they might find their paper. In the classroom I have the children pay special attention to saving construction paper and sorting it by color. These scraps can be used for papermaking.

Through extension activities, these lessons can be integrated into other curriculum areas. A math connection can be made by making a graph of shapes or patterns from Japanese art and having the children put their name in the column for their favorite. Another math activity can use pictures from a book of reproducible Japanese designs. Have children cut and paste elements to make a pattern. Primary students love to make clothes from whatever culture they are studying. When studying Japan, use grocery bags to make vests, the type of which is sometimes worn over *yukata* (lightweight summer kimono). Have the children choose their favorite design elements to create patterns for their vests.

After a visual investigation of Japanese eating utensils and food (and perhaps cuisine sampling), children can use the above collage technique to cover a box and its separate lid to make a beautiful Japanese lunch box called an *obento bako*. In this case the children would cover any writing on their box with dark

colored papers applied with watered-down glue and a brush. When the first layer is dry it can be covered with layers of transparent paper such as tissue paper which the children have saved from packages or calligraphic writing papers which you can obtain from the National Clearinghouse for U.S.-Japan Studies. The trick here is to teach the children to brush their papers flat and to cover the top layer with glue or layers of glue to obtain a sheen.

The ideas in this *Japan Digest* are offered to spur thinking toward practical applications for the study of Japan using art, visual thinking, and the global issue of recycling. Additional lessons on teaching Japanese art are available at <http://www.indiana.edu/~japan>.

### **Resources for Teachers:**

- Daniel Smith, Inc. Art supply company offering Japanese art papers, (Tel: 800-426-6740). <http://www.danielsmith.com/>
- Horn, Diane Victoria. *Japanese Kimono Design*. Stemmer House: Owings Mills, Maryland, 1991. ISBN 0880450541. <http://www.stemmer.com>. Background information and reproducible kimono designs.
- Hornung, Clarence, photographer. *Traditional Japanese Crest Designs*. Dover Publications, Inc.: New York, 1986. ISBN 0486252434.
- Loudon, Sarah M. *Spring Blossoms, Autumn Moon: Japanese Art for the Classroom*. Seattle Art Museum, Education Department, P. O. Box 22000, Seattle, WA 98122 (\$35.00) <http://www.seattleartmuseum.org/teach/trc/trc.asp> Japanese art slides and accompanying lessons.
- National Clearinghouse for U. S.-Japan Studies, Indiana University, Memorial West #211, Bloomington, IN 47405-7005; (800) 441-3272. <http://www.indiana.edu/~japan>. The Clearinghouse can supply calligraphy samples for classroom use.
- Sun, Ming-ju. *Japanese Nature Print Designs*. Stemmer House: Owings Mills, Maryland, 1982. ISBN 0880450134. <http://www.stemmer.com>. Background information and images reproducible for classroom use.
- Sibbett, Ed Jr. *Japanese Prints Coloring Book*. Dover Publications, Inc.: New York, 1982. ISBN 048624279X.
- Ukiyo-e: A Kodansha Postcard Book*. Kodansha International, Ltd.: New York, 1992. Contains 23 important Japanese prints (one image is not suitable due to content) and background information. ISBN 4770016786.

### **Web Sites:**

<http://www.meitokai.com> Site of a class taught by calligraphy master Yoshi Fujii. The fine calligraphy on the site may be downloaded and made into transparencies for study purposes.

<http://www.bahnhof.se/~secutor/ukiyo-e> This is a very good source for ukiyo-e images.

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