

East Asia Study Unit

Module Four: Art

LESSON ONE: EARLY MODERN JAPANESE WOODBLOCK PRINTS

GRADE: 9-12

TIME: One class period.

GOALS: At the end of this lesson, students will:

1. Understand how ukiyo-e (Japanese woodblock prints) were made.
2. Explain what led to the popularity of ukiyo-e in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries.
3. Be able to recognize developments in ukiyo-e over time, such as the addition of colors and perspective.
4. Appreciate that ukiyo-e developed through interactions with other forms of art around the world.

MATERIALS/PREP:

1. Powerpoint slide show attached to this lesson, with ukiyo-e images.
2. Computer, projector, and screen for showing the images.

INTRODUCTION:

One of the most notable things about Japan's early modern period (the Edo period, 1603 – 1868) was the rise of an urban commoner class. The shogun's capital city (Edo, later renamed Tokyo) reached a population of approximately one million by 1700, making it one of the largest cities in the world. Other cities such as Osaka, Kyoto, and Nagasaki also became important urban centers. Many of their residents were commoners who were literate and had money to spend but who were banned from taking part in politics or governance (which was open only to the samurai).

These commoners provided a ready market for new developments in entertainment and popular culture. The publishing industry flourished, producing books on everything from business guides to poetry and from ghost stories to travelogues. People traveled around the country to visit famous temples, shrines, and sites of natural beauty (travel outside of Japan was strictly forbidden). Kabuki theatre (with live actors) and bunraku theatre (with puppets) were colorful, full of action, and immensely popular. Perhaps the most enduring form of early modern Japanese popular culture, however, was the woodblock print or ukiyo-e (pronounced oo-kee-yoh-eh). Ukiyo-e prints were extremely popular both in Japan and, starting in the nineteenth century, abroad as well.

In this lesson, we'll use ukiyo-e prints to understand a bit more about Japan's urban class in the early modern period as well as discover how ukiyo-e are put together and see how they influenced European artists such as van Gogh and Monet. Although not listed in the activities below, some questions that you can always ask of any of the prints include: what is distinctive about the style of this print (vs. other prints, or vs. other kinds of art)? What grabs your attention? How does the artist help focus your attention on a particular part of the picture? Are the lines thick, thin, or a combination? Is there any sense of depth, or is the picture flat?

ACTIVITIES:

1. To begin discussion: Ask students what kinds of things they like to do for fun. Hopefully some of the answers will include watch sports, read, go places, go to the movies, and look at stuff on the internet. If you don't trust the students to give these kinds of answers, then you might simply pose the question rhetorically and put your own list on the board. Or you can prepare answers beforehand and make it into a "Family Feud"-type game show, where you reveal the top five answers of a (hypothetical) survey of high school kids (at your school, in the state, anything will work since it isn't a real survey anyway).
2. Entertainment before Movies: After briefly discussing the five things, move the discussion to the topic at hand by noting that people in early modern Japan enjoyed very similar activities. But in a pre-electronic age, those activities took different forms. Sumo wrestling was popular, but you had to go to watch it in person. Reading was very popular, and Japan developed a huge publishing industry that produced all kinds of books: poetry, novels, adventure stories, romance, business guides, travel guides, and more. People traveled to visit famous places such as sites known for their natural beauty or religious temples and shrines. There were no movies, but people could go to the theatre to see performances by live actors in kabuki or by elaborate puppets in bunraku. And, although they had no internet, people enjoyed pictures in the form of woodblock prints.
3. Famous Images: You may have seen Japanese woodblock prints before. [Show images one and two]: how many of you have seen one or both of these pictures before? They are both from 19th-century Japan: the first is Red Fuji and the other is the Great Wave off Kanagawa, both by the artist Hokusai. [Show image three] Today you can see these in art books, on t-shirts, even as an iPod skin, and they were just as popular at the time that they were first created.
4. Ukiyo-e: [Show image four] In Japanese, these images are known as ukiyo-e, which means pictures of the floating world. The floating world was a Japanese term for the entertainment and pleasure quarters and, although many of the most famous ukiyo-e were landscape images like the two I just showed you, others (like this image of a courtesan) featured famous wrestlers, actors, female entertainers, beautiful women, and other people associated with entertainment – hence the name, "pictures of the floating world."
5. Making ukiyo-e: [Show images five and six] There were actually a number of steps involved in making an ukiyo-e print. First, an artist painted a picture on paper. If the image included text, then a separate calligrapher would write it out. The image would be laid on a block of wood and professional carvers would carve out a series of blocks, one for each color. A printer would apply ink and print the images, each block adding a new color to the finished picture. Finally, a publisher underwrote the cost of production and handled distribution.
6. [OPTIONAL: Use the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts web page or other website that shows the actual steps involved in making a woodblock print, including the laying of each color. The Virginia page can be found at <http://www.vmfa.state.va.us/ukiyoe/woodblock.html>
7. [OPTIONAL: you could bring in one set of blocks to show or have students try out, or you could even have students make their own prints, carving in potatoes,

for example. If they are going to make two-color prints, then each student will need two potato halves (one for each color)).

8. The Popularity of Woodblock Prints: [Show image seven] Why do you suppose that woodblock prints were so popular? One reason was that the mass produced pictures were affordable for ordinary people. This was a big change from earlier times, when usually only the wealthy could afford to buy or commission works of art. With woodblock prints, even though several people were involved in making them, thousands of copies could be made and sold from one set of blocks, keeping the cost per print quite low. A second reason was that woodblock prints could be made quite quickly – it might only take a few days from start to finish, meaning that woodblock prints were great for publicizing the newest sumo champion, the hottest kabuki actor, or even breaking news stories. This also was a change from earlier times, when an artist commissioned to paint something might need months to complete a job. A third factor was Japan's urbanization. Now that a lot of people were living in cities, there was a concentrated market where publishers could sell their prints. This differed from earlier times, when more people lived in the countryside and a publisher would have had to travel to many small communities to sell prints. Finally, the topics of ukiyo-e prints were selected to appeal to common people – topics like wrestlers, actors, beautiful women, pictures of famous places, and more.
9. The Four-Class System: [Show image eight] Woodblock prints depicted many things, from performers to athletes, landscapes to ghost stories. One topic that you did not find in woodblock prints, however, was politics. During these centuries samurai ruled Japan and implemented a rigid Confucian class system. Most people fell into one of four categories: 1) samurai, who were the bureaucrats and officials, 2) peasants, who produced agricultural goods and lived in the countryside, 3) artisans, who made things or provided services in the cities, or 4) merchants. Only samurai could take part in politics and governance. The urban commoner class consisted of the artisans and merchants, who were forbidden from participating in – or even commenting on – national politics. The government had censors to make sure that books, plays, and woodblock prints avoided topics that were not approved.
10. Evolution of Woodblock Prints: Japan's early modern period lasted over 250 years, and as you might imagine, woodblock prints changed a lot over that time. Let's look at a few examples. [Image nine] The earliest woodblock prints were monochrome, such as this erotic illustration from the late 17th century by Hishikawa Moronobu. If color was added, then it was hand painted. Multiple colors were not used until the mid-18th century, when Suzuki Harunobu's prints became extremely popular. He painted slender, frail young women and produced polychromatic prints like the ones shown here [Image ten]. Kitagawa Utamaro was also widely admired for his portraits of women [Image eleven]; as you can see in these two prints, his images showed fuller, more mature women than Harunobu. The artist Sharaku, another late 18th-century figure, had tremendous success portraying kabuki actors with exaggerated features and expressions [Image twelve]. Sumo wrestlers and illustrations to accompany poetry [Image thirteen] also became popular topics for woodblock artists in the eighteenth

century. Further developments in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries took ukiyo-e to new heights of sophistication, as seen in the work of Ando Hiroshige and Katsushika Hokusai. We saw two of Hokusai's images earlier – the red Mt. Fuji and the great wave, both part of a very famous series of prints titled "36 Views of Mt. Fuji." Hiroshige also produced some very famous series of prints, including these next few slides [images fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen] from a series called "The 53 Stations of the Tokaido."

The Tokaido was the major highway linking the shogun's capital of Edo with the old imperial capital of Kyoto. Notice the very fine detail in these prints. Also notice that the prints make a great effort to convey a sense of perspective and receding distance, elements that had been missing from early ukiyo-e. These were techniques that the Japanese artists in part picked up from Western painting. Image sixteen, for example, of the station at Mishima, uses shadows very effectively to convey a sense of objects farther away lost in the mist. In images seventeen and eighteen, pictures of famous places around the city of Edo (also by Hiroshige), we can see

how the artist uses objects extremely near to the viewer (the channel marker in the water and the left edge of the temple gate) to frame and provide perspective to the main objects of the pictures. Series of woodblock prints by famous artists such as these became collectors' items, and many copies were produced.

11. Popularity Outside of Japan: When Japan began to open to contact with Europe and America in the 19th century, Western artists got their first glimpse of Japanese woodblock prints and took to them from the start. As you can see in these last two images, van Gogh and others found inspiration in the work of Japanese ukiyo-e artists. Cultural influences went in both directions.