

Japanese Woodblocks and the Art of the Postcard
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Lesson Overview

Following the social studies unit on Japanese history, grade 7 students will create a woodblock print using their choice of historically or culturally relevant subjects. They will hand color the postcard sized prints, and mail their two best in an envelope to a student in Japan. In keeping with the Japanese custom of gift giving, one postcard will be a gift to the recipient, the other will be requested to be mailed back to the original artist with the Japanese cancellation and, hopefully, a message.

Historical Perspectives

In 1853, Matthew Perry of the United States, under the orders of President Millard Fillmore, aboard heavily armed, steam-powered warships known as the “black ships,” sailed into Tokyo Bay to negotiate a treaty that would open Japan for trade with the United States. One year later this treaty was signed and soon after Japan began trade with Great Britain, The Netherlands and Russia. This ultimately brought about the end of Japan’s isolation. The Meiji Era, beginning in 1868, marked a campaign of modernization that included embracing Western technology, culture, commerce and industry. Soon after, in 1873, the Japanese government introduced the postcard. At first, postcards were published solely by the government, but in 1900 the government relinquished that control, allowing people in all walks of life to create images that were specifically designed for that small format.

Artistic Perspectives

Japanese Woodblocks

Prior to the eighteenth century, woodblocks were primarily used for reproduction of text. In 1765, technology was developed to produce single sheet prints in multiple colors. Woodcuts have continued to be produced, however, they were originally produced in the Ukiyo-e style. This method had a division of labor where the design was created by the artist, carved by a craftsman and printed by a master printer.

Woodcuts increased in popularity in Japan during the 1890s. Early in the twentieth century, the entire process began to be performed by one person. The art of expressing, carving and printing by one individual is Sōsaku hanga.

Japanese Postcards

Influenced by modernization and European postcards, a group of Japanese artists that included Asai Chū, Wada Eisaku, Nakamura Fusetsu, Hashimoto Gahō and others, created images that were composed for the small, intimate postcard format. The subjects ranged from political and socioeconomic examples of material culture to landscapes and even include Art Nouveau and Art Deco influences from the West.

Instructional Objectives

Students will:

- draw from their knowledge of Japanese history (the end of isolationism and the era of modernization) to think of possible subjects for a “woodblock” style print
- learn about the importance that the Japanese postcard has played in the 20th century history of Japanese art
- design an image appropriate for the woodblock process, taking into consideration their personal drawing skills and their fine motor coordination
- carve their image into the block
- print the block
- add color to their image with watercolor
- mail two postcards in an envelope to a student in Japan, one serving as a gift, the other to be mailed back as a postcard
- perhaps develop a friendship with a Japanese student

Ohio Academic Content Standards, Fine Arts, Grade 7. Historical, Cultural and Social Contexts, Benchmark A-1,2; Benchmark B-3; Benchmark C-4; Benchmark D-5,6, Creative Expression and Communication, Benchmark B-3; Benchmark C-4; Benchmark D-5; Benchmark E-6; Analyzing and Responding, Benchmark A-1,2; Benchmark B-3; Benchmark C-4; Valuing the Arts, Benchmark A-1; Benchmark B-2,3

Supplies

- postcard visuals, posters, books, PowerPoint presentation
- list of possible subjects (Japanese history, landscape, culture, etc.)

- 4" X 6" mounted linoleum (used in place of actual woodblocks)
- drawing paper for sketching
- pencils
- medium and fine point permanent markers (Sharpies)
- linoleum cutting tools
- bracing boards for safety
- black oil base ink
- non toxic paint thinner
- Handiwipes for clean-up of blocks
- old magazines for spreading ink (can be discarded, easing the clean-up)
- brayers for applying ink
- barens or wooden spoons for burnishing prints
- 4" X 6" cardstock for printing postcards
- watercolors and watercolor brushes
- 6" X 9" manila envelopes for mailing of postcards
- Japanese school to collaborate with

Instructional Timeline

- Introduction and PowerPoint presentation – one 45 minute period
- Brainstorming of subject matter and sketching of ideas – two 45 minute periods
- Drawing of finalized idea on linoleum block – one 45 minute period
- Carving of image on block – two to three 45 minute periods

- Printing of images – three 45 minute periods (this could be less with small class sizes)
- Painting of prints using watercolor – one 45 minute period
- Wrap up and addressing envelopes for postcard mailing – one 45 minute period

Procedure

Introduce the concept of the Japanese woodblock postcard print. Review Japanese history leading up to the era of modernization and the influence of this on the development of the postcard as art. This lesson is designed to be a follow-up to the Japanese history taught to the 7th graders as part of their Social Studies curriculum. Show PowerPoint of images of historical Japanese woodcuts through history and images of Japanese postcards.

Review the concept of the postcard as art and provide students with a list of possible subjects for their designs. Encourage students to create a design that they feel that they can succeed at for both the drawing and carving steps.

Students should do 3-5 drawings of possible ideas for their postcard. They should be encouraged to consult the books and examples provided in class and also to do research on their own.

After gaining input from both the teacher and their peers they should select a design and draw it with pencil directly on the mounted linoleum block. When finished and in final form, they should go over their pencil drawing with a permanent marker. The thickness of the line will determine the intricacy of their carving as they will be cutting away all but the marker line. They can use markers of varying thicknesses to create variety in their finished print.

Demonstrate proper cutting and safety procedures with the linoleum tools.

Printing of images on cardstock

- squeeze ink onto a magazine page
- roll ink out with a brayer
- roll ink onto linoleum block
- place cardstock onto inked plate
- burnish with a baren or wooden spoon
- each student should print several cards

Clean-up by discarding inked magazine pages and wiping blocks with non-toxic paint thinner and Handiwipes

Apply color to the plates using watercolor

Write a message on the card that is to be the gift and address envelopes to Japanese students

Assessment

Student work will be assessed in two ways:

- class critique where they will discuss both the historical relevance and the artistic idea and mastering of the technique
- student/teacher evaluation rubric, the exact questions to be formulated at the time of the lesson so that they are pertinent to the actual results

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