

# Asian Odyssey

A National K-12 Interdisciplinary Curriculum Model

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## Japanese Aesthetics in Art and Literature

### Grade Level

This lesson was written for an Asian Studies high-school class. It can be adapted for grades 9-12.

### Purpose

To compare the general aesthetic principals of Western and Japanese ideals in art and literature.

### Concepts

- Asymmetry--a lack of balance or correspondence of opposite parts in size, shape or position
- Awareness--sensitivity to the sadness and impermanence of life
- Buddhist aesthetics--appreciation for the austerity and simplicity in art and life
- Byobu-- folding screen
- Suggestion--faint hint or indication

### Key Ideas

- Understanding and appreciating the aesthetic principles of impermanence, suggestion, asymmetry, and simplicity in Japanese art and literature
- The tradition of incorporating literature in the art of Japan
- The reverence the Japanese have for the past
- The concept that literature mirrors popular thought and taste

### Materials

*Autumn Evening with Full Moon on Musashino Plain*, early 1600s, CMA 2000.4.1-.2

*Scenes from "Essays in Idleness"*, late 1700s-early 1800s, CMA 1971.43.1-.2

*Summer Night*, 1784, CMA 1973.156.1

*Winter Day*, 1784, CMA 1973.156.2

*Heron on a Willow Branch*, late 1700s, CMA 1997.108

*Twilight in the Wilderness*, Frederic Edwin Church, 1860, CMA 1965.233

Handout on aesthetics

Reading: excerpts from *Essays on Idleness (Tsurezuregusa)* by Yoshida Kenko (1283-1350)—some available at [http://www.geocities.com/leslie\\_barclay/EssaysInIdleness.html](http://www.geocities.com/leslie_barclay/EssaysInIdleness.html)

### Procedure

1. Hand out copies of "Taste Test" and ask students to answer the ten questions.
2. Explain that traditionally Japanese people have enjoyed a different aesthetic sense of beauty than most Westerners.

3. View Autumn Evening with Full Moon on Mushashino Plain. Ask students to describe the scene and the feelings that the scene creates:
  - a. What time of day is this?
  - b. Does this represent beauty in a way that is familiar to you?
4. View the Frederic Church painting of Twilight in the Wilderness. Ask students to compare the evening depicted on the Japanese byobu with the scene in Church's painting. Note differences in the portrayal of evening—in color, in subject, in perspective. This represents, in part, the difference in aesthetics.
5. Have students view Scenes from “Essays in Idleness” and note the Japanese tradition of depicting great works of literature in art (other examples of this include The Tale of Genji and The Tales of Ise).
6. Hand out excerpts from Essays in Idleness: Written by a Buddhist monk in the early 1300s, this series of brief comments on life reflect the taste of the time, much of which has survived to the present. Read #82 (available at [http://www.geocities.com/leslie\\_barclay/EssaysInIdleness.html](http://www.geocities.com/leslie_barclay/EssaysInIdleness.html)), translated by Donald Keene.
7. Discuss the passage in terms of what the author appreciates about incompleteness; this aesthetic is identified as suggestion, the idea that leaving something incomplete can make it more interesting, such as a half-moon, as opposed to a full one.
8. Also discuss the appreciation of the impermanence of the scroll described in the passage. Explain that this is called awareness, a sensitivity to the nature of life's impermanence.
  - a. This reflects the Buddhist awareness of the brief, transitory existence of life and their belief that all life is suffering due to its temporal nature.
9. View CMA's Winter Day and Summer Night. These byobu in ink, gold, and silver on paper were painted by Maruyama Okyo and date from the Edo period (1615-1868). Ask students to identify elements of the screens that reflect the two seasons, to observe examples of suggestion in the images, to reflect on the sense of time passing (impermanence).
  - a. Note the placement of the most important images in the screens and ask students why the moon, for instance, is not in the center? This reflects another aesthetic, asymmetry. A fourth is simplicity: ask students if simplicity is reflected in the art.
10. View another painted screen by Maruyama Okyo, Heron on a Willow Branch. Ask students how these aesthetic principles are reflected in this painting.
11. Read more passages from Kenko's Essays in Idleness and discuss how his comments reflect aesthetic principles. Review the “Taste Test” and distinguish Japanese from Western aesthetic principles.

### **Enrichment**

- A. Draw examples of scenes in Japanese and Western style.
- B. Illustrate passages for Essays in Idleness.
- C. Find essays in America or European literature that reflect Western tastes.

### **Ohio State Standards**

1. Analyze how issues may be viewed differently by various cultural groups, p.78.
2. Identify the perspectives of diverse cultures when analyzing issues, p. 78.
3. Explain how the character and meaning of a place reflect a society's economics, politics, social values, and culture, p. 80.

**This lesson plan was developed by Dana Noble, Shaker Heights School System, Shaker Heights, Ohio.**