

Japanese Art for the Classroom

IMAGES, TEXTS, AND NOTES FOR TEACHERS

BY FRANK L. CHANCE

USES OF ART IN THE CLASSROOM

There are many reasons to bring art into the classroom. Of course, discussions may focus on art as art, i.e., the aesthetic, stylistic, or historical aspects of a work, but there are many other functions for which art may be used to achieve pedagogical objectives. Below, I describe a few of them, with examples available to me locally.

A clearly related issue is HOW to bring the art into the room. For small groups, the best option is obviously the work of art itself. Some of us are lucky enough to have useful items in our own collections, or available through local collectors, galleries, or other sources. Students respond wonderfully to actual objects, though a few comments on treating them with respect and care (such as noting that only pencils should be used for notes when objects are being viewed) are often required. In most cases, of course, we need to use reproductions—color slides, prints, or perhaps images downloaded from the Internet and displayed using a digital projector. Here again, students usually respond well, and the range of items that can be presented is greatly enlarged. Full color versions of the objects illustrated in this article are, for example, available online at www.aasianst.org/ea/supplemental.htm.

ART AS NARRATION

Perhaps the most direct way to use art objects is to visually narrate history. Through painting, printmaking, and photography, artists created images representing the events of their past and their present. My example is almost journalistic in its approach, though perhaps a bit misleading. The artist was not present in Korea, to the best of our knowledge, but was in Tokyo, creating images based on telegraphed reports from the front lines. Hence, the Japanese troops are depicted in considerable detail, their uniforms correct (and clean!) while the Chinese troops are much less clearly shown.

This image is from a university museum. Such collections can be an important source for classroom art, especially if the class can have opportunities for gallery visits or, in the case of some museums, for specially arranged viewings or even visits by curators bringing items to the classroom.

Image 1: Fall of Pyongyang, Korea: Great Victory for Our Troops

This triptych narrates a scene from the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, depicting the action outside the city gate in the decisive Battle of Pyongyang, September 15, 1894. Neatly uniformed Japanese troops dominate the foreground, clearly on the verge of a great victory, but as the fighting raged into the night, the Japanese met resistance from the defenders at the walls of the city. The long inscription at upper right describes the battle of “more than 20,000 troops” fighting “through the day and the night;” then notes the role of each of the Japanese battle groups. A relatively minor leader, Captain Ōshima, is shown in the upper left, while Colonel Satō rides in at the center. The opposing Chinese generals Wei Jugui, Ma Yuguan, and Nei Guilin appear at the lower right.

In addition to comparing the image with published accounts of the battle, many topics for class discussion are possible. Students can easily pick out differences between the style in which the “good guys” and the “bad guys” are depicted. First, we might compare these styles to the way cartoonists illustrate contemporary conflicts with images of “good” Presidents and “bad” dictators, for example. This could initiate a line of inquiry into the manipulation of images for propagandistic purposes. A second topic for discussion might be the differences between a print (such as this one) and a photograph or a video image.

ART AS IDENTIFICATION

The use of portraits, whether actual or imaginary, can help students envision the people who created great works of literature or who enacted the events of history. The following example is from a set of the *Hyakunin isshu*, “One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets.” This set represents the best Japanese poets, as determined (according to tradition) by the critic, poet, and calligrapher Fujiwara no Teika (1162–1245). Later, the poems and accompanying portraits became the material for a card game, still played as a part of New Year’s celebrations, in which



IMAGE 1: Fall of Pyongyang. University of Pennsylvania Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology 17223. Published September 1894 by Katada Chōjirō.



IMAGE 2: Hitomaro. Artist Unknown: woodblock print, eighteenth to nineteenth century, private collection, Philadelphia.

the first part of the poem is read out and the players must find the card with the second half of the poem. The example here is from a cheaply-reproduced book of the early 1800s.

Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (circa 660–708) was one of Japan's first great poets. As a courtier to at least three emperors, he wrote for official occasions, produced memorials for friends and relatives, and penned a number of poems on the theme of travel. His contribution to *Hyakunin isshu* was composed when he was traveling on court business, and expresses his loneliness at separation from his wife and family. The poem text follows in romanization, and translation.

Image 2: Portrait of Kakinomoto no Hitomaro

The image here is not, of course, what we would ordinarily call a portrait, but rather a traditional image and standard iconography associated with this poet. The artist was, after all, working more than a thousand years after Hitomaro's death. While the clothing is clearly ancient from the viewpoint of the nineteenth century artist, it is more like that of a tenth or twelfth century courtier than one of the eighth century. Nevertheless, students can get a sense of the repose of this famous gentleman, and of his brushes and paper, tools of the poetic trade in East Asia.

Hyakunin isshu and other Japanese poems are available in many versions on the Internet. One of my favorite sites is <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/japanese/hyakunin/hyakua.html>.

<p><i>Ashibiki no yamadori no o no shidari o no naganagashi yo o hitori ka mo nen</i></p>	<p><i>The long foot-dragging trail, of a mountain-pheasant's long tail mimics a down-curved branch like this long, long-dragging night when I lie in bed alone</i></p>
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ART AS ILLUSTRATION

My third example is an illustration of a piece of literature. Created in the 1880s, the scene illustrates a story set in the 1300s. *Tsurezuregusa* is a classical Japanese text, composed of 244 sections written by the lay monk Kenkō (1283–1352) and beautifully translated by Donald Keene as *Essays in Idleness*. We don't know if

the story was a report of an actual event or a fictional account told for a moral purpose, and students might easily discuss whether humorous illustration has a different tone from the original story. The example comes from my own collection, and was neither expensive nor well preserved, as you can tell from the clearly visible vermicular trails.

Image 3. Tsukioka Yoshitoshi: The Tripod Dance of Ninnaji

Kenkō: *Tsurezuregusa*, section 53:

The priests of the Ninnaji [temple in the northwestern suburbs of Kyoto] held a feast to celebrate a young acolyte entering the priesthood. They became drunk, and, feeling merry, one of the priests took a three-legged iron pot and put it on his head. Then, though it was very tight, he flattened out his nose, pulled the pot over his face, and began to dance. The whole company grew merry beyond measure, until after performing awhile, he at length tried in vain to pull it off!

A pall fell over the gathering, and they were thrown into confusion and doubt, wondering what to do. The pot cut into his skin, blood began to flow and his face swelled up so that he could hardly breathe. They tried to split the pot, but it was not easily broken, and the reverberations inside were unbearable. When all else failed, throwing a black gauze cloak over the three horn-like legs, they led him to the house of a physician in Kyoto. People stared at this apparition with amazement as they went along.

The priest presented an extraordinary sight to the physician on entering his house. When he spoke, his voice was muffled, and they could not understand what he said. The physician said that he had never seen such a case in the books, "and there aren't any oral traditions either," so they were obliged to return to Ninnaji. There his friends and his old mother gathered at his bedside and wept and grieved—not that they thought he could hear! At last someone said, "Wouldn't it be better to save his life, even if he loses his nose and ears? Let us then pull the thing off by force." So they thrust rice straw all round between his head and the metal, and pulled hard enough to drag it off his head. His ears and nose were torn away, and he escaped with his bare life, suffering afterward for a long time.

Adapted from *Essays in Idleness: the Tsurezuregusa of Kenkō*, translated by Donald Keene, Columbia University Press, 1967, 46–47.



IMAGE 3: Yoshitoshi. Color woodblock print, private collection, Philadelphia.



IMAGE 4: Bunchō. Ink and color on silk, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

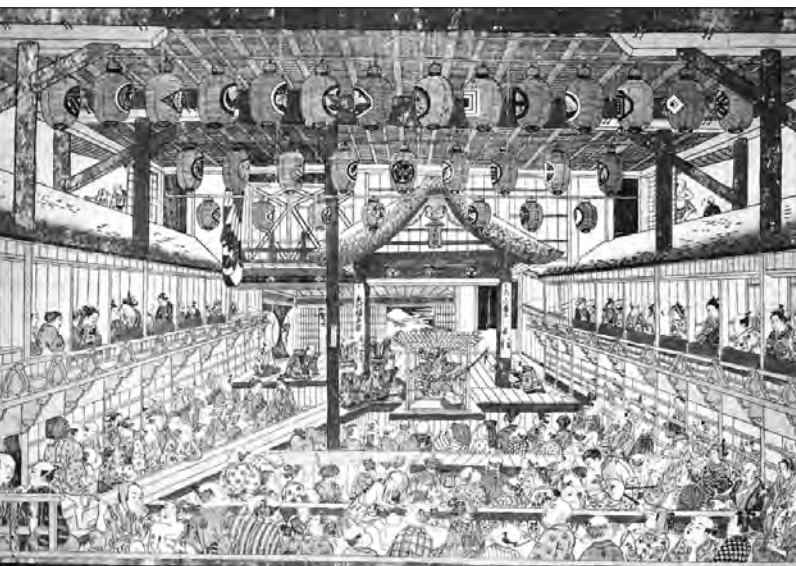


IMAGE 5: Masanobu. Perspective Print of Kaomise Performance of Kyogen Onstage, circa 1740, Philadelphia Museum of Art.



IMAGE 6: Pine Breeze Villa. Used by permission of the Friends of the Japanese House and Garden, Philadelphia.

ART AS EVOCATION

Our fourth example is not a direct illustration of the poem in question but rather an independent production whose tone and effect act to elucidate, one might even say to incarnate, the tone and sense of the poem. The poet Teika was also a theorist and brilliant calligrapher of the late Heian and early Kamakura periods; this poem was also quoted by tea masters of the sixteenth century to describe their *wabi* aesthetic of simplicity and tranquility. Bunchō, the painter, was a prolific artist and famous teacher from the end of the eighteenth century through the 1830s; his work is in a basically Chinese style, yet seems to evoke the mood of Teika's poem perfectly, though it was not, apparently, designed as an illustration of the lyric.

Image 4: Tani Bunchō (1763–1841): *Landscape*, circa 1820s

*Miwataseba
hana mo momiji mo
nakari keru
ura no tomaya no
aki no yūgure*

*Why look about,
for cherry blossoms
or crimson leaves?
A grass-thatched hut,
in autumn dusk.*

Fujiwara no Teika (1162–1241)

ART AS EXPLANATION

Art can, of course, be used to simply explain a situation or establish a setting. One could show a photograph or a video of a modern performance of the Kabuki theater, for example, but a contemporary view provides a strong alternative. This example, from the print collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, shows the interior of a performance space as viewed by an artist of the mid-eighteenth century. It gives students a glimpse into the attitude of the audience, the construction and staging techniques, and the overall ambiance of one of Japan's traditional performing arts.

Many lines of inquiry might proceed from this image, linked to the Kabuki text of your choice. The use of perspective to create the illusion of pictorial space is prominent here; normally associated with European art, the technique is an example of an import in a period thought of as one of isolation.

Image 5: Okumura Masanobu: *The Nakamura Theater*

ART AS INSPIRATION

Finally, art can simply inspire the student and the teacher to a variety of epiphanies. Imagine the benefits of a visit to a Japanese structure—teahouse, gate, temple or, as in Philadelphia, a traditional house. Of course, Japanese structures are not available in every small town, but there are examples in surprising places from Saginaw, Michigan to Austin, Texas, and all can inspire visitors to new understandings of Japanese and Asian visual and material culture.

Image 6: *The Pine Breeze Villa, Fairmount Park*

Shōfūsō, designed by Yoshimura Junzō for the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1953, moved to Fairmount Park in Philadelphia in 1959. ■

FRANK L. CHANCE is the Associate Director of the Center for East Asian Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.