

Asian Odyssey

A National K-12 Interdisciplinary Curriculum Model

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Ukiyo-e Japanese Prints Depicting the Floating World

Grade Level

This lesson has been developed for an Asian Studies high-school class. It can be adjusted for grades 9-12.

Objective

To examine the significance and popularity of the *ukiyo-e*, Japanese woodblock prints depicting the Floating World during the Edo period (1615-1868).

Concepts

- Courtesan—a woman of the pleasure quarters who entertained men through song, dance, poetry, and the art of conversation
- Floating World—a licensed area of teahouses, theaters, and establishments for leisure-time entertainment; often referred to as the pleasure quarters
- Kabuki—a form of popular drama blending music, dance, and mime portraying historical events or the everyday life of the people of the period; it appealed to the common people as opposed to the more refined Noh theater supported by the aristocrats
- Pleasure Quarter areas:
 - Yoshiwara in Edo
 - Shimabara in Kyoto
 - Shinmachi in Osaka
 - Maruyama in Nagasaki
- Ukiyo-e—depictions of the Floating World

Key Ideas

- Originally the term *ukiyo* was used to describe the fleeting secular world in contrast to the spiritual world of Buddhism.
- During the Edo period (1615-1868), *ukiyo* came to mean that part of the secular world set aside for entertainment and amusement, such as the licensed pleasure quarters of the major cities.
- In the late 17th century, the suffix *-e* (which means painting) was added to the term to describe a genre of painting and prints that depicted the everyday life and activities of these various pleasure quarters.
- Popular subjects were the courtesans, Kabuki actors, and others who provided love, pleasure, and entertainment for men who could afford it.
- The Floating World offered places of relaxation away from the stresses of authoritarian rule of the military government with its exalted concepts of honor and duty and from the rigid class stratification enforced by the Tokugawa shogunate.

- Under the Tokugawa, society was strictly segregated into four classes: ruling families and aristocratic warlords, peasants and other agricultural workers (80 percent of the population), artisans, and merchants.
- Although the artisans and merchants had low social status, they were becoming increasingly prosperous. At this period, Japan was closed to the outside world; neither foreigners nor foreign goods could enter the country (with the exception of Chinese and Dutch traders at Nagasaki), and the Japanese were forbidden to leave the country. Thus most commerce and industry had to be indigenous, creating an emerging middle class.
- In addition, the military government required the provincial warlords and their retainers to reside in the capital every other year. Away from the duties and responsibilities that occupied them in their home provinces, this group suddenly had leisure time and money to spend in the Floating World.
- High-ranking courtesans came to be regarded as the ideal of womanhood and many of them gained a following among both men and women, rather like the pop idols of today. They defined the standards of beauty and fashion and were often pictured parading with their attendants, all of whom were sumptuously dressed in the latest styles. Many of these women were accomplished poets and musicians as well as entertainers and had an enormous influence on popular culture.
- Courtesans belonged to the owner of the teahouse where they performed, and although patrons paid for their services, there was a stringent code of protocol and behavior that was strictly enforced.
- Kabuki actors were also favorite subjects for the *ukiyo-e* artists. In contrast to Noh, from its beginnings in the 17th century, Kabuki was a theater for the common people for whom the melodramatic plots, energetic and violent stage action, and splendid costumes had great appeal. Prints of scenes from the plays, as well as depictions of the actors in their characteristic roles, were collected by the public in the same way that signed photos and other souvenirs of today's movie and music stars are collected.

Materials

The Courtesan Takihime and Attendants (from the series New Patterns of Young Greens), 1795, CMA 1921.363

Beauty Before a Screen, 19th century, CMA 1985.268

Lady with a Parasol, early 1800s, CMA 1985.257

Entertainment Scene, 18th century, CMA 1985.17

Courtesans Promenading on the Nakanochō, c.1790, CMA 1930.211.a-c

The Four Pleasures, 17th century, CMA 1985.269

Portrait of a Woman, 19th century, CMA 1985.271

Courtesan Seated on a Bench Enjoying the Evening Cool in Summer, CMA 1998.290

Tsukasa and Other Courtesans of the Ogiya Watching the Autumn Moon Rise Over Rice Fields from a Balcony in the Yoshiwara, 1799, CMA 1943.4

Two Beauties, late 18th century-early 19th century, CMA 1985.274

Iwai Kiyotaro (Edoia) as Okaru (from the series Pictures of Actors Onstage), 1794, CMA 1930.215

Procedure

1. Acquire from the school library or from friends enough magazines for all your students

(*People*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Mademoiselle*, *Vogue*, any teen magazines, or *STAR*). Distribute copies of the magazines and have students peruse them for about ten minutes. Then pose the following questions:

- a. Who is the target audience? Who buys these magazines?
 - b. Why do they buy them? What purpose do they serve for the buyer?
 - c. How much do they cost?
 - d. What happens to the magazine once the buyer is finished with it?
2. Next, ask:
- a. Have these magazines contributed to shaping part of American culture? How?
 - b. What influence do these magazines have on people?
3. Distribute some of the images from CMA listed above (all the images need not be used). Have students look at the images. Discuss the subject matter of the images and begin to draw parallels between the Japanese obsession for these prints and the American obsession toward images of celebrities from the worlds of film and music.
4. View *The Courtesan Takihime and Attendants*. How are they dressed? The courtesans were not nameless women; they were known by the public and became famous for setting standards of beauty. They were popular icons of style. Does this remind you of anything?
5. *Entertainment Scene* shows the courtesan at work (performing a concert and earning money for her manager, the teahouse owner).
- a. Show students images of *Beauty Before a Screen* and *Lady with a Parasol* and compare them to a celebrity photo shoot on Oscar night or at an induction into the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame.
 - b. Have students look at CMA's *Portrait of a Woman* and compare this close-up portrait of a geisha with portraits sent by stars to members of their fan clubs. Notice particularly the different styles of hair and makeup and that the Japanese lady has had her eyebrows shaved.
 - c. Show students *Courtesans Promenading on the Nakanochō* and explain it was customary for elaborately dressed courtesans and their retinues to promenade on the main thoroughfare of Yoshiwara early in the evening. This is where the most prominent courtesans could be seen. (Note the man attempting to disguise himself by pulling up his cloak and hiding his face with a fan. Perhaps he was a prominent gentleman who thought it would be better not to be seen in the pleasure quarters of Yoshiwara.)

Evaluation

1. Discussion: First, ask the questions below:
 - a. Why do you think these ukiyo-e prints were popular among the masses?
 - b. Why would people buy them?
 - c. What purpose did they serve?
 - d. What do you see in each print?
 - e. Have you ever seen anything similar to these prints?
 - f. To what can they be compared?
2. Explain to students that the Japanese viewed these images of the Floating World in much the same way many Americans view images of film and rock stars. Ask students if they can see a parallel.
3. Then, divide students into groups and have them prepare a chart of the similarities.

Enrichment

A. Students write a reaction paper.

- Most of the world's large cities have pleasure districts and they are more or less tolerated by the authorities. Many large cities also have sections that are devoted to a type of underground culture that supports a bohemian life where avant-garde and cutting-edge music, theater, literature, poetry can be found. Tokugawa Japan was no exception. But the difference is that no other such quarter has ever produced such a first-rate aesthetic as did 17th-century Yoshiwara, Edo's Floating World.

B. Agree or disagree with this statement by writing a 2-to 3-page documented paper.

Ohio State Standards

People in Societies Standards

1. Cultural perspectives, p. 67.

**This lesson plan was prepared by Bonnie Morosi, Beachwood High School,
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