

East Asia Study Unit

Module Four: Art

LESSON ONE: ART AND NATIONALISM IN MEIJI JAPAN

GRADE: 9-12

TIME: One class period.

GOALS: At the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

1. Explain some of the reasons for the different Chinese, Japanese, and Korean responses to the Western powers in the nineteenth century.
2. Explain some of the steps that the Japanese took to foster a sense of citizenship and nationalism among their people.
3. Identify how artists created images that reflected and bolstered national pride.
4. Use these materials to begin a discussion on the difference between art and propaganda and the relationship between art and society, especially in a pre-radio/t.v./internet age.

MATERIALS/PREP:

1. Handout One, copied for distribution to the students.
2. Powerpoint slide show attached to this lesson.
3. Computer, projector, and screen for showing the images.

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND:

In the late 19th-century, Japan underwent an amazing transformation from a pre-industrial society ruled by an elite class of samurai to an industrialized country with citizens and a modern military capable of beating much larger opponents such as China (in 1895) and Russia (in 1905). This lesson looks at how art played a part in building a sense of citizenship, pride, and nationalism in the Japanese people. Of course, art both supported the government's agenda and reflected it – in other words, artists had national pride and wanted to show their glorious army in their pictures, and at the same time, their pictures helped instill such feelings in others. As in any society (including our own), art both shapes society and is shaped by it.

Handout One is intended to serve as an introduction to 19th-century East Asian history, but please keep in mind that the handout is summarizing and generalizing some very complex historical trends and events that cannot be fully explained in a mere one- page handout. These next few paragraphs are intended to provide a bit more information for the teacher (to share with students as you see fit).

Qing Dynasty China, Choson Dynasty Korea, and Tokugawa Japan all respected the teachings of Confucianism. They also had societies in which an elite class had a very distinct identity from the common people. In China, the literate scholar officials and their families saw themselves as far above the peasants. In Korea, the landowning class was known as the yangban; as members of a hereditary elite, some, even if they fell on financial hard times, would refuse to work as they considered labor beneath them. In Japan, the Tokugawa shoguns implemented a Confucian-inspired four-class system in which samurai became the scholar official ruling class. In other words, unlike many modern societies that emphasize how all citizens are equal (despite great disparities in

wealth, privileges, etc.), there was no sense of equal citizenship in these early 19th-century East Asian societies.

Of the three, only Japan attempted to create a sense of modern, equal citizenship among its people in the 19th-century. By the 1850s, when Commodore Perry sailed to Japan with U.S. warships in hopes of establishing treaty relations, the Japanese already knew of China's defeat at the hands of the British in the Opium War. They had good reason to be nervous about the prospect of war with a western power. And yet the Tokugawa government justified its existence in part by keeping out undesirable foreigners, so to merely give in to the American demands would be seen as a sign of weakness. This provoked a crisis in Japan, and after much debate and violence, a group of samurai overthrew the Tokugawa and established a new government called Meiji that was committed to modernization. The Meiji leaders were convinced that the only way to avoid becoming a colony was to become strong like the Western powers – with a modern military, industry, and citizenry devoted to the state.

There were many steps that the state took to try to foster nationalism among the people. For example, samurai status was eliminated and the military changed to a conscript army in which all young men served. Elementary education became compulsory for both boys and girls, and children studied in classrooms with a picture of the emperor on the wall. The state taught people to revere the emperor as a living god and the Shinto faith was used to promote the state's agenda. Through these and other means, the government tried to give people a common sense of national community and love of country.

All of their efforts were put to the test in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95, when Japan fought China for pre-eminent position in Korea. Few people around the world expected small Japan to win against the much bigger foe, but the Japanese army and navy proved better trained and equipped and won handily. The Chinese forces were ill-supplied, not unified in their efforts, and some Chinese generals refused to send their troops to aid others – they saw the war as a regional problem rather than a national one. The war ended with the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki, which forced the Chinese out of Korea, gave some Chinese territories (including the island of Taiwan) to the Japanese, and required the Chinese to pay a large war indemnity to Japan.

It was in this context that Japanese artists produced colorful prints glorifying the emperor and the military. The prints serve as primary sources, reflecting how the Japanese viewed the war and their enemy. Many of them were woodblock prints, similar to those discussed in the previous lesson. As they are colorful and exciting, students may find the images interesting to look at. But they also should be encouraged to think critically about the messages that the prints put forward. How do the portrayals of Japanese and Chinese differ? What adjectives would you use to describe each group? Why would the Japanese artists show them that way? Are these reliable depictions of what the war was really like? Why or why not?

ACTIVITIES:

1. To begin discussion: Say “Europeans began sailing to East Asia in the sixteenth century. But unlike in the New World, where they found societies much weaker than their own, the Europeans found strong states in China, Korea, and Japan. European sailing technology was only just advanced enough to get the Europeans

- to East Asia; they were in no position to challenge East Asia militarily, and the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese were quite happy to keep the Europeans at a distance. But by the nineteenth century, things had changed. The industrial revolution, new advanced in steamship and military technology, and the wealth from overseas colonies all made the Europeans strong enough to begin demanding that China, Korea, and Japan open up to trade. How did the East Asian states respond? Let's find out."
2. Handout One: Additional information is provided in the background section (above). After students have finished reading the handout, you might discuss it with them. How did the three states' responses differ and why? What were the long-term consequences of those different responses? Why did Japan fare better than its neighbors?
 3. Going Deeper: The handout suggests that the Japanese worked to create a sense of citizenship and nationalism among the people. What does it mean to be the citizen of a country? (Hopefully the discussion will turn to issues of everyone being equal or having equal rights. But in Japan, that had not historically been the case; the four-class system meant that people were not equal and did not have equal rights, so the government had to take steps (outlined in the background section) to foster a sense of equality and "Japanese-ness" among the people. If you want, you could take this discussion into how feelings of citizenship and common nationality can actually hide important differences in a society. These are serious issues that our own American society wrestles with even today – for example, the fact that a disproportionate percentage of those who serve in the military come from lower income families. If we are all equal citizens, shouldn't we all serve our country equally?
 4. Art and Modernization: Let's look and see how art reflected the goals of the new Meiji government. What do you see in these two images [SLIDE 1]? Trains and steamships were associated with being a modern, industrialized country, so these images reflected the new, modern Japan. In the next slide [SLIDE 2], we see Western-style brick buildings, again highlighting how quickly and successfully Japan was catching up to the West.
 5. Art and the Emperor: [SLIDES 3 & 4] Under the new Meiji government, the emperor held political power, but calls for democratic participation in government – and recognition by the Meiji leaders that people needed a say in government if they were going to commit their loyalty to it – led government leaders to institute a constitution and parliament in 1890. Here you see two images. What kind of message do they show? They suggest that the constitution is a gift from the emperor, and that the parliament serves him. Both reinforce the idea of the emperor as the most important figure in the room, one who is treated with reverential respect. In the following slide, the emperor watches as his troops practice battle maneuvers. He is the consummate commander-in-chief.
 6. Art and War: When war broke out with China in 1894, the government had the emperor establish a special war headquarters in the city of Hiroshima so that he could appear to be closer to the front lines and directly involved in directing the war effort. We see him in this print [SLIDE 5], standing tall in his military uniform, an image designed to convey confidence to the viewer. The empress had

- a part to play as well [SLIDE 6]; here we see her visiting wounded Japanese soldiers. How does this image reinforce the importance of the empress? (we see how the wounded soldier seems to be in awe of the empress and how grateful he is that she took time to visit him)
7. Art and Images of the Enemy: Unlike contemporary wars, which we can see on television new channels as they happen, Japanese had to rely on artist's depictions of the war. Although there were a few who actually traveled to the battle zones, many artists relied on the reports of others and "invented" images that they thought were appropriate to match. Prints of the war like these were wildly popular. Let's look at one [SLIDE 7]. Can you tell which side is Japanese and which is Chinese? How? What visual elements let you know? How are the two sides shown to be different (i.e. brave and cowardly)? What about in this next slide [SLIDE 8]? (We see the Chinese general ordering his troops to advance, but his donkey's direction proves that he intends to flee. The Chinese troops clearly look terrified, are also heading in the wrong direction, and even have wheels on their shoes to aid their fast escape. Adding to the irony is that the writing on their backs is the Chinese symbol for "brave"). The next slide [SLIDE 9] shows the Chinese surrendering. As with the other images, the Chinese wear traditional dress while the Japanese wear modern, European-style military uniforms. The Japanese (who are on the left) even look tall and European, and they stand proud in victory. Off to the far right are the European advisors to the Chinese (who look almost identical to the Japanese). They also bow in defeat, but only slightly. The final image [SLIDE 10] shows a very modern-looking Japanese explaining the terms of the peace treaty to a confused Chinese man. How does the depiction of the two characters reflect Japanese attitudes toward China following its loss in the war? (the Japanese figure is shown to be modern (by his clothing) and exasperated by his seemingly clueless counterpart (who doesn't seem to understand the treaty and is shown to be backward by his traditional dress))
8. For deeper discussion: you could use these materials to discuss the differences between propaganda and art. Which were these images? Why? These are hotly contested issues even in our own society today – for example, in how the war in Iraq is portrayed on t.v. What images get shown (or not shown), and how does that affect public opinion?