



NATURE of the BEAST

Animals in Japanese Paintings & Prints

SIMPLE SUMI-E PAINTING

Suggested Grade Level: Lower and Middle Elementary (Grades 1 to 4)

Subject: Visual Arts, Language Arts

Estimated Time: 1 class session

Introduction

Masters of Japanese ink drawing and calligraphy—the art of writing elegantly—could convey an animal's essence in a few simple strokes of a brush. They also wrote short poems with such strong, clear brushwork that it seemed as if it had been written spontaneously. This simplicity, however, was often achieved through years of practice.

Lesson Objectives

Students will:

1. Learn the basics of calligraphy and ink painting
2. Use an artwork from the Pacific Asia Museum as the basis for understanding these ideas and for engaging student critical thinking and writing.

Key Terms

brushstroke
ink
line
spontaneity, spontaneous
texture

Instructional Materials

- From *Nature of the Beast* website:
 - ❖ *Man on Ox*, Gibon Sengai (1750–1837), Circa 1800, Scroll painting, ink on paper, Pacific Asia Museum Collection, Gift of Dr. Jesse L. Greenstein, 2002.4.1
 - ❖ *Sage on Horseback*, Attributed to Maruyama Okyo (1733–95), Circa 1769-1789, Scroll painting, ink on paper, Pacific Asia Museum Collection, Gift of Dr. George W. Housner, 2001.21.71

- Search using terms “calligraphy” and “Japan” in the Pacific Asia Museum collections database for other examples: <http://www.pacificasiamuseum.org/mweb/>
- ❖ *Moon and Rabbit* is an excellent alternative example:
<http://www.pacificasiamuseum.org/cgi-bin/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record&key=1819>
- Several large sheets of recyclable newsprint for every student—ideally, an easel with newsprint sheets
- Black poster paint
- Sumi-e set ink and brush set for demonstration and display (optional)

Discussion

Japanese artists could convey the essence of an animal in just a few simple brushstrokes. Display or project selected images from *Nature of the Beast*. Show the simplicity of the rendering of the horse and rider in *Sage on Horseback*. Show how few lines were used by the artist in *Moon and Rabbit* and point out that the moon is simply a circle. Ask students to point out the lines and the quality of the brushwork. How does it vary in thickness? How much ink does the brush carry? At what point does the brush seem to run out of ink? Explain that the artist tried to paint the animal in a quick and spontaneous way. What are the important features of a rabbit that get across the idea of its “rabbit-ness”? (Its long ears and big feet, for example.)

Ask students to come up with the essential features of other animals. (Have photographs or artworks if desired.) What few lines would they use to get across the idea of a turtle? A poodle? A parrot? A tiger? A whale?

Activities

Students will select an animal that they are interested in painting. They will decide how to get across the idea of the animal in just a few lines. With a dish of black poster paint and a large brush, each student will paint their animal with as few lines as possible. Ideally, they will be able to experiment with their artworks and try a half-dozen times at least. Even V-shaped seagulls get the idea across! They will choose their favorite effort and display it.

To practice calligraphy, ask each student to select one word to paint. That word, preferably not the student’s name, will be a favorite word or a word that has a shape that is pleasing to them. For example, the word “one” mirrors the round circle of the moon in *Moon and Rabbit*. Have students practice painting the word so that it seems strong and spontaneous. Ask each student to choose their favorite effort, explaining why it is their best work, and display it.

[If a sumi-e set is available, demonstrate how the ink was ground and diluted with water.]

Standards

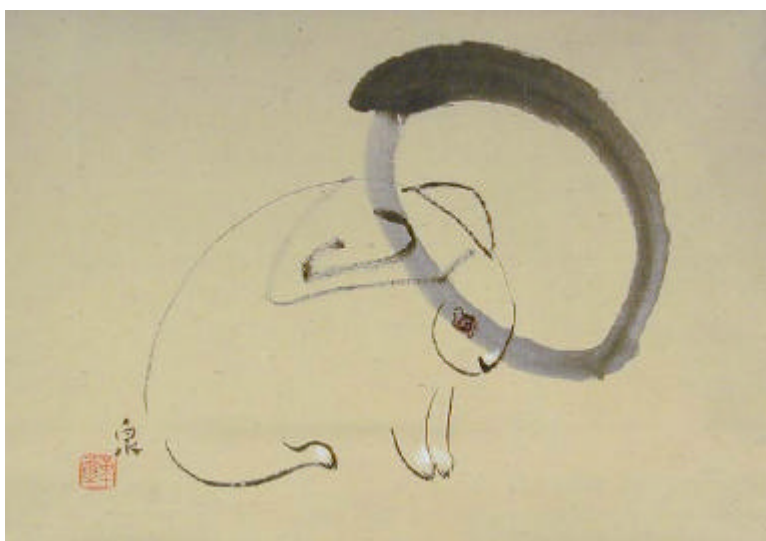
California State Framework for Reading and Language Arts
Reading Comprehension
Literary Response and Analysis



Man on Ox
Gibon Sengai (1750–1837)
Circa 1800
Scroll painting, ink on paper
Pacific Asia Museum Collection
Gift of Dr. Jesse L. Greenstein, 2002.4.1



Sage on Horseback
Attributed to Maruyama Okyo (1733–95)
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Scroll painting, ink on paper
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Yamanouchi
date unknown
Scroll painting, ink on paper
Pacific Asia Museum Collection
Gift of the Grill Collection, 1986.79.22