



# NATURE of the BEAST

Animals in Japanese Paintings & Prints

## TRADITION, REALITY, IMAGINATION

**Suggested Grade Level:** High School (Grades 9-12)

**Subject:** Visual Arts

**Estimated Time:** 1-5 class sessions

### Introduction

The *Nature of the Beast* website examines three different approaches the Japanese artists during the Edo period took to painting animals:

#### 1) *Tradition*

Some Japanese artists favored the idealization of animals according to traditional Chinese artistic standards. China was considered the source of culture throughout East Asia, so many Japanese artists emulated the works of Chinese masters, following well-established artistic models for the depiction of animals and birds. These paintings did not present animals as living, breathing creatures, but rather as symbols of power, prestige, or virtues, lions, tigers, and hawks, for example, representing military and political power. In particular, the Kano school, the official painting school of Japan's military government, rarely painted from live models, and instead copied idealized depictions of animals from the works of their Chinese and Japanese teachers and predecessors.

#### 2) *Reality*

In the 18th and 19th centuries, many artists chose to depict animals in a realistic manner, using real animals and birds as models for artistic study. Such artists Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) and Mori Sosen (1747-1821), paid increasing attention to physical volume, feathers, hair and other surface detail, and often spent many hours observing and studying these creatures in order to paint them more realistically. They experimented with brushwork, painting countless tiny lines to delineate the short hairs of a deer's coat or using a very dry brush to reproduce the ruffled fur of a dancing monkey.

#### 3) *Imagination*

In an attempt to depict the essence of birds or beasts, rather than their true physical form, many Japanese artists produced abbreviated, stylized or expressionistic images of animals. Certain artists, influenced by lyrical Chinese brush painting and Zen Buddhist values, depicted in a few quick strokes the spirit and character of the creature. Works often showing animals as artistic or poetic, rather than as real animals. Many artists, often described as eccentric, who worked independently of major schools, produced some of the most imaginative images of animals. The imaginary beasts of Ito Jakuchu (1716-1800), for example, are rendered in an entirely original painting technique, with thousands of individual strokes using bright colors applied in thousands of small squares resembling mosaic or tiles.

## Lesson Objectives

Students will:

1. Understand and explore three traditions in the creation of Japanese art in the Edo period.
2. Use artworks from the Pacific Asia Museum as the basis for understanding these ideas and for engaging student critical thinking, writing, and artwork.

## Key Terms

imagination  
reality  
tradition

## Instructional Materials

- The *Nature of the Beast* website
- The Pacific Asia Museum's online collections database:  
<http://www.pacificasiamuseum.org/mweb/>

## Discussion

Using a projector, reproductions, or individual workstations, explore the *Nature of the Beast* website. Present the introduction above as a worksheet or show examples of the artworks and discuss the three approaches to Japanese art. Which works are examples of a realistic approach? Which are traditional? Which are more imaginative? Why?

Encourage class discussion on student opinions of the three approaches. As art students, what kind of models do they follow? In what ways do they prefer to follow traditional models? How do they approach a new subject? How do they approach working with a new medium? Do they master techniques and media or do they prefer to work more spontaneously with the materials that inspire them in the moment?

The contemporary western tradition in fine art favors innovation. In commercial art and animation, however, mastery and repetition of models often created by others is required for success. Encourage debate: How is one approach superior to another?

Many high school students are familiar with Japanese *manga* and *anime*. Ask students to bring examples to class, noting that any graphic novels or films should be suitable for viewing by the class as a whole. Which of the three approaches apply to the *anime*? How so? Is there, for example, an *anime* tradition in which graphic styles are mastered and repeated? What elements make *anime* realistic? Which ones include imaginative renderings of people and animals?

## Activities

Students will choose one artwork or the work of one artist from the museum's database. Possible search terms to select artworks include names of the artist from the list of captions [<http://www.pacificasiamuseum.org/japanesepaintings/html/captions.stm>] or individual animal names plus the term "Japan." Students will write a short essay or create an oral presentation that explains why they believe the work they have chosen is realistic, traditional, or shows imagination.

Included with the presentation is an artwork by the student using materials of his or her choice. The artwork should reflect an understanding of the three traditions and an expression of the student's own interests and abilities. Possible artworks include variations on Japanese *manga* and *anime*, which embody elements of tradition, reality, and imagination presented in *Nature of the Beast*.

## Standards

California Visual Arts Standards, Grades 9-12

"Students perceive and respond to works of art, objects in nature, events, and the environment. They also use the vocabulary of the visual arts to express their observations.

*Develop Perceptual Skills and Visual Arts Vocabulary*

1.1 Identify and use the principles of design to discuss, analyze, and write about visual aspects in the environment and in works of art, including their own.

1.2 Describe the principles of design as used in works of art, focusing on dominance and subordination.

*Analyze Art Elements and Principles of Design*

1.3 Research and analyze the work of an artist and write about the artist's distinctive style and its contribution to the meaning of the work.

1.4 Analyze and describe how the composition of a work of art is affected by the use of a particular principle of design.

*Impact of Media Choice*

1.5 Analyze the material used by a given artist and describe how its use influences the meaning of the work.

1.6 Compare and contrast similar styles of works of art done in electronic media with those done with materials traditionally used in the visual arts."