March 21 - June 9, 2024
Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago

Meiji Modern
FIFTY YEARS OF NEW JAPAN

AN EDUCATOR’S GUIDE
The Meiji Era, from 1868 to 1912, was a period of many changes in Japan. The country reopened its borders to travel and commerce after 250 years of isolation, and the political power was restored to an imperial system ruled by the Emperor Meiji. *Meiji Modern: Fifty Years of New Japan* explores the political and social changes as the country modernized, influenced and intimidated by other powerful nations of the world.

The objects in the show and in this guide are a small sample of the range of work produced by Japanese artists and artisans. Before the exposure to Western culture, Japan did not have an encompassing word for art, instead considering each medium distinctly. The creation of the word *bijutsu* (art) is just one of the ways Japan was influenced by Europe and the United States. Japan changed to become a modern nation, but it held onto many of its traditions in culture and in art, incorporating them into the new innovations.

In this guide, we offer resources and discussions to prepare for your visit to the Smart Museum of Art (p. 2-3) and continue the conversations after returning to your classroom (p. 4-12). At the museum, students will be led in an inquiry-based exploration of some of these objects and more, while being encouraged to form and share their own interpretations and understandings of the works and themes.

For more information on the exhibition and upcoming related events, visit: smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/exhibitions/meiji-modern-50-years-of-new-japan
Understanding Japan
Japan is a country in the continent of Asia. Japan is an archipelago, or a string of islands, and its capital is Tokyo. Reference the map to compare the geographical location of Japan to the United States.

Today, the country is known for its technological innovations, but it also has rich cultural history and traditions. Discuss food, objects, and ideas that have come from Japan that are common in your community and life.

What does “modern” mean?
When people use the word modern, they are often referring to present day life. However, in this show and in art history, modern refers to the period of 1860-1970s. The term for this period came from the rapid changes and progress happening around the world that seemed to be the start of a new era in contrast with the traditional ways of life. The term “contemporary art” is used to talk about art made today.

Museum Manners
Please review guidelines for visiting the Smart Museum prior to your visit. Backpacks, food, and drinks are not allowed inside the gallery. We will provide bins and lockers to store any items. Do not touch any works unless you are explicitly invited to do so. Oils and dirt from our fingers can damage the art and we want to protect it for everyone to see. Please be mindful of your space, leaving a bubble between you and the art.
BEFORE YOUR VISIT

Looking at Art

Ask your students, how do we look at and talk about art? Openly acknowledge to them that understanding and interpreting art can feel intimidating, especially being in a museum space. It is important to remind them that there is no wrong response to art, even if they do not like the piece. Art is subjective and everyone's ideas and questions are valid and can change over time. We want you and your students to feel comfortable and confident talking about art with us.

To practice talking about art, show your favorite artwork to your students. Model an "I notice... I feel... I wonder" response to the art. Begin the conversation by asking them "What do you see? How does it make you feel?"

To further analyze, here are some examples of different perspectives and advanced questions to use to think about art. We don’t need to ask every question for every work we see, but they are good tools to have on hand if your students ever feel stuck. Some questions may require more research, such as reading the wall labels next to a work of art to learn more information about the artist, materials, and context.

FORMAL QUALITIES

-What colors are used? Shapes? Texture?
  -What is the emphasis or focus? How can you tell?
  -What mood and feeling do these visual elements create?

MATERIAL + PROCESS

-What material is this piece made of? What feelings do these materials evoke?
-How would the artist have manipulated the materials? What might the creative process have looked like?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

-What was happening in the world when the artist made this piece? Could the piece be a response to personal or world events?
-Who was the intended audience?

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

-How does the subject of the work remind you about your life or the society you live in?
-What is the artist trying to communicate? What can you learn from the message?
-What does the title make you think of? Does it accurately represent the work?

Illinois Visual Arts Anchor Standards 8, 9
The Emperor was said to be given power to rule from the gods. When Emperor Meiji (meaning enlightened ruler or bright rule) was given restored political power, he was in charge of creating a national identity for Modern Japan. Part of the nation’s identity came from circulating reproduced images of the imperial couple.

**Further Discussions**
- What elements of the portrait and clothing seem traditionally Japanese? What parts seem influenced by Western culture?
- How do you think this was made?
- Why do you think these images are popular? How do you treat images of world leaders and/or celebrities today?

**Activities**
- Take a black and white portrait of yourself. Go back in and color over the areas that you want to highlight.
- Practice posing for a portrait with a partner. Experiment with the angles of your body, arm placement, and facial expressions to change how you present yourself.
During the Meiji Period, Japan was open for trade and travel with the rest of the world. Boats were essential for getting to and from Japan because it is an island country, and planes hadn’t been invented yet. Here we can see ships arriving at Yokohama, one of the first ports in Japan to be open to foreigners.

Further Discussions
- Look closely at the people and goods on the ships. What does this print reveal about how outside countries viewed Japan?
- Japanese prints are often in panels pieced together. How does the story told here change if you only look at one panel?
- Describe the movement in this print. Identify compositional and stylistic elements that contribute to the feeling of activity.

Activities
- Identify the flags flying on each ship. Part of Japan’s creation of a national identity included designing a flag. Draw a design for a flag for a real or imagined country.
- Create a trade network within a large group. Draw or select an item you think other people would be interested in. Trade objects with peers based on what appeals to you during a set time. Keep a tally on how many people the object reaches.
This vase was made using cloisonné, an ancient metalworking decorative technique that became common in East Asia. This was one of the largest vases made using this technique. The creation of the vase took 18 people and special equipment, and it was purchased by a collector in the United States.

Further Discussions
- How do you think this was made? What material does it look like it could be made of?
- Why do you think Japanese art uses a lot of images of nature when made for people of different cultures?
- Would this be something you would buy? How much would you spend?
- What do you think is the purpose of this vase? Is it meant to be functional, decorative, or both?

Activities
- Use cut paper to assemble an image of nature.
- Collage paper onto a vase to get a feel for the curves of the form.
This landscape is made in a traditional Chinese painting style. When Japan’s borders were closed, artists weren’t allowed to travel to China to study the technique. Rōzan was the first to study in China, getting there by stowing away on a boat. He stayed in China for 10 years.

Further Discussions
- Start by looking close at one section and covering up the rest. Can you tell what is being shown? Look at the whole work. Can you see the scholar and student in the landscape?
- Think about how the artist might have felt being away from home for so long. Do you think this painting show any of those feelings?
- Discuss artists taking inspiration and learning from each other. What artist would you want to learn from? What style of art do you want to learn more about?

Activities
- This scroll, like many others in this same style, has a poetic inscription at the top. Write a haiku (a Japanese style of poetry) that describes the feelings of the landscape.
- Use black watercolor to mimic the lines that Rōzan uses in the landscape. Play around with how much water you use to make darker and lighter lines. Use different pressure for thick and thin lines. Add dots for texture.
These panels relate to a common legend in Japanese culture of reaching enlightenment after hardships in life. In the myth, skeletons serve as a symbol to indicate the characters in the story are not ordinary humans. Here, the skeletons are seen in a parade, with onlookers playing games and listening to music.

Further Discussions
- What are different reasons people might have a parade? Do they always have to be happy?
- What different ideas do skeletons symbolize?
- Discuss the color palette in this work. What feeling does it evoke? Where does it place it in time?

Activities
- Describe a tradition or celebration that is important in your culture or life by writing a story or making a drawing.
- What myth or story do you think is well-known in your community? Make a storyboard that illustrates the important events of the story.
Dragons have been an important creature in Japanese and East Asian mythology. Japanese dragons are often associated with water, including the ocean, mist, and rainfall. This work references traditional Chinese dragon paintings.

**Further Discussions**
- Compare the different visual representations of dragons in current media. Discuss what qualities of the dragon evoke different feelings.
- What does the drawing say about the country of Japan? What animal would you use to represent yourself?
- Where do you see a connection to water in this image?
- What are the two dragons doing? Why are they intertwined? Create your own myth that tells the story of these two dragons.

**Activities**
- Create your own mythical creature. What are its powers? Why are they important?
This work won an advertising contest for a department store. A modern woman sits confidently, wearing traditional clothing with a European hairstyle.

Further Discussions
- Compare the two works in the “Modern” section (This Beauty and Tiger). Which one feels like it was made more recently? Why?
- Look closely at the book the woman is holding. She is looking at a more traditional style of woodblock prints. What do you think makes this lithograph modern compared to the prints inside the open book?
- Compare this work to recent advertisements. What do you think this is advertising?

Activities
- Create your own advertisement for a place of your choice by collaging print ads in magazines.
- Notice the floral patterns throughout the background and clothing. These bold and graphic designs are characteristic of the Art Nouveau (new art) style. Create your own pattern of natural elements that you would want on clothing.
Live tigers were brought to Japan for the first time during the Meiji period as part of circuses and zoos. Artists were able to see and draw the tigers from life, studying their anatomy more accurately than the previous taxidermy they had as references.

**Further Discussions**
- Discuss what you already know about tigers. Where have you seen them during your lifetime?
- How do you think the artist felt while making this painting? What parts of this image evoke that feeling?
- What part of the image do you notice first? Describe the path your eye takes along the painting and identify the elements that draw your attention.

**Activities**
- Draw from a different perspective. Take an object that you see every day. Look at it from an angle you never have before - turn it on its side, hold it upside down, look at it directly from above. Sketch the object from each of these angles.
- Draw an animal from your memory. Then, draw it again using an image as a reference. Discuss which drawing looks more realistic. Which do you prefer? Why?
## GLOSSARY

Learn about the Meiji era and the Elements of Art in Japanese

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<th>Word in Japanese</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
<th>Definition in English</th>
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<td>Nihon</td>
<td>nee-hone</td>
<td>Japan</td>
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<td>Meiji</td>
<td>may-jee</td>
<td>Enlightened rule</td>
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<td>Bijutsu</td>
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<td>Art</td>
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<td>Yōga</td>
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<td>Tekusucha</td>
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Smart Museum of Art

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