



Botanical Garden Programs: Japanese Garden

GYOTAKU:

Japanese Fish Printing



Grades 4–7

I. Introduction

In preparation for a school visit to the Huntington Botanical Gardens' *Japanese Garden* tour, we will observe koi and learn about the tradition of gyotaku (fish printing). Through a hands-on experience creating a gyotaku fish printing, we will learn about representational art and symbolism in Japanese culture, using koi as an example.

II. Objective

- ◆ To introduce students to symbolism in Japanese culture and to learn how to create a gyotaku fish painting.

III. Standards Addressed

Visual Arts Standards (California Department of Education, January 2001)

Standard 1.0

Artistic Perception: Processing, analyzing, and responding to sensory information through the language and skills unique to the visual arts.

- 1.2 Recognize and describe characteristics of representational, abstract, and non-representational works of art. (Grade 5)

Standard 2.0

Creative Expression: Creating, performing, and participating in the visual arts.

- 2.5 Interpret reality and fantasy in original, two-dimensional and three-dimensional artworks. (Grade 7)

Standard 3.0

Historical and Cultural Context: Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and culture.

3.1 Research and describe how art reflects cultural values in various traditions throughout the world. (Grade 7)

Standard 4.0

Aesthetic Valuing: Responding to, analyzing, and making judgments about works in the visual arts.

4.1 Construct and describe plausible interpretations in what they perceive in works of art. (Grade 6)

4.2 Compare the different purposes of a specific culture for creating art. (Grade 5)

4.2 Identify and describe some ways in which their culture is reflected in their artwork. (Grade 6)

4.3 Discuss how the selection of media relates to the meaning or purpose of a work of art. (Grade 4)

IV. Background

Koi

Koi, or carp, are highly revered in Japan. The fish are seen as possessing great perseverance and strength. Koi can survive in a wide range of temperatures, and in murky water that other fish wouldn't tolerate. They also are rumored to have great strength swimming against the current. According to legend, one famous koi swam strongly upstream and turned into a dragon!

During Tango-no-sekku, Boy's or Children's Day, on May 5th, streamers are decorated with cloth or paper carp and displayed on poles outside the home for each boy in the family. Koi are used as symbols on Children's Day because of the associations of strength and determination—qualities that children are encouraged to acquire.

Koi eat water plants, insects and tadpoles. They are known as bottom-feeders, which means that they feed from the bottom of the ponds. At the Japanese Garden at the Huntington, you will see many koi in the ponds. Koi can be quite valuable: they are bred and displayed for their shapes and colors. Differently patterned koi have different names. These are listed for you on an attached sheet.

Gyotaku

Gyotaku (pronounced gee-oh-TA-koo) fish paintings were traditionally made by fishermen as size records for the fish they had caught. They are now often used as art and decoration. Paint is applied to a fish and then pressed onto paper or cloth, creating a fish print. You can use real fish, or the much more pleasant-smelling plastic fish available from Acorn Naturalists. (<http://www.acornnaturalists.com>—search under “fish printing”)

V. Materials Needed (for each group of 3 students)

- ◆ Koi ID worksheets
- ◆ Color pencils
- ◆ Fish or plastic fish replicas
- ◆ Paints—acrylics are best, watercolors or India ink also work (warning: India ink is permanent)
- ◆ Paper (9" x 12") or cloth squares (10" x 10")
- ◆ Buckets of water to rinse fish

VI. Procedure

1. Search for images of koi in the library or on the web, either in preparation for the lesson, or with your students as part of the lesson. Use the images to initiate a discussion about koi: Who has seen koi before? Where do you usually see them? What are the colors that you associate with koi?
2. Discuss different kinds of symbolism in traditional Japanese culture: explain that koi fish symbolize strength and perseverance. Discuss symbolism in different cultures: Can anyone think of an animal that has particular symbolism in the United States? (i.e. bald eagle, grizzly bear) What other things have symbolism that you can think of?
3. Distribute copies of the koi worksheets. These show the patterns and colors of different types of koi. Tell your students that they will see many of these on their Japanese Garden tour at the Huntington.
4. Describe gyotaku fish printing & display a few examples. Let your students know that traditionally gyotaku were made by Japanese fishermen to record the size of fish they had caught. This was a method of directly representing something. Discuss the representational form of gyotaku paintings: while gyotaku no longer necessarily represent a caught fish, the use of a fish in the painting results in a representational form of art.
5. Cover the tables in newspaper (this can be a very messy activity.) Distribute fish (real or plastic) for groups to share. If you use real fish, take care to clean them first, and then pat them dry with paper towels. Have the students take turns applying paint to the fish (paint in one direction to preserve the detail in the scales of the fish) & then pressing paper or cloth on top to make a gyotaku. Take care to press the sheet directly down so that the paint will not smear. If they want to model their colors on koi patterns, they can refer to the worksheet. In between each fish print, have the students rinse off the fish in a bucket or dish of water. Have plenty of paper towels around to minimize the mess.
6. Hang the fish prints to dry.

VII. Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think koi would symbolize strength and perseverance in Japanese culture?
2. If you had to choose an animal to represent strength and perseverance, what would you choose and why?
3. What kinds of art forms serve to represent events, in a similar way to the gyotaku representing the size and shape of a fish caught?

VIII. Making Connections

1. Look at all of the detail in a gyotaku work. What can you learn about fish by closely observing them?
2. What are some animals that have symbolic meaning in the United States? In other cultures?
3. The Japanese Garden is full of symbolism. Research the symbolism of different plants, sculptures, and elements of a traditional Japanese house.

IX. Extension Activities

1. For Children's Day (May 5) make carp streamers and display them in the classroom. Research the history of Children's Day and participate in other rituals, such as making origami iris and helmets, symbols of success and achievement.
2. Research other Japanese festivals that happen throughout the year. See what kinds of activities your class may be able to participate in.
3. Make t-shirts with gyotaku prints. Ask each student to bring in a shirt that they'd like to decorate. Make sure the shirts are washed and ironed first. Use fabric paints for the best results.

Vocabulary

- gyotaku* ["gee-oh-TA-koo"] a traditional fish printing art from Japan; originally gyotaku were made by fishermen as records of their catch, now they are used as art and decoration
- koi* [or *carp*] fish that are highly revered in Japan; koi symbolize courage, energy and determination; koi are bred for their color and shape, many are quite valuable
- symbolism* the association of meaning with specific objects, plants, animals or places

Koi (also known as Carp)

How many different colored and patterned koi can you find?

