Meet the Masters

February Program

Handout

Japanese Screens

Grade 6
May be adapted to grades k-8)

"Screen of Southern Barbarians" Momoyama period 1568-1603
"Flowering Cherry Blossoms with Poem Slips" Tosa Mitsuoki c. 1675 Edo period

About the Artists:

The artist's name that painted "**Screen of the Southern Barbarians**" is unknown.

The artist Tosa Mitsuoki painted "**Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips**". Tosa was a family of painters that maintained its profession in a hereditary fashion over the generations. Mitsuoki Tosa's affiliation with *yomato-e* (yomato-native Japan: e-painting) came out of his family's long history as the official painters, curators, and connoisseurs for the imperial family. The Tosa family had a reputation for maintaining a painting style affiliated with the golden age of the Japanese court.

About the Artwork:

The **"Screen of Southern Barbarians"** is among the most unusual products of the Momoyama period (1568-1603) in Japan. These were called *namban-byobu* or "Southern Barbarian" screens. These large folding screen paintings depict the earliest Europeans (barbarians) to venture out to Japan, the Catholic missionaries and merchants of Portugal and Spain. The first Europeans landed in the Southern tip of the Japanese islands during the Momoyama period.

Screens have along history in Japan and China. "Screen of the Southern Barbarians" is a folding screen (byobu). It's history dates back to the Han dynasty (206 B. C. -221 A. D.) in China. *Byobu* literally means "enclosure" or "protection against" (byo) the wind (bu), and the byobu was used as a temporary divider of interior space or as an enclosure outdoors. The byobu is constructed using strips of paper wrapped horizontally around a wooden frame, starting from the front of one panel to the back of the next, forming hinges. The adjacent strips are applied in the reverse direction. The process is repeated at least three times to strengthen the hinges. The process gives strength to the screen and unity to the composition.

Japanese warlords and rich merchants during the Momoyama period decorated the interiors of their castles and mansion with folding screens. This screen depicts a landscape with figures from Portugal arriving in a galleon onto the shores of Japan. These European visitors brought goods for trade with Japan. They also brought Jesuit missionaries to establish Christian missions on the islands.

Screens were very important in the architecture of Japan. The interiors of traditional Japanese homes were sometimes cold and drafty, because the walls were made of paper. The reason for the paper walls had to do with the lack of good construction lumber to be found on the islands of Japan. Thus the screen provided protection from

cold for the residents. Japanese homes were also made with few interior walls thus the screen could be used for privacy and to divide the spaces.

The Japanese called the men on the large ship that appears on the screen, *namban*, meaning southern barbarians. The Chinese had at one time referred to the Japanese as barbarians at an earlier date as the Portuguese themselves referred to non-Christians.

What brought the Portuguese was probably the famous travel book written by Marco Polo. This famous thirteenth century explorer wrote of the riches he found in the islands called Zipangu, off the coast of China. Today Zipangu is called Japan.

When we look at "**Flowering Cherry with Poem Slips**" we see a very different image than the scene represented in the "Screen of the Southern Barbarians. Tosa Mitsuoki painted this scene on silk stretched around a wooden frame rather than paper. This screen was painted for Tofukumonin (1607-1678), daughter of Shogun Tokugawa Hidetada (ruled 1605-1623) and wife of emperor Gomizuno-o (ruled 1611-1629). In the spring when the cherry blossoms were in full bloom the Japanese custom was to make a social event of the occasion. The empress and her courtiers engaged in a contest of recalling versus from classical poetry associated with spring. The poems were written in calligraphy on vertical strips of paper, which were tied to the tree branches. Participants in this excursion may have inscribed some of the poem slips on this screen.

Mitsuoki was painted this screen using inks and gold leaf with gold powder while malachite was used for the green of the bamboo and lichens. Cinnabar was used for the red poem slips. Silver, now tarnished was used on the reverse side of a number of poem slips.

Topics for Discussion:

These two screens are presented together with an emphasis on the "Screen of the Southern Barbarians". Presenting two works of art provides a point for lively discussions for comparing and contrasting the subjects styles and purposes of each object.

1. What colors did each of the artist use?
2. Do you know where the artists used gold leaf?
3. One screen tells a story. Can you tell what the story might be?
4. Which of these screens represents nature?
5. Find the Portuguese in the "Screen of the Southern Barbarians". How are their cloths different from the Japanese cloths?
6. There is one figure dressed differently that the others. Do you know what his job was? (He was a Jesuit priest)
7. Can you find animals in the scene? How many? (There are 3, 2 horses and 1 dog.)
8. Is this a friendly picture or a warring kind of picture? (friendly) Why do you think that?
9. What story could you tell using the screen format?
10. Which explorer sailed in the same kind of ship as the one in the screen? Christopher Columbus
11. Which of these screens would you want to use in your home? Why?

Hands-on Art Activity: **Tell a Story on a Folding Screen**

Teacher preparation: The subjects used by Japanese screen painters were usually based on nature. The students should think about the way they want to show the natural world on their screens. They could also tell a story on their folding screen.

Materials: Stiff paper app. 11"x17" cut in half (5 ½" x 17")
Pencil
Ruler
Watercolor paints colored pencil or crayons
Optional: Colorful wrapping papers
Glue

1. Lay the paper on the table and evenly fold the paper in half on the short edge and then fold it back again to make four panels.
2. Using the ruler measure 1/4' around edge of paper. Drew a line around the edge to form a frame.
3. Draw a continuous design that begins on left screen and flows through to the right screen. You may tell a story on the screen that begins in the first panel and ends at the last panel.
4. Paint the edge and design when the drawing is complete.
5. Sign the front when complete.

Colorful wrapping papers or foil papers can be glued around the edge of the screen to form a frame. The decorative papers can also be glued to the back of the screen to add color and support.

Additional Support Materials:

Japanese Screens Boxed Stationary
The Art Institute of Chicago Museum Shop
You will find five different designs from the Art Institute collection. Each note card is a miniature version of the original work of art. These are great for passing around the classroom for students to fold and study.

A **world map** can be utilized to show the location of Japan in comparison to Chicago.. Latitude can be discussed especially in the older grades. This way you can bring geography into the art presentation.

Bring a CD player (many teachers have them in their classrooms) and a selection of **traditional Japanese music**. Look for music made with the **Koto and Shakuhachi** (bamboo flute). The students will relax and enjoy working on their screens while listening to this music.

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