

Exploring Japanese Artefacts: Dogu

Background Notes for Teachers

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What are Dogu?

Dogu means 'earthen figure' and they were usually made of clay. They were made by people in Japan long ago between 14,500–500 BC during the Jomon Period. This would have been around the same time as the Neolithic Period in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

What were they used for?

Dogu had spiritual significance, but contemporary researchers and archaeologists do not know the specific nature of their use; there is no written record or other evidence to tell us.

What is interesting about dogu?

Over 20,000 dogu have been excavated in Japan and they all have different facial expressions and unique personalities. Figurines from other pre-historic cultures found in other parts of the world tend to have the same faces or facial expressions.

Both large and small dogu have been found – one of the largest is over 40cm tall and one of the smallest is only 3cm! Some of the best preserved dogu are now designated as national treasures of Japan.

What else do we know about the people who lived during the Jomon Period?

Jomon pottery features designs and textures made by pressing rope or cord into the wet clay (in fact, Jomon means 'cord-marked'). The Jomon potters made many other items besides dogu, including practical cooking pots and other vessels. Their creations were made without the use of pottery wheels or kilns and were fired on open bonfires.

We also know Jomon people loved to ornament themselves – taking care of their hair, clothes, and teeth and wearing ceramic jewellery. This can be seen represented in the dogu figures too.
