

Sumo

Background Notes for Teachers

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This document is intended for teachers who are planning on teaching about an aspect of Japanese literature or art within their English or Art & Design curriculum, or perhaps within a wider unit of learning about Japan. These background notes will provide you with the basic key information you need to know about some of Japan's most famous arts and literature, including ukiyo-e, origami, calligraphy, manga, kamishibai, haiku, and noh theatre.

Ukiyo-e 浮世絵

Ukiyo-e are Japanese woodblock prints and paintings that became popular as an art form during the Edo period (1603-1867). Ukiyo-e is often translated as “pictures of the floating world”, with the subjects of the paintings usually being people and nature. These bold, colourful, and expressive prints and paintings are iconic and distinct when compared to art from elsewhere in the world at the time.

To make a woodblock print, artists first sketch out an initial design with ink, before carving it onto wooden blocks. They then apply different coloured inks to the blocks, before pressing them onto paper to print the design. Whilst this can be a long process initially, once the wood blocks have been carved, it is easy to then mass produce prints.

Katsushika Hokusai is an example of a famous ukiyo-e artist from the Edo period. He is famous for his series of work *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, which includes the iconic *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*.

Origami 折り紙

Origami literally means paper folding – **ori** 折り from the verb to fold, and **gami** 紙 meaning paper. It's believed that the concept of paper folding originated from China. Practiced by monks, they brought paper and the ideas for folding it to Japan around the 7th century. Originally, paper folding was used to create special decorations in religious ceremonies, called **girei-ori**.

It was not until the 1600s when origami became a popular recreational art form. People enjoyed the art of folding paper and being able to create their own designs, not necessarily for any religious or ceremonial purpose.

One of the most iconic origami designs is the origami crane. It is a symbol of resilience, strength, and peace. Traditionally, it is believed that if someone folds and strings together 1000 origami cranes, it will grant you a wish, such as a long life or recovery from an illness.

Calligraphy / Shodo 書道

Shodo 書道 (calligraphy) is the traditional and artistic way of writing kanji on paper with a brush and ink. The word shodo literally means “way of writing”. It originated from China, and was introduced to Japan in the 6th century, alongside Buddhism. Calligraphy has been practiced for over a thousand years in Japan, and even today, children at schools across the country learn how to write kanji in this way. There are many different calligraphy styles, too.

Manga 漫画

Manga are Japanese comics or graphic novels that are iconic and have become popular as a form of story-telling media across the world. The art style is distinct from other comic book styles; characters often look unrealistic and have round, big eyes, which helps with expressing and conveying emotion. Manga books are also read from right to left, top to bottom. Whilst this may seem unintuitive for many people outside of Japan, manga continues to be a popular form of media for people to consume and enjoy. You can find manga on library shelves and in bookshops all around the world.

Paper Theatre / Kamishibai 紙芝居

The word **kamishibai 紙芝居** literally means “paper theatre”, and it is a traditional form of storytelling in which the narrator uses a set of picture boards with illustrations on the front side and a script on the back, slotted into a theatre-style wooden frame.

It particularly flourished in the late 1920s to 1930s, during which time Japan was in a great economic depression. Travelling storytellers would move from place to place and visit towns to read and perform for children. Kamishibai proved to be a simple yet effective way to be able to earn money, as well as a popular form of entertainment for children and adults alike. Many kamishibaiya would perform traditional Japanese folktales, such as *Momotaro* (*Peach Boy*) and *Kaguya Hime* (*The Moon Princess*, also known as *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*).

Haiku 俳句

Haiku are Japanese poems that consist of seventeen syllables, structured in a five-seven-five syllable structure across three lines. Unlike other forms of poetry, haiku do not necessarily need to rhyme or having a rhyming structure, however some poets may try to make the first and third lines rhyme. Traditionally, haiku poets wrote about nature and the beauty of the natural world, often referring to a season.

One famous haiku poet is Matsuo Basho (1644-1694), who wrote perhaps one of the most well-known haiku poems in the world - *The Old Pond*. Below is the English translation:

*An old silent pond
A frog jumps into the pond,
splash! Silence again.*

Another key characteristic in haiku is that somewhere within the poem, a change will occur. In the example shown above, the change is the sound created by the frog once it jumps into the pond. Whilst haiku poems may only be short, they are simple yet effective at evoking a clear image and expressing a message.

Noh Theatre 能楽

Noh is a traditional type of Japanese theatre that has been performed as early as the 1300s. It is known for its use of elaborate costumes and iconic and distinctive masks, which are usually only worn by the lead actor of the play. Noh plays are also well-known for their exaggerated and abstract styles of dance, and the music for these plays is performed live by musicians on-stage who play traditional Japanese instruments such as the fue (flute) and taiko drum (large floor drum), to help tell the story and set the scene.
