

Asian Odyssey

A National K-12 Interdisciplinary Curriculum Model

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Mount Fuji

Grade Level

This lesson plan can be adjusted for grades 5-12

Purpose

The purpose of this lesson is to consider the cultural significance of Mt. Fuji to the Japanese, use it as a tool to consider Shinto, and to examine the imagery of Mt. Fuji in order to discover why it has such a dominant place in Japanese culture and is a recurring theme in Japanese art.

Concepts

- Mount Fuji—a dormant volcano that is the highest mountain in Japan (3,776 meters or 12,387 feet); it is a part of Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park in the southern part of Honshu, the largest island of Japan. Fuji's most recent eruption lasted from November 24, 1707, until January 22, 1708. It had erupted at least 16 times prior to this.
- Imagery—appealing to the senses.
- Archipelago—a string of islands, often grouped together
- Physical features—landforms, bodies of water, climate, soil, plant and animal life, and other natural resources
- Processions—ritual parades
- Shinto—"the way of the kami," the ancient indigenous religion of Japan based on the belief that nature and all things related to it are divine
- Volcanoes—vents in the earth's crust that permit the flow of molten materials (lava)

Key Ideas

- Mountains comprise 71% of Japan's four main islands of Hokkaido, Honshu, Kyushu, and Shikoku, as well as Okinawa and Rito (out islands) were formed by volcanic eruptions. Japan has 1/10 of the world's 840 active volcanoes and experiences between 1,000 and 1,500 earthquakes a year.
- Mount Fuji is a volcanic mountain sacred to the Japanese. The mountain is viewed as one of Japan's most enduring national symbols; it is often cited as more popular than the national flag.
- In the ancient Shinto religion, Mt. Fuji was considered to be the supreme altar of the sun; the goddess Sengen-sama's shrine is still found at the summit.

- In ancient Shinto belief, humans are part of nature and must respect and appreciate the awesomeness of the natural world and the spirits (*kami*) of nature that reside within this world. This attitude has been reflected in the Japanese arts.
- Many of the special places in Japan are depicted so often in all forms of art that they have become icons for the Japanese people.
- Many people make pilgrimages to the top of Mt. Fuji, and there are rest stations (mountain huts) along the trail. It takes 8-9 hours of moderate hiking to reach the summit.
- Shinto, Japan's indigenous religion, originated in ancient fears of demons and supernatural powers present in all of nature. The divine spirit is present in trees, mountains, stones, and plants, all of which are venerated.
- Shinto beliefs are reflected in the value Japanese people place on simplicity and nature and in the focus on life's impermanence and the passing of the seasons as a representation of life's passing moments. Nature and its beauty and all related to it are considered divine.
- Those ideas permeate Japanese life not only in its religious customs but also through architecture, daily rituals, music, and art.
- Aesthetics with Shinto roots that surface in art and literature (poetry) are:
 - Suggestion—hint of idea (as in monochromatic paintings)
 - Irregularity—not symmetrical or regular (as in odd numbers of syllables in a poem or lines or nonsymmetrical paintings)
 - Simplicity—not complicated (simple homes, single-idea poems that focus on a specific idea or passing moment, the meditation on a single moment or enjoyment of one aspect of nature)
 - Perishability—the recognition of impermanence (the savoring of an irretrievable passing moment in a poem or artwork)
- There is such an appreciation for the changing seasonal beauty of Mount Fuji that the famous artist, Katsushika Hokusai painted 36 different views of it. Mt. Fuji is usually not in the center of the composition. In the Japanese aesthetic, asymmetry is much prized in most of the compositions. Fuji remains one focus, if not the sole focus, of the image. This is achieved by the Fuji's size, the colors used in the print, or the placement of the composition to create diagonals that focus the eye of the viewer on Mt. Fuji.

Materials

The Fuji River in the Snow, 1841, CMA 1916.1125

Fuji in Clear Weather (from the series Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji), early 1830s, CMA 1930.189

Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji: The Pine Grove at Niho in Suruga Province, 1859, CMA 1985.319

Procession at the Foot of Mount Fuji, 1921.340.a-c

Mt. Fuji and Pine, with Kyoka Poetry, late 18th century-early 19th century, CMA 1995.18

Rain Below the Mountain (from the series Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji), early 1830s, CMA 1940.1002

Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji: The Surface of Lake Misaka in Kai Province, early 1830s, CMS 1985.325

Yosemite Valley, Albert Bierstadt, 1866, CMA 221.1922

Twilight in the Wilderness, Frederic Edwin Church, 1860, CMA 1965.233

Procedure

Day 1

1. Discuss the following:
 - a. Have the students bring in an image of an American icon. What images/emotions/feelings does it conjure up in your mind? What senses are affected? Do you feel a part of the image in any way?
2. Show the CMA images of Mt. Fuji. Ask students to verbally describe the images. Have them discuss whether the images are realistic? Abstract? Emotional? Reverential? Take notes on each one.
 - a. Have you ever visited places similar to this? Discuss.
3. Now look at all the images together. Describe what you see and write it down. What is the season? How do we know? Does the fact that the same subject is painted over and over under different conditions suggest anything about how the Japanese view nature? What is the focal point? Is there more than one focal point? Are there any people in the painting or other objects? What do you notice about them?
4. Discuss the concept of Shinto. What is the natural world? How do people fit into the natural world? How does nature help people? Can nature be a destructive force?
5. What places of great natural beauty have you visited? Have you ever been in a position where you felt inconsequential against the power of nature?
6. Does nature possess a duality? Explain. How is it shown in the prints? Is there a sense of divine portrayed in the print?
7. What does the frequent emphasis on nature suggest about the Japanese spirit or mind?

Day 2

1. Have students research various aspects of Mt. Fuji. Locate Fuji on a map of Japan. How does it compare in height to Mount Everest? What is the world's tallest active volcano? When did Fuji last erupt? How much snow falls on Fuji annually? When can people climb Mt. Fuji?
2. In the class have the students share their research.
3. Show the images of Mt. Fuji from the CMA's collection. From the images, what can you deduce about the Japanese feeling toward Mt. Fuji? Ask the class to use words to

characterize the images. (Are the compositions asymmetrical? Colorful? Vertical? Do they have a central horizon line?)

4. Demonstrate how the people acclimate to the mountainous terrain. Ask students to explain what modes of transportation evolved because of terrain, as reflected in the images from CMA?
5. Discuss Shinto with the class. Ask the students to posit from the images how Fuji fits into Shinto. (It was revered as a place through which the *kami* were channeled. In the images, it is always given a position of reverence. The eye is drawn to the mountain by diagonals in the composition.)
6. Show the procession images. Ask the students to discuss the activities involved.
7. Ask the students in Americans revere nature. Ask them to look at *Twilight in the Wilderness* and *Yosemite Valley*. How are they similar to the Japanese depiction of nature? Different? Discuss the American sense of reverence for nature. While we do not practice it as a religion, it is part of the American ethos.

Enrichment

- A. Using art books, and working in groups of two or three students, locate a set of Katsushika Hokusai's prints of the *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*. Assign one print to each group. They must make a brief presentation to the class of their observations. Use the following questions as a prompt or guide:
 - a. What do the images portray about nature? About Mount Fuji in particular?
 - b. Does the print depict an identifiable place (i.e., would a Japanese person know the locale)?
 - c. What emotions emerge from viewing these prints? Why?
 - d. Does the mountain possess a certain mystery, wonder, or power? Why do you suppose this is?
 - e. What is the role of the individual in the natural world?
- B. What other mountain has the level of influence on its country, as Mt. Fuji on Japan?
- C. How does a volcano influence the formation of landforms?
- D. Research the active volcanoes in the world today.
- E. Research the various volcanoes around the world and compare the others to Mt. Fuji.

Evaluation

- A. Ask each student to bring to class a small part of nature.
 - a. A leaf
 - b. A bug
 - c. A flower
 - d. Sand
 - e. A rock
 - f. A seashell

- g. A branch
 - h. Student's choice
- B. Have students write a brief paragraph about the images and emotions that are engendered by this object from nature.

Ohio State Standards

1. Locate on a map the major physical and human features of world regions. Locate physical features in the world region that include mountain ranges.
2. Explain how physical processes produce geographic variations in landforms and climate, and how physical features affect human settlement.
3. Use text features and graphics to organize, analyze, and draw inferences from content and to gain additional information.
4. Explain the treatment, scope, and organization of ideas from different texts to draw conclusions about a topic.

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