

Visual Literacy Activity

networks

The East Asian World

Analyzing Art of the Tokugawa Period

The arts of a culture or era can thrive even during times of rigid government controls and social restrictions. When you view art from the perspective of a historian, you can appreciate how art can both reflect and transcend the prevailing social views of its time.

Directions: The two works below represent two of the most important genres of art during Japan's Tokugawa period. Look closely at the two works, analyze them, and answer the questions below.

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Caption: *Iris*, Ogata Korin, c. late seventeenth–early eighteenth century.



Caption: *South Wind, Clear Sky* from *Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji*. Katsushika Hokusai, c. 1826–1833.

British Museum / Art Resource, NY

Background

During the Tokugawa era (1603–1868), also known as the Edo period, Japanese society was very restrictive: class distinctions were more rigid than before, exposure to the outside world was strictly limited, and women's rights were severely curtailed. Yet the Tokugawa era was a time of expansion and innovation in the visual arts. Art patronage was no longer just the domain of nobles and the elite. In cities, both nobles and wealthy merchants wanted to beautify their surroundings. One artistic response was a popular style of art called *Rinpa*, which reinvigorated earlier classical Japanese styles. *Rinpa* artists excelled both in painting and in the decorative arts, creating lacquerware, screens, textiles, and pottery. Luxurious materials, such as gold leaf, were often used to paint scenes of nature inspired by Japanese literature. Vibrant colors, elegant decorative patterns, and a sense of refinement and luxury were characteristics of the *Rinpa* style.

The image of flowers is by Ogata Korin (1658–1716), one of the greatest *Rinpa* painters. His painting *Iris* is a folding screen with a gilt, or gold leaf, background. The term *Rinpa* comes from Ogata Korin's name: *rin* from "Korin" and *pa*, meaning "group" or "school." Korin's style is known for its simplified, flattened, and abstracted shapes. Korin created several different versions of this iris screen, each inspired by a famous episode from the classic Japanese book *Tales of Ise*.

Ukiyo-e, meaning "pictures of the floating world," is one of the Tokugawa period's most important artistic developments. This uniquely Japanese art focuses on images of everyday life. The subject matter is distinctively Japanese but departs from traditional subjects and themes. Even though Japan protected itself from direct contact with foreigners, a Dutch trading post in Nagasaki brought in numerous printed works from Europe, and Japanese artists studied these images. Directly and indirectly, *ukiyo-e*

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Visual Literacy Activity *Cont.*

The logo for 'networks' features the word in a bold, lowercase sans-serif font. A stylized graphic of intersecting lines forms a starburst or network pattern behind the letter 'o'.

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artists began to incorporate European themes, styles, and even techniques into the brightly colored, crisply designed ukiyo-e prints.

The woodblock print of a mountain is by Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), one of the greatest of the later ukiyo-e artists. *South Wind, Clear Sky* is from his print series *Thirty-Six Views of Mt. Fuji*. Contrary to its name, *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji* actually contains 46 woodblock prints depicting Mount Fuji from various perspectives. The series stemmed from Hokusai's fascination with Mount Fuji, which, according to popular belief, was connected to immortality. Hokusai later went on to publish the series *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*.

Practicing the Skill

1. **Describing** What features do these two works have in common?

2. **Explaining** How did Japanese artists embrace outside influences even though contact with the outside world was severely restricted?

3. **Interpreting** Both works shown here exist in several different variations, or versions. What do you know about life during the Tokugawa period that might explain why artists produced different versions of the same subject?

Go a Step Further

4. **Speculating** Why do you think a socially restrictive era such as the Tokugawa period produced vibrant new expressions in the visual arts?
