

Early Japanese Pottery Curriculum Project

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Rationale

While ostensibly an art project about particular pottery forms in pre-literate Japan—a Jomon era flamboyant ceramic and Yayoi era footed jar—the real goal of this two-lesson series is to investigate with students the ways in which experts examine and interpret ancient material. Inserted into a general survey course of ancient history, which often has little or no Japanese content, this study expands the normal curriculum and adds a hands-on experience.

There is no prerequisite content or skills, though it may help to have begun the general history class in order to provide more comparisons for students. I often use these short lessons a few weeks into the course in order to interrogate the construction of knowledge in our own study, as well as that of academia and experts. In the coming months, it can be useful to remind students of this short course and encouraging them to question sources and assumptions.

Skill & Content Objectives

For the purposes of this curriculum project, its lesson plans, and underlying assumptions, I am relying on the current publications of the California Department of Education. Similar expectations and assumptions exist for most states. In California, sixth grade social studies has as its focus ancient civilizations in the context of world history and geography. This varies a bit more by state and local system, but this project has plenty of flexibility for you to modify it for younger or older students.

California Department of Education, [History-Social Science Framework](https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/hs/cf/hssframework.asp).
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/hs/cf/hssframework.asp>. Last Reviewed Monday, October 19, 2020.
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Lesson Plan

This lesson takes place over two sessions, each lesson focusing on a pottery object from ancient Japan. Lesson One features a [Jomon](#) vessel, and the second spotlights a [Yayoi](#) jar. The structure of each lesson is the same. This repetition structures the investigation of the construction of meaning without extending across many lessons and inducing boredom.

Supplies & Materials

- Blank paper
- Pencils, markers, or other drawing tools
- Clay of any kind
- Tools for working or decorating clay, if desired

1. Present the image of the pottery object, just the image, on a screen or print copies of the image for students to hold.

Jomon Vessel - <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39660>

Yayoi Jar - <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/50305>

2. Ask questions

What is this object?

What do you think is going on?

What are the practical possibilities? What was its use?

What are the decorative possibilities? Why do you think it looks like this?

Mention early Yayoi decoration by pressing shells into surface.

How do you think they made it?

Give students time to speculate and discuss their ideas, from the simple to the elegant or ridiculous.

Ask more questions.

What limits our ability to make conclusions?

How do we decide between two theories?

3. Reveal the whole of the web page linked above to show students the assertions of the experts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

4. Compare and discuss the students' ideas with those of the web pages.

5. Ask students what another example of each ceramic would look like.

What are its essential qualities?

What seemed to matter to the makers?

6. Students design their own example on paper.

7. Sculpt their own versions of the object with an eye for shape and decoration.

This lesson can be expanded and extended by adding more objects and more time for students to design and sculpt.

Assessment

The big payoff for this study is students' willingness to interrogate the sources they encounter and the expertise on which they draw.

It is useful, however, to have students respond in writing to the following questions with a topic sentence and an example or two from their study.

- What was your initial understanding of the two objects we explored and how did it change as we examined and discussed them further?
- What kind of information helped you understand the objects better?
- What are the limits on our ability to challenge published interpretations of historical objects?