

Japanese Handscroll Painting

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- Jaye Zola, “[A Case Study of Heian Japan through Art: Japan’s Four Great Emaki](#),” part of *Imaging Japanese History*, University of Colorado Boulder:

Jaye Zola’s lesson plan comes from the Imaging Japanese History project, part of the University of Colorado Boulder’s Program for Teaching East Asia. This lesson is aimed at high school students, but can be adapted and used in an introductory survey art history classes to good effect. The lesson involves having students look closely at a few frames from four handscroll paintings from the Heian period, interpreting them with the help of some contextual information, and then comparing them.

Learning Goals:

After completing this activity, students will be able to:

- Relate their close observation of a particular work of art to the contextual background provided for it – connecting its visual appearance to its historical context.
- Compare the formal characteristics, narrative content and historical context of different handscroll paintings from the Heian period.

Activity (takes about 75-90 minutes):

- Before class Preparation:
 - o Students prepare by reading Ethan Segal’s “[Heian Japan: An Introductory Essay](#)”, which provides background on the period. (I tell students in advance that the whole class period will be given over to an activity and that I will not be lecturing in a conventional sense, so that it is extra important for them to come prepared.)
 - o Instructor prints out copies of [images](#) from *Chōjū giga (Scroll of Frolicking Animals)*; *Genji Monogatari emaki (The Illustrated Tale of Genji)*; *Shigisan engi emaki (Legends of Mt. Shigi)*; and *Ban Dainagon ekotoba (The Tale of the Courtier Ban Dainagon)* and [handouts](#)
- In class:
 - o Each student is assigned one of the paintings to focus on (so that ¼ of the class is focusing on *Scroll of Frolicking Animals*, ¼ is focusing on *The Illustrated Tale of Genji*, and so on)
 - o Students individually look at the print-outs of their assigned painting, read the information given in the handout, and take notes following the “Scroll Analysis and Art Characteristics” worksheets (H5 and H9) – c. 10-15 minutes to study the scroll
 - o Students assigned the same painting meet as a group to clarify their understanding of the painting – c. 10-15 minutes to talk together

- Students form pairs to compare two paintings and fill out “Scroll Comparison Diagram” together (H6). Each student is an “expert” on their respective scroll, and responsible for explaining it to the other. Zola recommends pairing *Illustrated Tale of Genji* with *Legends of Mt. Shigi* and *The Tale of the Courtier Ban Dainagon* with *Scroll of Frolicking Animals*– c. 10-15 minutes
- Class reconvenes as a complete group, and instructor guides students in discussing the paintings.
 - Project the images on the screen and have students take the lead in telling the class about the narrative, social context, and formal qualities of the paintings. Guide them as necessary and move the conversation along so that all four paintings are discussed by the end of the class period, framing this as an operation of the student experts explaining their painting to the class, rather than the instructor providing information.
- If there’s time, end with a discussion asking:
 - How do the paintings reflect their historical/political context? What do these paintings tell us about life in Heian Japan?
 - How was it to move back and forth between the “close looking” at the paintings and the broader historical material given in the handouts or in the Segal essay? How can we balance these different types of information, visual and contextual? How are they related?
 - How do these handscroll paintings compare in form, content and context to other examples of two-dimensional art/painting that we have studied so far in class?
- Note: If your class period is shorter than 1 hour 15 minutes, or your class is full of enthusiastic discussants, you might consider reducing the number of paintings discussed to three or even two. (I usually open the class by explaining that it was a deliberate choice to use a case study and focus on depth rather than breadth in an activity that asks students to look directly and actively for themselves.)
- In addition to the Ethan Segal essay, I also post all the handouts from class to the Blackboard, so students can access background information on all the paintings.