

Lesson 2: Japanese Influence on Whistler

“This artistic abode of my son is ornamented by a very rare collection of Japanese and Chinese. He considers the paintings upon them the finest specimens of art, and his companions (artists), who resort here for an evening’s relaxation occasionally get enthusiastic as they handle and examine the curious figure portrayed.”

--Anna McNeill Whistler

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Introduction

When Japan opened to trade with the West in 1854 after centuries of isolation, Japanese art began appearing in European capitals. Asian objects and the composition and harmonies of Japanese woodblock prints intrigued James McNeill Whistler and his fellow artists. Whistler incorporated Japanese flattened space, high horizon line, and limitation of color into his etchings and paintings.

In this lesson students discuss Whistler's print, *Upright Venice*. They compare and contrast it to Japanese artist Hiroshige's woodblock print *View of Mogami River and Gassan Mountain, Dewa*. Students read how 19th-Century artists were inspired by art from the Far East. They write answers about this reading on a worksheet. Students sketch or photograph a landscape scene and experiment with various locations of the horizon line. As a concluding assessment students write a short essay explaining how Japanese prints influenced Whistler's art.

Guiding Question

How did Japanese prints influence Whistler's art?

Learning Objectives

At the end of this lesson students will be able to:

- Analyze and describe the composition of space in Whistler's etching, *Upright Venice*;
- Identify and discuss similarities between Whistler's print and Japanese artist Hiroshige's woodblock print;
- Discuss Whistler and his associates' enthusiasm for Asian art;
- Describe how Whistler incorporated Japanese influences into his art;
- Vary the location of the horizon line in sketches or photographs of the same scene;
- Analyze how the placement of the horizon line affects the perception of space and abstraction in a composition;
- Write a short essay describing the influences of Asian art in Whistler's art.

Background for Teachers

James McNeill Whistler

Whistler and his friends first “discovered” Japanese woodblock prints in Paris in the mid 1850s. After 250 years of isolation, Japan opened to trade with Europe and the United States. Whistler began collecting Japanese prints, porcelains and other objects. When Whistler moved to London in 1859, he introduced fellow artists to his collection of Japanese art. The 1862 International Exhibition further piqued London’s obsession with Asian art.

Composition

As Whistler changed his art from realism to works of pure beauty, he studied the spatial composition and color of Japanese prints. He incorporated their principles into his own compositions. He began locating horizon lines high in the picture plane. This flattened space eventually led to abstractions. Like Japanese artists his compositions were asymmetrical, not centered, with figures and objects cut off by the edge of the picture. Striving for harmony in his paintings, he limited and repeated colors.

Asian artists sign their work with chop marks. Whistler signed his art with a butterfly, his mark.

Upright Venice, etching and drypoint, 1879-1880

Whistler was broke after suing art critic John Ruskin for libel in 1878. Although he won the case, he’d used all his money for legal fees. He received a commission to create twelve plates of Venetian scenes. Initially he was only to be in Venice a few months, but he stayed more than a year etching over fifty scenes. On his return to London, his exhibits of the etchings were very successful.

For more about Whistler’s art: [\[Link to these on the site\]](#)

[Talented Boy](http://www.odysseymedia.org/art-life/talented-boy/) [http://www.odysseymedia.org/art-life/talented-boy/]

[Art for Art’s Sake](http://www.odysseymedia.org/art-life/art-for-arts-sake/) [http://www.odysseymedia.org/art-life/art-for-arts-sake/]

[Inspiration from the East](http://www.odysseymedia.org/art-life/inspiration-from-the-east/) [http://www.odysseymedia.org/art-life/inspiration-from-the-east/]

[Selling the Vision](http://www.odysseymedia.org/art-life/selling-the-vision/) [http://www.odysseymedia.org/art-life/selling-the-vision/]

[Portraits & Painters](http://www.odysseymedia.org/art-life/portraits-patrons/) [http://www.odysseymedia.org/art-life/portraits-patrons/]

[Legacy](http://www.odysseymedia.org/art-life/legacy/) [http://www.odysseymedia.org/art-life/legacy/]

Comparative Timeline

[<http://www.odysseymedia.org/productions/whistler/about-the-artist/timeline/>]

The Venice Sets [<http://www.odysseymedia.org/introduction-to-etching/the-venice-sets/>]

The etching process is introduced in lesson 3. See the video on this site, ***The Process of Etching*** [[Add Link](#)].

Hiroshige

Japanese artist Andō Hiroshige was born in Edo (modern Tokyo) in 1797. His original name was Ichiyusai Tokutaro, but his professional name was Utagawa Hiroshige. Although he inherited a fire warden position from his father, by 1811 he was studying art. Edo was a prosperous commercial center. Hiroshige designed ukiyo-e prints. These genre pictures of Edo's stylish, fleeting, "floating world" featured familiar scenes, everyday life and Edo's entertainers.

Hiroshige's print, *View of Mogami River and Gassan Mountain, Dewa* was from his series of *Famous Views in the Sixty-odd Provinces*. This vertical composition shows a bird's eye view of the swift Mogamiawa River. Mount Gassan, one of the three sacred mountains of the ancient Japanese province of Dewa, rises in the background. Because ukiyo-e prints were inexpensive, costing only about the price of a bowl of noodles, middle class Japanese were able to afford them. To learn more about Hiroshige and ukiyo-e see:

The Floating World of Ukiyo-E (includes Hiroshige's sketchbooks)

Library of Congress Exhibit

<<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/ukiyo-e/index.html>>

Japan Memories of a Secret Empire

PBS video and website

<<http://www.pbs.org/empires/japan/entered.html>>

Preparing to Teach this Lesson

Review the lesson plan and the websites used throughout. Locate and bookmark suggested materials and websites. Download and print out documents you will use. Duplicate copies as necessary for student viewing.

Students can access materials at
<<http://www.whistlerthemovie.com>>.

Reproducible Handouts for Lesson 2:

[Link to each of the following within this lesson]

Lesson 2.1 Compare and Contrast Whistler Etching to Hiroshige Woodblock Print Worksheet

Lesson 2.2 Study Guide “Whistler’s Enthusiasm for Japonisme”

Lesson 2.3 Answer Sheet for “Whistler’s Enthusiasm for Japonisme”

Lesson 2.4 Horizon Experiments Assignment

Lesson 2.5 Japanese Influences in Whistler’s Art Assignment

Lesson 2.6 Assessment Rubric for Japanese Influences in Whistler’s Art Assignment

Suggested Activities

[each of the following should be links to the activity within this lesson]

Activity 1. Look and Think: Discuss Whistler Etching, *Upright Venice*

Activity 2. Compare and Contrast a Whistler Etching and a Hiroshige Woodblock Print

Activity 3. Read, Think, Write: Japanese Influence on Whistler

Activity 4 Studio. Experimenting with Horizons: Landscape Photographs or Sketches

Activity 5 Assessment. Write How Japanese Art Influenced Whistler’s Prints

Activity 1. Look and Think: Discuss Whistler Etching, *Upright Venice*

Show students a large image of **Whistler's etching, *Upright Venice***. Give them a few minutes to study it.

Observation and Analysis

Ask: What objects do you see in this picture? Compile a class list of students' answers. They should see

- gondolas (boats – most are open, some enclosed) Note the curved bows.
- upright poles with streamers in foreground for mooring gondolas
- oars or poles lying on gondolas
- indistinct city in background with two tall domes (It's Venice.)
- a 3-masted schooner in the left background
- brick or cobblestone waterfront walkway in left foreground
- sky with clouds
- rising smoke in far right background
- men – most standing in groups wearing hats, man bending over, man leaning on a cane or stick near left edge
- one woman in the group at the table (Is she shopping?),
- butterfly (Whistler's signature symbol)



Whistler, James McNeill, *Upright Venice*, 1880, Etching, 25.5 x 18 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection

Ask: Describe the color in this print.

It has black lines on a cream colored paper. Explain that this was a one-color or monochrome print.

Tell students that it is an etching. Briefly, the artist's lines were etched into a copper plate. The printer put ink into these etched lines, and then forced the ink onto paper. (This process is explained in detail in Lesson 3 and in ***The Process of Etching* video [link to it on this site]**)

Ask: What do you notice first when you look at this print?

Students may notice the darker circle of men standing by the group of gondolas on the lower right. With the focal point located off center, this is an asymmetrical composition.

Ask students to trace the movement of their gaze through this picture. Beginning on the lower right, the waterfront curb leads to a dark covered gondola. Although there is a large empty space in the middle of the composition, the gondola mooring poles, as well the angle of the curb lead us to the distant ship and city scene.

Point out how Whistler created the darker values in the etching. If possible zoom in to some of the closely spaced parallel lines. Locate a few areas of crosshatched lines. Notice the sketchy, almost scribbly lines of the figures.

Ask students to locate the horizon. Note how high it is in this composition, in the top quarter.

Ask: Where might the artist have been standing to have this viewpoint?
This is an elevated, bird's eye view. Perhaps Whistler saw this scene from an upper story window or balcony.

Ask: How did Whistler suggest distance?
The distant objects are smaller, lighter, and higher in the picture than the nearer objects.

Interpret

Ask: What do you know about Venice from this print?
Students might suggest that it has a busy waterfront with many boats and people. The schooner suggests trade with distant lands. The domed buildings in the background indicate a grand city. The water in the canal seems calm with fair weather clouds overhead.

Venice was a slightly exotic, popular destination for vacationing Londoners in the 19th Century. Explain that Whistler had gone to Venice to create a dozen prints of Venetian scenes. Although he was initially only to stay for three months, he remained for over a year, creating over fifty prints, which sold well on his return to London.

As an admirer of Japanese art, Whistler depicted space and composed this scene similar to that in the Japanese prints that he collected.

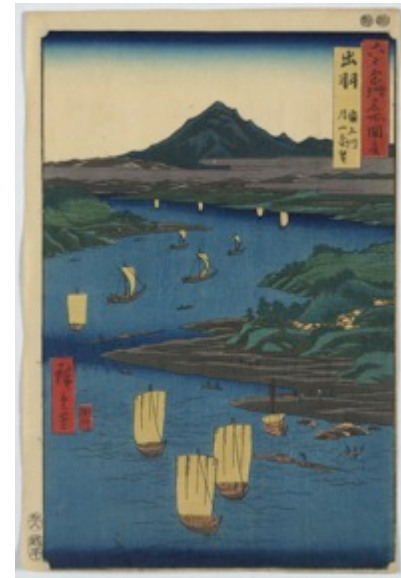
Activity 2. Compare and Contrast a Whistler Etching and a Hiroshige Woodblock Print

Show students a large image of **Andō Hiroshige's View of Mogami River and Gassan Mountain, Dewa.**

Have them compare and contrast Whistler's *Upright Venice* with Hiroshige's woodblock print using the Venn diagram in the reproducible **Lesson 2.1 – Compare Whistler Etching to Japanese Print Worksheet.**

<link to this worksheet in lesson>

Students' answers may be similar to these: (Teacher comments are in parenthesis.)



Andō Hiroshige, *View of Mogami River and Gassan mountain, Dewa*, 1853, Woodcut, 35.6 x 24.5 cm, Library of Congress

Whistler	Alike/similar	Hiroshige
Etching (In the etching printing process ink is pressed out from recessed grooves in the plate.)	Both are prints (In both printing processes ink is transferred from a block or plate to paper.)	Woodcut or woodblock print (In block printing ink is on the raised surface of the block. Areas that don't print have been cut away.)
One color, black on white	Black lines	6 or more colors (Each color on Hiroshige's print was printed with a separate block.)
Gondolas, one schooner	Many Boats with curved bows (Boats are smaller in background.)	Sails on many boats, some rafts and small boats
Most figures are standing and are larger than in the Hiroshige print.	Indistinct people	A few very small figures are on boats.
Very smooth water	Both show a busy waterway. (The viewer's gaze follows this path to the background.)	Water ripples are indicated by lines.

Domed city in background	A triangular or pointed shape rises from the horizon line in both prints.	Mountain in background, tiny village mid right
Gondolas on right point to center	Similar shapes on the right side of each print point into the composition.	Land on right points in to center
	High Horizon located about ¼ of the way down the composition	
Butterfly artist symbol on left		Artist signature in red box on left, publisher's seal in lower left margin, date and censor seals in upper right margin, print title and series titles in boxes in upper right corner

Discuss the students' comparisons of Whistler's and Hiroshige's prints. Emphasize the similarities in composition and space. Explain that Hiroshige's print is an ukiyo-e woodblock print. Ukiyo-e subjects were familiar views or scenes from everyday.

Activity 3. Read, Think, Write: Japanese Influence on Whistler

Before students read "[Inspiration from the East.](http://www.odysseymedia.org/art-life/inspiration-from-the-east/)" [<http://www.odysseymedia.org/art-life/inspiration-from-the-east/>], go over unfamiliar terms. Explain that *Japonisme* was 19th Century Europe's fascination with anything from Japan. It began when Japan opened to trade with the West after being isolated for 250 years. Students may not be familiar with the term *atelier*, an artist or decorator's workshop.

Have students read "Inspiration from the East" and complete the short study guide "[Whistler's Enthusiasm for Japonisme,](#)" [[link to Lesson 2.2 Study Guide](#)]. Discuss their answers to the study guide questions. See the answer sheet for this [study guide](#) [[link to Lesson 2.3 Answer Sheet for Whistler's Enthusiasm for Japonisme Study Guide](#)].

Activity 4 Studio: Experimenting with Horizons: Landscape Photographs or Sketches

Have students photograph or sketch a landscape. This might be what they see from a window or students might explore nearby outdoor views.

Encourage them to look at the scene from various vantage points – looking down, up, or from various sides. Remind them that Whistler often located the horizon line high in his compositions as in Japanese art. This led to a flattening of space and eventually greater abstraction in his art.

Lesson 2.4 Horizon Experiments Assignment [[link to this](#)] explains this assignment and includes questions for students' reflection on their artworks' composition. They should consider how relocating the horizon line affects the perception of space and abstraction of their subject.

Note: The photograph in Lesson 2.4 Horizon Experiments Assignment is a free public domain image.



autumn-landscape-1352568333n2y-4.jpg

<http://www.publicdomainpictures.net/view-image.php?image=27546>

<http://www.publicdomainpictures.net>

Activity 5 Assessment: Write How Japanese Art Influenced Whistler's Art

Have students write a short essay describing how Whistler's enthusiasm for Asian art influenced his prints. Students may use information they learned in this lesson and the film, "Whistler & The Case for Beauty."

They should also refer to "Inspiration from the East"

[<http://www.odysseymedia.org/art-life/inspiration-from-the-east/>] and

their comparison of Whistler and Hiroshige's prints. See **Lesson 2.5 Japanese Influences in Whistler's Art Assignment**. [[Link to it.](#)]

Activity 6 Lesson Extension. Create a Block Print

Students may create a block print from their landscape sketch or photograph. If you are unfamiliar with this process, see:

Museum of Modern Art's interactive directions for creating a woodcut, *What is a Print? Woodcut*

<<http://www.moma.org/interactives/projects/2001/whatisaprint/print.html>>

and

Japan Memories of a Secret Empire, PBS video and website

<<http://www.pbs.org/empires/japan/entered.html>>

Activity 7 Lesson Extension. Write a Haiku. Students may write a haiku poem about either Whistler’s art or their photograph or sketch of a landscape. Haiku is a very short form of Japanese poetry. See:

The World of Haiku

<http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/world-haiku#sect-introduction>

Can You Haiku?

<http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/can-you-haiku#sect-introduction>

Other Resources

Edsitement Lesson Plans

Life in the Floating World: Ukiyo-e Prints and the Rise of the Merchant Class in Edo Period Japan

<http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/life-floating-world-ukiyo-e-prints-and-rise-merchant-class-edo-period-japan>

The World of Haiku

<http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/world-haiku#sect-introduction>

Can You Haiku?

<http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/can-you-haiku#sect-introduction>

“Japan: Memoirs of a Secret Empire”

PBS video and website

Learn more about ancient Japan and Japanese prints. Interactive features teach how woodblock prints are made.

<http://www.pbs.org/empires/japan/entered.html>

The Basics

Grade levels – 6-8 or 9-12

Subject areas

Art and Culture: Visual Arts, Art History

Literature and Language Arts: Common Core

Time required 2 or 3 periods

Standards Alignment

National Core Arts Standards: National Visual Arts Standards

<<http://nationalartsstandards.org>>

Grade Hs accomplished

VA:Pr6.1.HSII

Make, explain, and justify connections between artists or artwork and social, cultural, and political history.

Grade 8

VA:Re7.1.8

Explain how a person's aesthetic choices are influenced by culture and environment and impact the visual image that one conveys to others.

Grade 7

VA:Re8.1.7

Interpret art by analyzing art-making approaches, the characteristics of form and structure, relevant contextual information, subject matter, and use of media to identify ideas and mood conveyed.

Grade 7

VA:Cr3.1.7

Reflect on and explain important information about personal artwork in an artist statement or another format.

Grade Hs advanced

VA:Re7.2.HSIII

Determine the commonalities within a group of artists or visual images attributed to a particular type of art, timeframe, or culture.

Grade Hs proficient

VA:Re8.1.HSI

Interpret an artwork or collection of works, supported by relevant and sufficient evidence found in the work and its various contexts.

Common Core State Standards Initiative – English Language Arts Standards <<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/>>

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.7

Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g.,

visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1.D

Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.11-12.2

Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

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Abstract: In this lesson students view and discuss Whistler's etching, *Upright Venice*. Using a Venn diagram, they compare and contrast *Upright Venice* to a woodblock print by Japanese artist Hiroshige. Students read an article about Asian influences on Whistler's art. They experiment with horizon line locations by creating two photographs or sketches of the same scene, placing the horizon line high in one and low in the other. They then write a reflection on how this changes their compositions. In conclusion students write a short essay explaining how Japanese art influenced Whistler's art. Worksheets and an assessment rubric are included in this standards aligned lesson.