

## Meiji Modern – Fifty Years of New Japan | July 7 – September 15

Through a vivid selection of approximately 175 objects drawn from public and private collections across the United States, this exhibition takes a fresh look at Japan's Meiji era (1868–1912). As the result of unprecedented cultural exchanges between foreign entities, influences from Western styles and techniques can be observed; yet, a keen desire to preserve Japanese motifs of art, nature, and Buddhist influences is also seen throughout. These three art pieces take a brief snapshot of the melding of familiar and unfamiliar Japanese artistry and craftsmanship. As you view these images, we recommend you observe the art pieces using our four-step process.

### The Four-Step Process

#### 1. LOOK

Take time to look at the work of art. Look for 30 seconds and take in what you notice.

#### 2. DESCRIBE

Talk about what you see in the work of art. Describe all things visible: color, line, subject matter, etc.

#### 3. THINK

Interpret and assign meaning to the work of art. What is this work of art about? What is the artist trying to convey?

#### 4. CONNECT

Relate what you see to your own life or to other works of art or images you have seen. With many pieces in this collection, how is one piece similar or different to others in the exhibit?

### Concert of European Music by Toyohara Chikanobu (18381–912), 1889

Polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e) triptych, collection of David Libertson



Toyohara Chikanobu, *Concert of European Music*, 1889, polychrome woodblock print (nishiki-e) triptych, collection of David Libertson.

Detail of the sheet music showing the Japanese song "Iwama no Shimizu."

#### Context:

Before the Meiji Period, Japan defined its geographic position relative to China; Nihon, the Japanese word for Japan, means "the origin of the sun," a reference to Japan's position to the east of China, "the Middle Kingdom." The so-called opening of Japan caused Japan to reassess their position in the world, signing treaties with Russia, England, France, the Netherlands, and the United States, countries known generally as "The West."

With an enthusiasm for Westernization and openness to embrace European customs, Japanese government officials began to entertain visiting dignitaries from abroad. They practiced Western etiquette, dancing, and music, which can be noted in this painting. The building likely depicted here is Rokumeikan, a two-story, Western-styled building designed by Josian Conder, opened in 1883. Concerts and recitals were increasingly popular, and Japanese men can be seen in suits, while women adorn corseted dresses, enjoying imported practices. An interesting note of this piece, however, is, while the title references European music, the actual sheet music is the Japanese song "Iwama no Shimizu," which was published in the Meiji songbook.

#### Discussion:

- What aspects of this print are Japanese?
- Which aspects are Western influences?
- [Listen](#) to the song "Iwama no Shimizu" while viewing this piece; do you think this adaption of Japanese songs would give the impression that Japan was a modern nation-state, moving closer toward Western ideas?
- In looking at this image, can you infer what kind of Japanese people you think experienced European music concerts? Was this something an everyday person might see? Are there any visual clues in this image?

#### Transition:

While many Japanese were eager to adopt modern ideas from abroad, many were still hesitant with the sudden change and introduction of new concepts. Let's look at a different perception of Western influences in our next piece.

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## ***Temptation by Kaishu (Kimura Kaishu or Kimura Setsu no Kami)*** **(active Meiji Period), c. 1907**

Hanging Scroll; ink and color on paper, collection of Tusha Buntin, Honolulu, HI



### Context:

As Japan is suddenly thrust into modern times, we can see the reservations held by Japanese over the adoption of new and unfamiliar Western customs during the Bakumatsu and Meiji periods. A blindfolded Japanese woman wearing a traditional kimono with a phoenix design and a peacock motif on her obi is being tempted off a ledge toward the West by a seemingly unclean foreigner. Past his hand, you can see hungry ghosts foretelling her fate if she follows the man, while above her is a beautiful Japanese deity, her savior. You can see a five-pointed star adorning the goddess, which could possibly be attributed to protection from the Japanese navy.

### Discussion:

- What do you notice about the piece that is common in Japanese art versus Western ideas?
- How does this reflect Japanese feelings toward Westerners at the time?
- How do the clothing, accessories, and hairstyles of each figure express their identity? Are these details important to the “story” of this painting?


### Transition:

Certainly, there was some hesitation to Western ideas during the Meiji era, despite the achievements and advancements made and embraced by the imperial family and government officials. What would a melding of these two opposing ideas look like in art?



Detail of the hungry ghosts foretelling the blindfolded Japanese woman's fate.

Kaishū (Kimura Kaishū or Kimura Setsu no Kami), *Temptation*, c. 1907, hanging scroll; ink and color on paper, collection of Tusha Buntin, Honolulu, HI.

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## Vase with Blossoming Flowers by Goto Shozaburo (active 1860–1910), 1890s

Cloisonné (enamels over metal), Yale University Art Gallery, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles A. Lowenhaupt



### Context:

A modern nation-state was constructed through the display of craft wares at Japanese National Industrial Expositions and official art exhibitions to attract foreign interest and investment and further establish the image of the Meiji emperor and Japan as a nation. At nearly six feet tall, this vase speaks to the impressiveness of Japanese craftsmanship at this time.

### Style/Technique:

Here, details of various flowers—chrysanthemums and wisterias, among others—are paired with butterflies. This vase was made through a cloisonné technique where small metal filaments are individually bent into shapes and partitions of designs. Then, many coats of enamel are fired into them until the whole unique design is made. The chief artist of this piece was a woman, unusual during this time as the work was normally done by men, and 18 individuals were engaged in its production. The size of the vase necessitated a special oven be built to ensure it would bake properly, and the completed piece is the finished third attempt.

### Discussion:

- What aspects of this vase embrace new Western ideas?
- Which aspects lean toward familiar Japanese concepts?
- What does the large size of this vase tell us about the intent of the artist? What about the traditional themes of Japanese flowers and butterflies? Why would artist Goto use Japanese flowers for an American commission?


### Transition:

Reflecting on the realization that Japan was living in a modern era, we can see embracing new techniques while keeping familiar motifs makes way for a totally original art piece that still has a strong Japanese identity. Continue to look through the exhibition and explore how traditional and new ideas synthesized a modern Japan in the Meiji Era.

Gotō Shōzaburō, *Vase with Blossoming Flowers*, 1890s, cloisonné (enamels over metal), Yale University Art Gallery, gift of Mrs. Nathan Baldwin, 1899.4a.

Detail of the butterflies seen on *Vase with Blossoming Flowers*.



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## Classroom Extension:

We offer these activities for you to extend this study guide into your classroom, to create interesting ways to experience the Meiji Modern art collection with your students.

After discussing the art pieces, find two ways that Japanese culture has influenced American culture and vice versa to present to your class, or discuss with a partner or as a group. Great examples can be found in clothing design, modern animation and television, creative food dishes, and color palettes for warm home design, to name a few.

## How could you create a cloisonné design of your own?

Research online and create a unique design of your own to share! You could use cardstock to fold and mold your design, glue it to another piece of paper, and then fill in with paint; or bend simple metals like paper clips to glue to a surface and fill in with quick-drying acrylic paint.

## Scavenger hunt

Create your own scavenger hunt of modern aspects depicted in Meiji Era–art as you go through the Museum. Butterflies in nature? Wisteria engravements? Lanterns glowing at night? Western buildings? Hair design? Japanese navy battleships? Mysterious new animals from abroad? So much to choose from to engage your students!

## Referenced Works:

Foxwell, Chelsea, and Bradley M. Bailey. *Meiji Modern – Fifty Years of New Japan*. Lexington, MA: Japanese Art Society of America and Yale University Press, 2023.

Applicable State TEKS for High School

117.302, Art Level 1; c.1.A-D; c.3.A

113.42, World History Studies; 15.B, 16.B

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