



Using Museums to Teach about Japan

Willamarie Moore

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American museums—of all types, of all sizes, in all regions—have long histories of enriching and supplementing classroom education. In fact, The Children’s Museum, Boston (TCM) was founded in 1913 by Boston Public School teachers, and close, consistent communication with educators has always been central to its mission. To this day, TCM collaborates with teachers, school districts, and the city government to provide a variety of programs that supplement and enhance classroom teaching and learning. The museum’s long-standing Japan Program, for example, includes a collection of more than 2,000 Japanese artifacts and an authentic 175-year old Kyoto townhouse on permanent exhibition that is filled with school children every weekday morning between October and May. Artifact kits about Japan are rented by K – 12 teachers nationwide. At least once per academic year, TCM also offers a Japan-related seminar for teachers. Further, educators and family visitors alike enjoy annual Japanese festivals at the Museum, such as Japanese New Year and Cherry Blossom Festival.

Whether or not your school is located near a museum that offers school programs, kits, or special events specific to Japan, your students can benefit from museum resources. Museums of all kinds offer a variety of educational services, and today taking advantage of museum resources is easier than ever. This digest introduces teachers to the value of museum learning, reviews different museum resources available to enhance teaching about Japan at the K-12 level, and suggests several Web resources to supplement classroom instruction.

The Value of Museum Learning. Museum education is primarily concerned with meaningful interaction with objects, activities, and knowledgeable people. There is nothing like seeing an original work of art with your own eyes, touching an artifact with your own hands, or engaging in activities with people of another culture to bring meaning to an otherwise dry set of facts. Museums offer unique learning opportunities through sensory exploration; discussion and analysis; remembering, comparing, synthesizing; multi-contextualizing; and making cross-curricular connections. The Japanese House at TCM teaches students about daily life in Japan by immersing them completely in an authentic environment. For example, students remove their shoes before entering, walk and sit on *tatami* mats, feel their texture, and try to decipher what the material is. They compare the *tatami* to more familiar floor coverings. Focus on the *tatami* exemplifies the Japanese customs of removing shoes, sleeping on *futon* on the floor, and the use of natural materials in traditional homes. Further applications to other subject areas such as geography, science/technology, and architecture can be made. Having learned about *tatami* in these ways, students more easily retain the information and can use it to make connections in their future learning. Indeed, the power of an object, the experience of the “real thing” in motivating students to learn more should not be underestimated. One of the most rewarding outcomes of museum learning may be watching students develop new passions sparked through such encounters.

Variety of Museums and Services. Museums, from art museums, history museums, science museums, to youth/children’s museums often have exhibitions related to Japan that can complement K-12

curriculum. With a little creativity and an appreciation for interdisciplinary learning, numerous types of exhibitions and programs can be made relevant and provide unique and interesting learning opportunities for students at all levels. A visit to a Japanese art exhibition can enhance not only art classes, but can also add to social studies classes through the study of Japanese history. Similarly, the same visit can supplement learning in English/language arts when students write response essays. Even science instruction can benefit by shifting the focus to materials and technology. Exploration of a geology exhibit at a science museum can augment world geography lessons through links to topics such as volcanoes in Japan. Also, more and more children’s museums are offering cultural exhibits that introduce early learners to ways of life in other parts of the world, including Japan.

In fact, children’s museums represent the fastest growing cultural institution in the United States. During the last decade, the number of children’s museums in the U.S. has grown by 100% to reach over 31 million children and families, and hundreds of thousands of school groups. In June 2002, The Freeman Foundation and the Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) announced the single largest grant to the children’s museum field in its history: \$7 million for the development of exhibits on Asia for children. Called the Asian Exhibit Initiative, the program is funding nine museums to develop seven exhibits on five different Asian countries and cultures. Three of the exhibits under development will introduce Japan. In January 2004, the new exhibits will open in seven different cities across the United States. Then, in July of that year, the exhibits will begin traveling to a total of 70 venues nationwide during the next five years. Thus, in the near future an exciting new exhibit about Japan may be coming to a children’s museum near you. For more information about the Asian Exhibit Initiative, please see ACM’s Web site: <<http://www.childrensmuseums.org>>.

A wide variety of educational services are available to teachers and school groups through museums.

School programs: Museum docents give presentations to school groups directly in a gallery, exhibit, or in a room adjacent to a gallery, using demonstrations and hands-on materials.

“Mobile museum” programs: Museum staff, exhibits, and activities that travel directly to the school.

Kit rentals: Usually a box available for teachers’ use in their own classrooms filled with artifacts, images, and activities on specific topics or related directly to a museum exhibit; often shipped to the school via UPS.

Curriculum materials: Available for loan, rental, or purchase and often related to museum exhibits.

Performances: Drama or other types of performances are often found in youth/children’s museums and history museums, sometimes as regular program offerings, sometimes as one-time special events.

Cultural festivals: May include performances, demonstrations, activities, and/or foods. Often the result of a museum’s collaboration with people of a particular cultural community.

Research: Curators or museum educators may be available to conduct research for teachers and students on specific topics.

Teacher professional development: Seminars, institutes, and research opportunities both in content area as well as innovative pedagogical strategies.

Internet resources: More and more, museums are using the Internet to provide educational services. The final section of this digest will provide more details on this fast-growing area of museum resources.

Increasingly, museums are making explicit connections to national, state, and district learning standards so field trips to museums and use of other museum resources can be more easily integrated into teachers' curriculum. For example, often social studies curriculum standards at the K-2 level suggest that students learn about "Me, myself, and others" and "My country and my world." A general introduction to Japanese people, where and how they live, in comparison with the United States and other countries is a common approach. To help young learners make concrete comparisons, give them the opportunity to examine real objects from Japan. Allow them to discover their own answers to questions such as "What types of things do children in Japan take to school every day? What types of things are found in people's homes in Japan? How is this object the same or different from what I know?" The rental of an artifact kit from a museum such as The Children's Museum, Boston, easily enhances such lesson plans <<http://www.BostonKids.org/kits/>>.

At the middle school level, topics on Japan are often found in world history curriculum guidelines. Students may be required to learn the basics about "Shintoism, Buddhism, and Sino-Japanese culture." To make these topics come alive, a visit to an exhibition on Buddhist sculptures such as the Japanese Buddhist Gallery at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco may prove to be the most effective way to make the topic meaningful for students. Student visits to museums, where they see with their own eyes and learn from a museum curator or docent's presentation, supplements the standard textbook presentation in invaluable ways <<http://www.asianart.org/>>.

At the high school level, Japan commonly enters the curriculum again when students study World War II. Use of primary documents (letters, diaries, testimonies) and photos of Japanese Americans are ways to inject real voices and multiple perspectives to the complex topic. Such resources are increasingly available via the Internet. The Web site of the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, for example, offers two digital exhibits: *Dear Miss Breed: Letters from Camp* and *The Life and Work of George Hoshida: A Japanese-American's Journey* <<http://www.janm.org/>>.

Investigate what museums are within field-trip distance from your school, and what their current exhibitions are. Contact the education department and ask about opportunities for class trips or teacher professional development. Explain your curriculum goals and discuss possible ways to achieve them with the help of the museum. Visit museum Web sites.

Museums via the World Wide Web. Museums are still debating their relationship with the Internet. On one hand, looking at digital reproductions of objects, specimens, or works of art is clearly not the same as getting close to the real thing. On the other hand, there are, without question, exciting possibilities for unique and illuminating discoveries by "online visitors" and democratizing processes of sharing cultures and perspectives literally on a global scale. Museums are increasingly taking advantage of these online possibilities, and even now (early on in this process), there is real evidence that spending time with digital objects and works of art increases people's desire to see the real thing.

At present, there are a wide variety of museum resources available online, including databases of digitized collections,

online exhibitions, distance learning opportunities, and online activities for students. The following list of Web sites includes only a few samples of the many types of Japan-related electronic resources available from museums.

Digitized collection: *Cleveland Museum of Art Online Tours: Japanese Highlights Tour*

<<http://www.clemusart.com/museum/collect/japan/index.html>>.

In addition to these highlights, the Cleveland Museum of Art Web site also allows users to explore their collection of Asian art further at: <<http://www.clemusart.com/Explore/>>.

Online exhibition: *A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the U.S. Constitution* at the Smithsonian's Museum of American History

<<http://americanhistory.si.edu/perfectunion/experience/index.html>>

Museum-produced curriculum: *Japan: Images of a People*, also at the Smithsonian

<<http://educate.si.edu/resources/lessons/art-to-zoo/japan/cover.html>>

In working with digital collections, students can address the same types of questions as with real artifacts: Do you think the item is old or new? Why? What do you think it is made of? What do you think the object was/is used for? Who do you think used it? Of course, this inquiry can lead to questions such as: Do you want to see the real artifact? How would you go about doing so? In exploring online exhibitions, teachers and students will find many activities on the Web sites themselves, as well as interactive discussion boards for all online visitors, and in some cases the opportunity to ask questions directly of the curator. Curriculum on the Internet is often free and available for teachers to supplement classroom teaching.

In Japan, teachers are increasingly making use of resources outside of their own classrooms to create learning opportunities for their students. The nation-wide education reform implemented in April 2002 encourages more "hands-on" learning, providing teachers with support at the institutional level. Museums in Japan are beginning to recognize their important new role in students' education, and are working hard to develop—many for the first time—meaningful programs to accommodate visits by school classes. Many of these museums are looking to their counterparts in the United States for models of school programs. Teachers in both Japan and the United States are able to enhance their curriculum through the use of a continually widening variety of museum resources. In Japan, the current trend in education is away from strictly prescribed curriculum, while in the United States, the trend is the opposite, toward an increased reliance on standards and rigorous testing. Museums can play an important role in both educational systems today.

References

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Willamarie Moore is the Japan Program Manager/East Asian Educator at The Children's Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

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