LESSON 3: BEAUTY AND PURPOSE
Capturing Beauty: Ikebana Baskets, Japan

Fig. 1.6
Students investigate a number of aspects related to ikebana baskets—the uses and meanings of bamboo, construction methodologies, and the elevated status given basket makers in Japan. This lesson introduces students to the important concept of beauty and purpose—that is, that the humblest of objects may be embellished and enhanced in ways that elevate everyday work and imbue it with special significance and value. Activities stress research, discussion, writing, and artmaking. Students will

- Explore the uses of bamboo by finding bamboo items in their own surroundings.
- Create their own basket after they study some of the formal principles of ikebana design.
- Express their understanding of the art of ikebana flower arrangement through painting, writing, and poetry writing.

Japanese basket makers capture the beauty of carefully selected natural materials in their constructions. These materials are intended to harmonize with the meticulously arranged formal floral compositions (ikebana) that will be placed within the finished baskets. Often the floral arrangements reflect seasonal changes. Sensitive to the changes, Japanese people bring the seasonal mood into their homes with displays of flowers that they often place within bamboo containers.

In traditional-style Japanese houses, these flower arrangements in baskets may be placed in a recessed alcove, called the tokonoma. This space evolved from what was originally an altar, the sacred center of the home. All of the items placed in the tokonoma are supposed to be in harmony with one another and are often selected and arranged to fit a particular occasion or seasonal event. The basket and floral arrangement are thus key elements in setting the emotional tone of the household.
Although none of the flower baskets (fig 1.6-1.8) from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries shown here were signed or have been attributed to a specified artist, Japanese basket artists sometimes do sign their works. Since this is rarely observed in basketry traditions in other parts of the world, it suggests the high value placed on baskets and the art of basket making in Japan. Most recognized artists have had years of training, usually in a center associated with a lineage of artists that has made baskets for generations. Some bamboo artists have even been designated as Living National Treasures by the Japanese government.

Fig. 1.7 (left)

Fig. 1.8 (right)
1. The Material

A young bamboo –
how tall it has grown,
without the slightest help in the world.

Bamboo is considered a universally useful and readily available plant. In the West we are familiar with the use of bamboo for fishing equipment and we use it in the garden as fencing material, furniture, and rakes; and in our homes as tools, utensils, and a renewable resource for cabinets and flooring. Bamboo also has a long history in Asia, serving as the basis for traditional articles such as musical instruments (including the shakuhachi flute), ladders, fans, bows and arrows, paint brush handles, integral components of the tea ceremony (scoops, ladles, and the chasen tea whisk), and of course, baskets.

Bamboo is so connected to daily life in Asia that it is not surprising to find it an important component of traditional literature. As cited in Containing Beauty (1988, 13), “Once upon a time there lived an old bamboo cutter. Every day he would make his way into the fields and mountains to gather bamboo which he fashioned into all matter of things.....One day he noticed a light at the root of a bamboo stalk and, thinking that this was very strange, went over to examine it. He saw that the light shone inside the hollow bamboo, where a most fetching little girl about three inches tall was sitting.” The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter, written in the ninth or tenth century, is considered to be the oldest story in Japanese literature. The story continues with the childless bamboo cutter and his wife raising the child, and her eventual return to the Moon People, to whom she belonged. In another version before returning to the moon she writes a letter to the emperor who has fallen in love with her. He orders the letter burned at the top of the highest mountain in the land—from whose cone smoke magically continues to rise. The mountain is known as Mount Fuji, the immortal one.
Activity
Students can look in their own homes for bamboo items. They will probably find jewelry, eating and cooking utensils, toys, boxes, furniture, etc. List, draw, or bring them to class to display.

Activity
Students can embellish the excerpted legend quoted above with adventures the three-inch girl has until the time she reaches adulthood (does she remain small?) and then returns to her moon home.

2. The Process

“Don’t break it!” he said
then he broke off and gave me
a branch of his plum.

A single person accomplishes almost every step in the production of a basket; only thus does an artist feel that he or she has done the best possible. It is necessary that bamboo be picked at an optimum time for flexibility and texture—usually the plant is three or four years old. Paying great respect to their material, artists clean the stalk and cut it into approximately three-foot lengths. They then split the bamboo—the width and length of the pieces determined by the designs. Polishing and weaving the strips follow. During the process the artist considers the integration of the natural beauty of the bamboo with the form, texture, and balance of the piece. He will often dye the basket or parts of it.

As there are three basic categories of flower arrangement—formal, semiformal, and informal—so baskets are classified in much the same way. Each has a number of rules, but artists will often deflect from these, retaining creative input. A famous basket maker, Roksansai (1890–1958), classified baskets as formal if they had a symmetrical form with precise, elaborate ‘weaves.’ The work of baskets in the middle range was more relaxed, although the form was still symmetrical. The third type utilized rough ‘weaves,’ and a variety of shapes. (McCallum 1988, 20)

Prior to World War II, bamboo baskets were the favored containers for ikebana. Now ceramic, metal, and glass vases predominate.
Activity
It would be difficult to emulate intricate Japanese flower baskets in the classroom, but you can find instructions for making baskets of wire, yarn, paper, and natural weeds and grasses in books and on the Internet. You can encourage experimentation and creativity as your students work with the materials.

Activity
Have your students compare the varied baskets (Handout IKEBANA BASKETS) on display in this gallery of Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives. They should begin by listing the elements for comparison that are apparent to them. Probable inclusions will be shape, size, color, handle details, method of construction, weave, balance or symmetry or lack of same, and formal/informal in their judgment or as enumerated above.

3. The Artist
The place where I was born:
All I come to—all I touch—
Blossoms of the thorn.

As noted above, most of today’s artists have had years of training. Some received this training from their fathers and continue in the family’s tradition. Others served as apprentices, sometimes spending much time in seemingly menial preparation for the task while absorbing important spiritual and moral aspects of basket making.

In 1954, concerned that many tradition-based arts and crafts were no longer being made and valued, the Japanese government introduced the designation of certain arts as “Important Intangible Cultural Properties.” The designation was to preserve both the traditions and the traditional techniques. Included along with bamboo working were pottery, puppetry, and doll making.

Soon the honor came not to the craft that was to be preserved, but to the related artists, the “holders of Intangible Cultural Properties.” Though not given an officially recognized designation, these artists were called “Living National Treasures,” and of course so gained elevated status and prestige. About one hundred fifty individuals and organizations today have this honor.
Activity
Awareness of the Japanese practice can lead to discussions among your students. Some questions that can arise are

- What are some reasons for the possible loss of traditional arts? (*availability and desirability of commercial, mass-produced substitutes; fads and trends to have possessions like those of friends; always-present advertising to influence buying; artists not paid enough to practice their art*)

- How do students feel about recognizing the artist as opposed to recognizing the art?

- What honors are students aware of that go to artists of varying disciplines? (*Kennedy Center Honors, Pulitzer Prize for Literature, MacArthur Fellowship*)

4. The Use

*Oh, the wide world’s ways!*

*Cherry blossoms left unwatched*

*Even for three days.*

Traditionally ikebana arrangements are placed in the most formal place in a Japanese house, the *tokonoma*, an alcove serving as home altar. Before the alcove the family entertains guests and holds important family celebrations. Incense is burned here and a scroll hangs on the alcove wall, appropriate to the season and the occasion. Also appropriate to the season and occasion is the flower arrangement displayed in the *tokonoma*.

Ikebana remains a traditional art, still prized in this contemporary world. In his 2004 book on the subject, Shozo Sato discusses the history and characteristics of ikebana and describes some simple projects suitable for young people. He introduces the several styles of flower arrangements, and with diagrams and charts demonstrates the mathematical relationships among the floral components in several different styles. Most ikebana arrangements are based on three divisions differing by the height of the plants and the ratio of their heights to each other.
Activity
A long-term project would have students studying and practicing the art of ikebana.

Activity
Related projects of shorter duration could have students drawing or painting floral arrangements based on ikebana. Begin by giving students paper with a simple outline of a flower vase. Ask students to draw in a floral arrangement as they choose. Most will probably draw a variety of flowers, perhaps filling the vase. Follow this by drawing (either students or you) the same vase outline, but limiting the flowers to three in number (of different heights), adding three leaves, also differing in height. If you have access to the Sato book listed in the bibliography, or to Internet sites dealing with ikebana you can be more traditional in your drawings, and follow this with students comparing and contrasting the two approaches to flower arranging.

Activity
An art activity that simulates Japanese floral arrangements begins with a small blob of black or brown tempera paint near the bottom of a piece of white paper. With a straw the student blows on the liquid paint to create branches. (Caution students to not blow too hard or too long to be sure that they do not hyperventilate.) After the paint has dried add flowers, either painting with small sponges dipped in paint or gluing small pieces of colored tissue paper.

Activity
Haiku verses introduce each part of this lesson. Have your students write haiku based on their artwork.
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Useful Readings
Austin, Robert, and Koichiro Ueda
1973 Bamboo.
New York: John Weatherhill, Inc.

Henderson, Harold G.
1958 An Introduction to Haiku.
Garden City: Doubleday & Co.

McCallum, Toshiko M.
1998 Containing Beauty.
Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

Sato, Shozo
Boston: Tuttle Publishing.

*Childrens Book

Note to Teachers:
This lesson is part of the curricular materials developed to accompany the exhibition Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives. Although this and companion lessons are self-contained, each will be enhanced when used in conjunction with others in this resource. Addressing several lessons within each unit will facilitate the incorporation of the study of world arts and cultures into your curriculum.

The lesson is based on works in the first section of the exhibition called Art and Action. In this gallery works are introduced that served to make things happen. See “Unit One—Art and Action” for an introductory statement on the unit, along with some provocative “Questions for Thought,” and suggestions that will inspire the students to relate the unit to their own lives.

Images of objects to be shown to students may be printed as handouts (from within each lesson), viewed online at the Intersections web link http://collections.fowler.ucla.edu, or downloaded from the curriculum page on our website.

In this unit the topics and lessons are

Lesson 1: The Role of the Artist: Crown for Yoruba Initiation by Jose Rodriguez, U.S.
Lesson 2: Efficacy and Action: Nkisi Nkondi: A Power Figure of Central Africa
Lesson 3: Beauty and Purpose: Capturing Beauty: Ikebana Baskets, Japan
Lesson 4: Encounters of Ideas, Time, and Place: Textiles of Southeast Asia