

LESSON 20: ARTS FOR SPIRITUAL INTERVENTION

To Seek Divine Assistance: *Emas*, Japan

Fig. 4.2

Votive plaque (*ema*). Japan. Wood, paint. W: 30 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of Dr. Daniel C. Holtom. X89.847.

Unit 4

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Lesson Summary and Objectives

Activities in this lesson provide opportunities for students to explore the importance of animal symbolism in Japanese art. Students interpret the meanings of selected images and engage in artmaking activities that focus on animals in art. Their study of *emas* extends to an exploration of a Japanese form of poetry known as a *lune*, which students use to express feelings of thanks or good wishes. Students will:

- Study and interpret the symbolism of animals in Japanese art through writing and artmaking.
- Create their own *ema*-like wish and engage in creative writing about their wishes and dreams.

Background Information

In Japan, people who are seeking divine assistance to overcome some difficulty in their lives may place a votive offering known as an *ema* in a Buddhist temple or Shinto shrine. The illustration on the *ema* reflects the petitioner's problem. Petitioners may paint their own illustration, but as far back as the Edo Period (1600–1868) *ema* were also painted in studios and made available for sale to clients. The petitioner typically added an inscription, often including a personal name and date. *Ema* are also sometimes presented simply as an expression of thanks to the deities.

Today one can purchase an *ema* and decorate it with drawings and writings expressing wishes for good health, marriage, children, success in business, passing entrance exams, wealth, and so on. The *ema* is then left hanging at a designated spot at the shrine. Similar offerings are placed on private household shrines called *kamidama* set up to honor local protective gods.



Votive plaque (*ema*). Japan. Wood, paint. W: 31.6 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of Dr. Daniel C. Holtom. X89.863 Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of the Wellcome Trust. X65.4024.

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To Seek Divine Assistance: *Emas*, Japan

Votive plaque (*ema*). Japan. Late 19th–early 20th century. Wood, paint. W: 21.8 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of Dr. Daniel C. Holtom.

About the Artist

Long ago professional artists painted much larger *emas* in response to commissions made by people of diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Today, the typical smaller *emas* are apt to be drawn by the unskilled petitioners themselves, or by people with little or no training who sell their small picture boards in stalls or on street corners.

Curriculum Connections**1. Encountering Six *Emas***

Early *emas*, pictures of horses, were replacements for the real horses that had been placed on shrines as offerings. Today there is a wide variety of imagery seen on *emas*. As students look over the selected *emas*, they can offer interpretations of the drawings.

Unit 4

LESSON 20: ARTS FOR SPIRITUAL INTERVENTION

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Activity

Two of the *emas* feature human images and four show pictures of animals. What do the students think is portrayed in the first two *emas* (**Handout JAPANESE EMAS**)? How are the humans engaged? There is a relationship between these two *emas*. After students put forth their own hypotheses, tell them that one deals with a new marriage (**fig. A**), and one with a marital separation (**fig. B**).

Newlyweds offer this style of *ema* as an expression of hope for a long life together. They are called *takasago*, a name that recalls the couplet “you will live to 100, and I will live till 99.” Three auspicious symbols of longevity are included in the painting: a pine tree, plum blossoms, and bamboo leaves. What symbols might students include to denote a desired long-lasting relationship?

Longevity is here associated with these images, but these same plants are often shown heralding other desirable characteristics in a relationship: strength, fortitude and adaptability. Let students explain these attributes. (*The pine is seen as a symbol of strength, since it is often planted in areas subject to severe weather conditions, yet it perseveres and remains green during winter. Plum blossoms denote fortitude since the plum is the first tree to blossom out, typically when snow is still on the ground. Bamboo sways and adjusts to change without breaking, becoming a symbol of adaptability.*) Branches of all three plants often combine to form a typical home decoration and are also depicted in painted images as on the *ema* here. Can students find comparably appropriate plants or creatures to exemplify the same characteristics or ones similar to strength, courage, and adaptability?

The second *ema* with human figures bears writing—next to the man the inscription reads, “37 years old,” next to the woman it reads, “nuisance, 28 years old” (**fig. B**). Undoubtedly there is a story to be told here. Between the couple is a Chinese nettle tree, known to sever connections between people. It was an actual tree in Tokyo whose wood shavings were sought by people wishing to end a relationship with another person. The *ema* was offered with the same intent. Have students consider possible narratives around this *ema*.

Unit 4

LESSON 20: ARTS FOR SPIRITUAL INTERVENTION

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Animals are often the subjects of Japanese art, including the art of the *ema*. Four of the votive plaques here depict animals. Although they will be readily identifiable by students, their symbolism can only be guessed. Students could try to interpret meanings of the representations.

1. The horse is the most common depiction on *emas* (**fig. C**). In fact, the literal meaning of *ema* is “horse picture.” Long ago horses were sacrificed at shrines; gradually illustrations of the animals on *emas* substituted for the actual animals. Such *emas* date back to at least the medieval period (thirteenth through sixteenth centuries). In the *ema* here, the horse is tied, perhaps indicating that the petitioner was facing some obstacle. Often when the petitioner’s wish was granted, a second *ema* with an illustration of a freed and rejoicing horse was presented.
2. Snake *emas* like this one from 1917 (**fig. D**), are usually presented at temples dedicated to the goddess Benzaiten who administers music, speech, intelligence, happiness, and prosperity. Temples for the goddess are usually located near water, and snakes, also associated with water, are regarded as messengers of this deity. Snakes are believed to bring financial prosperity and also to cure sickness.
3. Centipedes (**fig. E**) are messengers for the Buddhist Guardian of the North, the direction from which came undesirable things including too much rain and snow. He is regarded as the deliverer of good fortune.
4. Monkeys (**fig. F**) often represent a founding god who became a sacred spirit in Shinto. One of the monkeys shown here wears a Shinto priest’s hat.

As we have seen also in the arts of African peoples and those of the Pacific Northwest Coast Indians, animals are significant and full of symbolism in Japanese art. Tigers typically represent bad luck, can chase away evil spirits, and are often associated with the ending of lives. The crane is considered the national bird of Japan symbolizing good luck and long life. The fox has special supernatural powers and is a clever trickster, the turtle signifies a faithful return, and the dragon is often associated with life’s origins in the mist and rough seas. These, and more, are subjects of literature and are sometimes painted on *emas* as petitions and thanks for favors granted. Before the *ema* is placed on the shrine, it is usually signed and dated (with the year—shown by one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac: the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and wild boar.

Unit 4

LESSON 20: ARTS FOR SPIRITUAL INTERVENTION

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Students can, in the spirit of *emas*, paint a picture that signifies a wish that they hope will be fulfilled, or a picture that expresses thanks for a wish granted. These can be painted on small pieces of wood that are either rectangular or have a peaked roof shape as on a Shinto shrine. On the back each student should write his or her name and draw a pictorial animal representation of the year with the proper animal according to the Chinese zodiac (this information is readily available in books and on the Internet).

2. A *Lune* for an *Ema*

A variation on the Japanese haiku can be used to express the appropriate wish or thanks on the *emas* made by your students. The poetry form called *lune* employs three lines of verse but, unlike haiku, words—not syllables—are counted. The first and third lines contain three words, the middle line has five.

It may be a petition:

Whirling white flakes
Winter break one week away
New skis waiting.

Or a thank you for a wish that was granted:

My math test
Difficult, confusing, and so important
I passed it!

Unit 4

LESSON 20: ARTS FOR SPIRITUAL INTERVENTION

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Useful Readings

Holtom, D. C.
1938 "Japanese Votive Pictures."
Monumenta Nipponica 1 (1): 15-164.

Knecht, Peter
2003 "Tenjin Festival in Tokyo."
Asian Folklore Studies 30 (1): 147-153

Photograph Captions

Handout JAPANESE EMAS

A. Votive plaque (*ema*). Japan. Late 19th-early 20th century. Wood, paint. W: 31.6 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of Dr. Daniel C. Holtom. X89.863

B. Votive plaque (*ema*). Japan. Late 19th-early 20th century. Wood, paint. W: 25.4 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of Dr. Daniel C. Holtom. X89.821

C. Votive plaque (*ema*). Japan. Late 19th-early 20th century. Wood, paint. W: 47.6 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of Dr. Daniel C. Holtom. X89.872

D. Votive plaque (*ema*). Japan. Late 19th-early 20th century. Wood, paint. W: 30 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of Dr. Daniel C. Holtom. X89.847

E. Votive plaque (*ema*). Japan. Late 19th-early 20th century. Wood, paint. W: 29.4 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of Dr. Daniel C. Holtom. X89.864

F. Votive plaque (*ema*). Japan. Late 19th-early 20th century. Wood, paint. W: 33.4 cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA. Gift of Dr. Daniel C. Holtom. X89.846

A graphic for Unit 4 featuring the word "Unit" in a script font and the number "4" in a large, bold, sans-serif font, both set against a dark orange background with a decorative border.

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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 last section of the exhibition called *Art and Transformation*. In this gallery works are introduced that served to make things happen. See “Unit Four—Art and Transformation” 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 19: Memorials and Transcendence: *El Arbol de la Muerte*, Mexico

Lesson 20: Arts for Spiritual Intervention: To Seek Divine Assistance: *Emas*, Japan

Lesson 21: Arts for Spiritual Intervention: Honoring Patron Saints with *Retablos*, Mexico

Lesson 22: Tradition as Innovation: *Apartheid's Funeral*, South Africa

Lesson 23: Tradition as Innovation: *La Calavera don Quijote*, Mexico



A



B



C



D



E



F

