



MORSE
MUSEUM

TSUBA: LOUIS COMFORT TIFFANY
AND THE ART OF JAPAN



Tsuba (sword guard), 19th century
Insect motif, Iron and soft metals,
Unknown maker, Japan (71-017: D)

GRADES/LEVEL:

Kindergarten–8th grade/Elementary and Middle School

TIME REQUIRED:

45 minutes

LESSON OBJECTIVES:

Students will:

- learn about the influence of Japanese art on Western art of the late 19th century.
- understand the artistic importance of *tsuba* and how *tsuba* were used in Japan.
- create an original work of art using safe and non-toxic materials.

MATERIALS:

- Tsuba template (see end of lesson)
- 8 ½” x 11” plain white paper
- Scrap paper
- Markers, colored pencils, and/or crayons
- Decorative objects (glitter, gems, found objects, etc.)
- Pencils
- Scissors
- White glue and/or glue stick
- Paperboard, cardboard, or chipboard (optional)

VOCABULARY:

Asymmetry: the lack or absence of symmetry; an image that is not the same on both sides but still maintains artistic balance.

Balance: the distribution of the visual weight of objects, colors, and textures; the arrangement of things in a work of art.

Pattern: using an element or elements of art (line, shape/form, space/perspective, texture, value, or color) in a planned way.

Symbol: something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention.

Symmetry: something that is even in design and proportion; a well-proportioned, well-balanced work of art that is the same on both sides.

Tsuba: a hand-crafted work of art used to protect the hand when holding a sword.

Unity: the feeling of harmony between all parts of a work of art; a sense of completeness.

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION:

In 1854, Commodore Matthew Perry (1794–1858) “opened” the ports of Japan, beginning a craze in the West for all things Japanese. Unfamiliar with Japanese art, the Western world was fascinated and excited by the asymmetrical compositions, decorative patterns, strong contrasts between positive and negative space, and the deliberate use of line. This Japanese influence can be seen in the work of well-known artists like Claude Monet (1840–1926), Vincent van Gogh (1853–90), Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), and Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848–1933).

Louis Comfort Tiffany’s work contains many elements of classical Japanese design. Tiffany also collected items from Japan, including four thousand Japanese tsuba, or sword guards, which he used as decorative elements in his interiors.

Though Tiffany used his tsuba as decoration, tsuba were originally designed to protect the hand when holding a sword. And, despite their functional use, tsuba were very much considered art. Each tsuba was unique to its user, and generations of artisans used metal-working techniques to create designs that included plants, animals, and symbolic representations.

INSTRUCTIONS:

1) Look at these examples of tsuba from the Morse Museum collection:

- <https://www.morsemuseum.org/collection-highlights/jewelry-enamels-and-metalwork/tsuba-insect>
- <https://www.morsemuseum.org/collection-highlights/jewelry-enamels-and-metalwork/tsuba-centipede>
- <https://www.morsemuseum.org/collection-highlights/jewelry-enamels-and-metalwork/tsuba-dragonfly>
- <https://www.morsemuseum.org/collection-highlights/jewelry-enamels-and-metalwork/tsuba-dragonfly-and-flowers>

What images do you see? What do you think they mean? For older students, find instances of symmetry and asymmetry in each design. Discuss how balance and unity work in each design.

- 2) Give each student a piece of scrap paper and a pencil. Encourage them to do some practice sketches for their tsuba. Review the concepts of symmetry and asymmetry, the elements of art, and the principles of balance and unity, and encourage students to use these concepts, elements, and principles in their designs. Once students have decided on a design, give each student a copy of the tsuba template.
- 3) Have students draw, trace, or transfer their design onto the tsuba template using a pencil. Add color with markers, colored pencils, and/or crayons. Add dimension and texture by gluing found objects, sequins, glitter, or other elements to tsuba template. Allow glue to dry.
- 4) For a sturdier tsuba, give each student a piece of chipboard, cardboard, or paperboard to use as a backing. Paperboard is the material used to make boxes for cereals, cookies, crackers, and multipacks of canned soda, so it is a great way to upcycle. Glue tsuba template down using

white glue or glue stick. Cut away background to have a stand-alone tsuba, or incorporate background into finished design.

- 5) Display and discuss the creation process. What symbols were chosen and why? What colors? What other considerations went into creating this tsuba?

ASSESSMENT:

Students should:

- recognize symmetrical and asymmetrical designs in works of art.
- gain a better understanding of the aesthetics of Japanese art.
- be able to effectively use the elements of art to create a two-dimensional interpretation of a tsuba.

TSUBA TEMPLATE

