

## Lesson Plan: Cultural Identity, US-Japan Relations, and Visual Art



Carved Wooden Transoms (Ramma) Panels from the Hooden, 1893

Takamura Koun (Japanese, 1852–1934)

Wood with polychrome

95 x 280 x 20cm (37 ¼ x 110 ¼ x 7 ⅞ in.)

## INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

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This lesson plan supports the integration of artworks into K–12 teaching. It focuses on a single work of art from the museum’s global collection and provides sequential activities and related resources that activate students’ critical and creative thinking skills, prompting them to deepen their sense of self, connect with others, and engage more fully with a complex world.

### Key Words

Cultural Competence, Global Competence, Diverse Perspectives, World’s Columbian Exposition, World History, Japan, Architecture, Cultural Identity, Nationalism, Chicago History, Asia in the World, US-Japan Relations

### Suggested Age Range

This content is adaptable for use by students from 6th through 12th grade.

### Essential Questions

- Why should we seek out diverse perspectives and sources in learning about historic events?
- How can learning about or experiencing different cultures and historic events help shape understanding of our own time and place?

# INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

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## How to Use This Lesson

This lesson includes a sequence of three types of activities which can be facilitated by the teacher or assigned to students to complete asynchronously. In progression, these activities build student engagement, starting with increased awareness, moving to knowledge, then to understanding of the artwork and artist, their cultural and historical context, and the relationship of these to students' lives today. All activities are framed by the essential question/s of the lesson, and support multi-modality and student voice. Students can be prompted to respond to questions through class discussion, small group conversations, or in writing.

- **Look** activities promote sustained observation, active listening, and curiosity. (5–10 minutes per activity)
- **Explore** activities provide opportunities for students to consider further contextual information, including diverse perspectives, and to challenge their assumptions. (15–30 minutes per activity)
- **Respond** activities engage self-reflection, synthesis, and creative expression. (15–30 minutes per activity)

For additional approaches to engaging students in observation and meaning-making with works of art, consult the Art Institute of Chicago's [Tips for Discussing Works of Art](#) or use the [Making Observations and Questions](#) activity.

### **\*Note to educators:**

The nineteenth-century sources cited in the explore section of this lesson plan contain language that we would consider offensive today. Talk to your students about how language changes over time and our responsibility to continue to learn about and use respectful terminology.

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## Learning Standards

SS.CV.2.6-8.LC:

Describe the origins, purposes, and impact of constitutions, laws, treaties, and international agreements.

SS.G.1.6-8.MC:

Construct different representations to explain the spatial patterns of cultural and environmental characteristics.

SS.H.1.6-8.MdC:

Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical contexts.

SS.H.4.6-8.MdC:

Compare the central historical arguments in secondary works across multiple media.

SS.H.2.9-12:

Analyze change and continuity within and across historical eras.

SS.H.11.9-12:

Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.

SS.H.8.9-12:

Analyze key historical events and contributions of individuals through a variety of perspectives, including those of historically underrepresented groups.



## Look

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Look carefully at this panel, called a **ramma** in Japanese. Note at least five observations.

- What draws your attention? Why?
- Look again. Where does your eye go next? Use your finger to follow the path of your eye as it moves across the artwork. What else do you see?
  - If you could touch the panel, how would it feel?
- How do you think it was made? What tools might have been used? Why do you think that?



Look at the different parts of the panel, such as the birds, the foliage, and the clouds.

- . What words or adjectives would you use to describe what you see? Why?
- . Does this look like anything you have seen before? If so, where or when?
- . What questions do you have about the panel? If you have made some initial inferences about the artwork, can you turn them into questions?

# Explore

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1. Read the caption for this artwork and the essay on its history provided in this lesson.

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- Look again. What do you see now?
- How does this information add to or change what you know and think about the ramma?
- What do you now wonder about the panel? If you could ask the makers of the ramma and of the larger Hooden a question, what would it be?

2. Explore Your Own Perspectives on Japanese Culture

Look at the historical images provided of the Hooden from the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which included the ramma featured in this lesson and three more that are exhibited at the Art Institute today. Describe what you see or notice. What more do you learn by seeing the entire structure?

In getting to know a culture different from your own, it is important to learn through multiple sources of information, including direct experiences with people and their culture, and to examine our own preconceived notions and possible **biases**.

For many visitors to the World's Columbian Exposition, the Hooden would have been their first exposure to Japanese people and culture. Prior to this experience, their understanding of Japan may have been shaped by limited and uninformed sources.

- What are your experiences with Japanese culture? What are the sources of your information or interactions? Possible sources might include food, movies, animation, fashion, or technology. How have these experiences shaped your understanding of Japan?
- Do you see any connections between the histories surrounding the Hooden and our current day?

- How can learning about or experiencing different cultures and historic events help shape understanding of our own time and place?

## Extension Activities:

### Explore Primary Sources of the Past and Today

Read the two **primary source** articles listed on page 18 from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* newspaper, which later became the *Chicago Tribune*. One article was written in 1872, and the other in 1892.

What stands out to you about what is said and how it is said? What is the **perspective** of each author and article on Japanese people and culture? What change in perspective do you note between the two articles? What might have contributed to these changes? What else have you learned?

Do you see connections between the tone or themes of the reporting in either of these sources and news you see reported today from particular sources? What feels similar or different?

#### **\*Note to educators:**

In asking students to consider reporting in news sources today, you could identify a current issue in the news together and then seek out a few diverse sources for students to compare and contrast how perceptions and reporting can vary.

### Take a Field Trip to the Site of the Hooden (Optional)

If possible, make a visit to the grounds of the [Wooded Island in Chicago's Jackson Park](#), where the Hooden once stood. Look for Yoko Ono's *Sky Landing* installation, created on the site in 2016 to commemorate the lost Phoenix Pavilion and to encourage hope for the future. You can also visit the Art Institute to explore Yoko Ono's sculpture [Mended Petal](#), which she made as a companion piece to *Sky Landing*. If it is not possible for your class to visit the park or the museum, visit [gardenofthephoenix.org](http://gardenofthephoenix.org) and [skylanding.com](http://skylanding.com) for additional information, primary sources, and interactive materials.



# Respond

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## Respond through Making: Create Your Own Pavilion

In the context of a world's fair, a pavilion is a structure that was used for entertainment, display, and education. In creating the Hooden, or Phoenix Pavilion, Japanese artists and architects used designs, symbols, and furnishings to reflect their national cultural values and artistic traditions. The Hooden later served as a tea house where a diverse public could experience this important element of Japanese culture.

Cultural identity is the system of beliefs, values, and traditions shared among a group of people connected through nationality, religion, generation, location, or family.

Personal identity comprises the qualities, characteristics, and beliefs through which an individual defines themselves.

Imagine you are creating a pavilion that teaches others about you—what you are interested in and care about. What would you want people to learn or know?

What kind of structure would you build? How would it be decorated? What colors, designs, and objects would you feature? What food would you serve and what games or entertainment might be offered? Sketch or write about what you would create.

Which of the elements that you featured are influenced by your cultural identity? Which come from your personal identity?

Share your ideas with a classmate and listen to their responses. What did you learn about each other and yourselves?

# Essay

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## Carved Wooden Transoms (Ramma) Panels from the Hooden, 1893

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## What do we see in this artwork?

Inside the rectangular, black **lacquer** frame of this **transom** panel, or **ramma (rahm-mah)**, two large birds with elaborate tail feathers are perched on flowering branches encircled by thick clouds. If we look closely we can see the many different colors of the birds and their surroundings, including blue, green, and red tones as well as bits of gold in the smoky clouds and on the edges of leaves. This type of **ramma** is an artistic element used in traditional Japanese architecture to fill space between the top of a sliding door and the ceiling. The open spaces in these carvings serve a practical purpose, allowing air and light to flow through a home or temple. There are four of these ramma installed at the Art Institute of Chicago, all with the same decoration. Each panel is close to nine feet wide and their **scale** as well as the fine detail and quality of the carving suggest that they were made by a highly skilled craftsman for an important place.

## Who made this artwork?

The ramma were created by Japanese artist Takamura Koun in 1893. Takamura was a master carver and a professor at the then newly formed Tokyo School of Fine Arts. Earlier in his career, he used his woodworking skills to create ornamentation for important Buddhist temples in Japan. Projects like the ramma allowed him to explore creating **secular** work as well.

## How was the artwork made?

Takamura carved the ramma out of the soft wood of the fast-growing **paulownia** tree, which is the same type of tree depicted in the ramma. The birds depicted on the panel are **phoenix**, or **Ho-o (Hou-ou)** in Japanese, mythical creatures that hold different meanings for different cultures. In Japan, the phoenix is a symbol of leadership and strength and is often depicted in pairs roosting in the paulownia tree during times of national peace and strong leadership.



The Hooden or Japanese pavilion (at front) on the site of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Takamura carved these ramma with a global audience in mind. They were just one part of the **Hooden (Ho-o-den)**, or Phoenix Pavilion, created by Japan for the **World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893** and based on an existing temple in Uji, Japan. Both structures were designed to suggest the shape of a phoenix, with three connecting buildings forming a head and two widespread wings. The entire pavilion was crafted in Japan by Tamakura and a number of other artisans, and then shipped piece by piece to Chicago where Japanese craftsmen assembled it on the site of the fair.

## How does the artwork reflect social and/or political structures?

About 40 years before the pavilion was made, the United States forced trade on Japan. The unequal terms of the 1854 **Treaty** of Kanagawa opened the nation to exploitation by and the influence of Western countries. At this time, the Tokyo School of Fine Arts was among those to articulate the concept of **Bijutsu (bee-jut-soo)**. This term, meaning “visual art,” was in part created to acknowledge the importance of artistic traditions and their power to establish national identity. Prior to this period, Japan used other terms and ideas to talk about the arts, artmaking, and craftsmanship.

The new concept of Bijutsu informed the design of the Hoo-den for the 1893 World’s Fair, where Japan would be judged on a global scale. Built in Chicago’s Jackson Park neighborhood near the shores of Lake Michigan, the fair’s grounds were known as the “White City” for the ornate and gleaming white buildings built for the occasion. The grounds also included a mile-long area called the Midway Plaisance where many nations were invited to create **ethnographic** exhibits intended to both educate and entertain. Under the direction of fair organizers, these displays were often sensationalized and **exploitative** of the cultures that participated.



Japanese workers constructing the Hoo-den on the Wooded Island, 1892. Courtesy of the Garden of the Phoenix Foundation.

Japan invested a large sum of money to create a pavilion on the nearby Wooded Island, which was set apart from the spectacle of the midway and therefore gave Japan more control over the **representation** of their culture. Through the lavish construction and display of the Hoo-den,

Japan demonstrated to the world its strength as a political and economic leader and a nation with rich artistic traditions and talent. For most Americans, the Hooden was their first encounter with Japanese people and culture. Many came to watch the Hooden's construction, but the Japanese workers they came to observe were met with varied degrees of acceptance ranging from curiosity to skepticism and disapproval. With a goal of fostering mutual understanding and respect, Japan intended the Hooden to remain in Jackson Park as a gift to the City of Chicago. The Hooden ultimately did have a positive influence on US-Japan relations. Just one year after the fair the Japanese Treaty of Commerce and Navigation (November 22, 1894) was signed, lifting earlier unequal treaties.



The fire caused by arson that consumed the Hooden in an act of hate, 1946. Courtesy of the Garden of the Phoenix Foundation.

This progress in relations was inconsistent however—many Japanese and Japanese-American people living in the United States continued to face discrimination in the early 20th century. Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 US-Japan relationships declined and acts of discrimination soared. In 1941 the Hooden's Japanese caretaker, Shoji Osato, was forcibly removed from his home and family in Chicago and held as part of efforts by the US government to intern Japanese Americans. Left unoccupied, the building fell into a state of neglect and two separate fires destroyed the Hooden—the second fire in 1946 was ignited as an act of hate. The four panels currently on display in the Art Institute and featured in this lesson were found by happenstance underneath the bleachers of Chicago's Soldier Field in 1973, heavily damaged

and with no explanation as to how they came to be there. They were then restored and displayed in the museum where we continue to learn from them today.

# Glossary

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**bias:** prejudice in favor of or against a people or thing

**bijutsu (Bee-jut-soo):** Japanese term for “art” that embraces more Western ideals of artistic expression in visual arts and is in contrast to previous terms used in Japan to describe their own creative practice

**culture:** the shared customs, arts, and beliefs of a group of people. Culture is something that everyone has and it is continuously shaped by time and human interaction.

**intern (referencing the Japanese Internment):** Following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and US entry into World War II, between 1942 and 1945, the US government forcibly removed over 120,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry from their homes and businesses and imprisoned them in isolated camps in violation of their civil rights. While this practice was widespread on the West Coast, people of Japanese and German ancestry were also rounded up and held in other regions including in the Chicago area. Language used around this history is contested and many now call these sites concentration camps.

**lacquer:** made from the sap of the lacquer tree, this liquid is painted on wood or metal to form a hard, shiny surface when dry

**ethnographic:** relating to the systematic study of human cultures and behaviors

**exploitive:** making use of a situation or treating others unfairly in order to gain an advantage or benefit

**phoenix / hō-ō or hou-ou in Japanese:** mythological bird whose tradition spans the Asian continent and represents peace, prosperity, and strong leadership. This differs from a Western concept of a phoenix that is born and reborn from fire

**primary source:** a firsthand account of a subject such as a document, diary, recording, or news report from someone with a direct connection to that event. A primary source is made within the period of time under study

**ramma (rahm-mah):** a horizontal structure used in traditional Japanese architecture to fill space between the top of a sliding door and the ceiling, often allowing light and air to move into a space (also known as a transom)

**representation:** the portrayal or description of someone or something in a particular way

**scale:** the size of an object relative to its surroundings

**secular:** things that are not regarded as religious, spiritual, or sacred

**symbol:** a thing used to represent something else, often an abstract concept

**paulownia:** a tree found throughout East Asia that is both fast growing and soft, making it an ideal material for woodworking. The leaves of the paulownia tree are often featured in imperial and governmental imagery. The paulownia flower seal once used by the imperial family is now used by the Japanese Prime Minister and governmental offices and is also featured on the 500 yen coin.

**treaty:** a binding formal agreement, contract, or other written instrument that establishes obligations between two or more subjects of international law

**world's fair:** an international exhibition of a wide variety of industrial, scientific, technological, and artistic achievements by participating nations that are on display at a specific site for a period of time





# Related Resources

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The following two historical sources from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* are to be used in the “Explore” section of this lesson.

1. [“Our Oriental Visitors.” \*Chicago Daily Tribune\*, 1872.](#)  
[http://www.gardenofthephoenix.org/app/pdfs/chapter4/chicago-tribune-our-oriental-visitors\\_2-27-1872.pdf](http://www.gardenofthephoenix.org/app/pdfs/chapter4/chicago-tribune-our-oriental-visitors_2-27-1872.pdf)  
[See excerpt here. Courtesy of the Garden of the Phoenix Foundation.](#)
2. [“Japanese In Chicago.” \*Chicago Daily Tribune\*, December 11, 1892.](#)  
<http://www.gardenofthephoenix.org/app/pdfs/chapter7/japanese-in-chicago-1892.pdf>  
[See excerpt here. Courtesy of the Garden of the Phoenix Foundation.](#)