

How can I use these *Discussion Topics* in my classroom?

The goal of the following pages is to engage your students in an open-ended dialogue about works of art, leading to learning in several disciplines. This material may be used verbatim by teachers of students in grades 7-12, though the questions are broad enough to be modified easily for grades K-6 with the substitution of less advanced vocabulary. Use the presented comparisons and *Inquiry* as bases for discussion of the images with your students. You need not follow these questions as a script, though you may. You may also choose to have students respond to questions in written form.

How will using these *Discussion Topics* benefit my students?

Through inquiry-based learning, students build skills across the curriculum, including those valuable to literacy such as the ability to:

- think critically
- use descriptive language
- provide justification for opinions
- observe closely
- form hypotheses¹²

Beyond enhancing these abilities, the present lines of inquiry are meant to serve as entry points to learning more deeply about Japanese art and culture, as well as artistic techniques, aesthetics, and art historical concepts.

When students view and discuss works of art, and are introduced to selected related information, it fosters an engaging, contextualized learning environment. Through open-ended inquiry, students are encouraged to formulate educated opinions based on their own experiences, associations and observations. An additional benefit of this process is that the teacher acts as a facilitator, rather than an expert on a particular subject-matter, modeling the processes of posing provocative questions and seeking answers.

What are some ways that I can create an optimal environment for an open-ended discussion?

- Ask questions that have a broad range of possible answers. Avoid yes/no questions.
- Repeat comments and link similar or differing ideas to spur debate and to encourage students to justify their opinions.
- Accept comments neutrally and without judgment.
- If a comment seems off-topic to you, redirect the respondent to the visual: "What do you see that makes you think that?" or "How does the artist show you that?"
- If you do not know the answer to a particular factual question posed by a student, say so. Then ask how one might investigate or do research to find the answer. Encourage students to do so.

Works of art presented on these pages are part of the exhibition *Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century*, on view at Japan Society Gallery from September 29, 2006 through January 21, 2007.

¹ Museum of Fine Arts Boston, *Thinking through Art Pilot Program Study*, 1996-97.

² Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, *Teaching Literacy Through Art*, Year One: 2004-05 Study.

(1) Rough vs. Refined: Kyoto Ceramics

Metavoid 4. 2004, stoneware, 22" x 28¾" x 28" – Akiyama Yō, Kyoto, 1953-.

Inquiry

- What do you notice about this piece?
- Imagine yourself inside the piece. Describe what you see, hear or feel. How might these sensations differ from your perceptions of the outside of the piece?
- This is a work of abstract art and is not meant to represent a particular object. What concept or emotion does it convey to you? How does the artist give you that idea?

Introduce Information:

Even though the form of this sculpture may look accidental, the artist carefully creates a planned appearance. He first builds the basic shape by throwing the form on a pottery wheel. Then, the artist uses a blowtorch to burn the clay, causing it to crack. He then makes changes to the surface by carving and peeling away singed layers, and burning it again. Finally, the artist fires the piece in a kiln to harden it and to give it its "rusty" surface coloring.

- The artist describes his work as a process of "creation and destruction."³ What do you think he means by this? Where can you find evidence of this idea in his artwork?

Artist Information for Educators

Akiyama Yō studied under Yagi Kazuo, one of Japan's most influential and emulated ceramic artists. Yagi was not only masterful at creating flawless vessels in the style of Chinese prototypes, but also revolutionary in breaking free from such models; introducing the idea of ceramic form as pure sculpture as a founding member of the **Sodeisha**. As a student of Yagi, Akiyama Yō's work shares these traits; impeccable technical skill and training, combined with a spirit of avant-garde experimentation.

Akiyama often creates works that are quite large, including full-scale installation pieces. He enjoys exploiting the characteristics of the medium of clay, and uses the material as a vehicle to explore the dualities of interior and exterior features, and the properties of creation and decay. Despite the organic appearance of Akiyama's forms, he is meticulous in his pursuit of an image that he first conceives of in his mind. He achieves this through a multi-step process of shaping, singeing, peeling, carving and firing each work of art. To sculpt pieces like the one shown here, Akiyama throws a form on a pottery wheel, and then uses a blowtorch to induce cracks in the clay's surface. This singeing also produces corresponding fragmentation on the reverse side of the clay.

Large Faceted Jar (Hakuji mentori ōtsubo). 2003, porcelain, 15" wide – Takenaka Kō, Kyoto, 1941-.

³ Joe Earle, *Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century* (Boston: MFA, Boston, 2005), 61.

Inquiry

- What does this piece make you think of? Why?
- Describe the surface of the piece. What does it look like?
- The artist who made this work often creates vessels that are based on long-established Korean and Japanese forms, including vessels used for traditional flower arranging (*ikebana*) and the tea ceremony. Why might an artist be interested in re-interpreting works of art from the past?

Introduce Information:

Like the Korean ceramics that he is inspired by, this artist removes all evidence of the artist's hand when finishing his works.

- Think about sculptures and paintings by other artists that you are familiar with. Do these works have evidence of the artist's brushwork, fingerprints, or other tools, or is the surface smooth and refined?
- Why might some artists choose to leave signs of their process of creation, while others choose to erase them? Which approach do you prefer? Explain why.

Artist Information for Educators

Takenaka Kō is a specialist in using Kyoto white porcelain, a material known for its delicacy in texture and structure. He studied with Living National Treasure Kondō Yūzō for ten years, and established his own kiln in Kyoto in 1970. In 1995, Takenaka was bestowed with a high honor of his own when he was designated a Kyoto Intangible Cultural Property. Takenaka creates a range of vessels modeled on established, traditional forms such as vases suited for *ikebana*, tableware, and bowls and utensils for the tea ceremony. Takenaka's more recent works, including the piece pictured here, is inspired by the sophisticated and pristine forms and finishes of Korean porcelain vessels of the 17th and 18th centuries, glazed in pale, translucent green or blue hues. The artist, in his work, achieves a masterful level of technical perfection, fineness and balance shared by ceramics of this historical era.

Comparison Questions

Introduce Information:

Both of these artists work in Kyoto, Japan, considered by many to be the epicenter of traditional, refined Japanese artistic style since the 9th century. Both artists were trained to be able to create ideal forms, in the style of traditional Chinese and Korean models. One artist continues to create more literal variations on these forms, while the other chooses to create more stylistically and creatively abstract works.

- Imagine you are a classically-trained ceramic artist. Do you think that you would choose to create more perfected, polished sculptures like Takenaka Kō, or would you prefer to create more abstracted forms like Akiyama Yō? Give reasons for your choice.
- Debate which piece is a "better work of art." Give justification for your opinions.

(2) Aesthetics & Process: Reminiscence of Stone

Vessel with Inlaid Multicolor Glazes (Saiseki zōgan utsuwa). 2001, stoneware, 27½" x 17" x 5" – Kishi Eiko, Kyoto, 1948-.

Inquiry

- What do you notice about this piece?
- How would you describe the **visual rhythm** of this work of art?

Introduce Information:

The artist created this work using a technique that she invented in which she creates a clay form, and then cuts many tiny holes in its surface. Into these holes she inlays bits of hardened clay, pigment, and glaze.

- Based on the use of this technique, what skills do you think this artist might need to possess? Why do you say that?
- What visual evidence from the artwork tells you that the artist might possess that particular skill?

Artist Information for Educators

Kishi Eiko invented the technique used to create this piece, which she calls "colored inlay" (*saiseki zōgan*). This technique is her primary method for making ceramic artwork, and she has been using it since 1984. Kishi begins this process by mixing wet clay with small fragments of ground, hardened clay. The artist then molds the form of the piece. A pattern is then cut shallowly into the surface of the form using a needle or engraving knife. Before firing, these crevices are filled with more fragments of ground clay, raw pigment, and glazes. Kishi has said that she enjoys utilizing this process because the finished effect is reminiscent of stone, yet the works still retain the properties of ceramic objects. It can take several months for her to complete a piece like the one shown here. Kishi most often works by creating two pieces simultaneously. She describes her process as a type of experimentation through trial and error, and explains that it is continually evolving.

Iga-Ware Faceted Flower Vase (Ige mentori hanaire). 2004, stoneware, 22½" x 6½" x 7" – Tsujimura Shirō, Mima, Nara City, 1947-.

Inquiry

- Describe the texture of this piece in as much detail as you can. Is the texture uniform across the piece, or does it vary?
- How does this work of art look different from other ceramics that you have seen? Why do you think the artist chose to form the piece this way?

Introduce Information:

This artist, Tsujimura Shirō, created this work by taking a large block of clay and slicing off large chunks of it with a fish knife. He then fired the piece (unglazed) in an **Anagama kiln** dug into a hillside. He left the vase buried for 10 years before he unearthed it in 2003, proclaiming the piece finished. What do you think this process of creation might tell you about this artist and what he is interested in? Why do you say that?

- Does knowing how this piece was made change the way that you think about it or your opinion of it? Why or why not?

Artist Information for Educators

Tsujimura Shirō is a self-taught artist. He attributes his inspiration to pursue the ceramic work that he does to a visit to the Japan Folk Craft Museum in Tokyo as a teenager, where he viewed a traditional Korean tea bowl (*Ido chawan*). From then on, the artist became intensely interested in the tea ceremony and the larger aesthetic, religious and philosophical traditions intrinsic to the ritual. The tea ceremony clearly informs his artistic decisions, both in terms of some forms, materials and techniques, as well as a more pervasive idea concerning an intense appreciation of natural forms. Tsujimura uses common materials and even processes, but his employment of the unpredictability of the medium, and his emphasis on retaining the organic nature of the clay and glazes themselves makes his art unique. He pays close attention to each step of his practice, and relishes the “accidents” of nature that are likely to occur in the process of crafting ceramic works.

Comparison Questions

- Both of these objects are vessels (containers meant to hold something). What can you picture each of them holding? Why?
- Do you picture these two vessels holding similar things or different ones?
- Compare and contrast the differences between the forms and textures of these two vessels. Describe these in as much detail as you can.
- Do you see any similarities between these two works of art? If so, describe them.

Introduce Information:

Both of these vessels have been said to remind the viewer of stone, yet the artists used very different processes to create them; Kishi Eiko was very precise and controlled in her execution, while Tsujimura Shirō was careful, but open to letting natural processes shape his work over time. What might these differing methods tell you about what is important to each of these artists?

- Based on what you noticed about these two works, how would you interpret these two artists’ statements about their art:
 - “It’s only in the making of my work that I understand where the piece is going.”⁴ -- Kishi Eiko
 - “It is in the last fifteen or so minutes of the firing that I win or lose.”⁵ -- Tsujimura Shirō

⁴ Joe Earle, *Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century* (Boston: MFA, Boston, 2005), 8.

⁵ Joe Earle, *Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century* (Boston: MFA, Boston, 2005), 11.

(3) Sculpture: Naturalistic vs. Abstract

Clay Image: The First Branch (Deishō: Saisho no eda). 1998, stoneware, 24" x 7" x 7" – Suzuki Osamu, Kyoto, 1926-2001.

Inquiry

- What do you notice about this piece?

Introduce Information:

The artist refers to these types of sculptures that he creates as "clay images."

- What is an "image?" How would you define that word?
- In your opinion, what makes an image different from reality? What aspects of an image might be the same as reality?
- Why do you think the artist calls this particular piece a "clay image?" What might it be an image of? What does its shape remind you of? Why?

Artist Information for Educators

Suzuki Osamu is one of the most important figures in the history of modern Japanese ceramics. He began life involved in the pottery trade, his father was a production potter (a ceramic artist working to create multiples of a utilitarian item e.g. 50 bowls, all very similar) and he, himself, attended and graduated from the Kyoto Second Industrial School. Despite his skill and formal training in the production arts, he began to seek another approach to ceramics. He started to collaborate with other artists, and became a founding member of the ***Sodeisha***. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, he started experimenting with variations on traditional, functional forms. Over time, his works evolved into pure sculpture, with no discernable practical function. His "clay images," as he calls them, are inspired by nature; each meant to capture an aspect of its essence.

Pineapple Box-S. 1986, stoneware, 10" x 28¾" x 28" – Mishima Kimiyo, Seto, 1932-.

Inquiry

- Look at the details of this piece. What do you recognize? What does the writing on the box tell you?

Introduce Information:

The artist who created this work likes to sculpt very realistic clay sculptures of things that society typically discards; newspapers, magazines, boxes and advertisements. Her subjects may not be as lofty as a Greek god or rich patron, but she renders each with painstaking care, crafting, glazing, firing and silk-screening each form to achieve a highly realistic effect.

- Why might an artist spend so much effort in creating something that is meant to look like trash?
- This artist is making a social statement. What do you think it might be?
- If this artist is interested in creating realistic sculptures of trash, why do you think she doesn't just use the objects themselves? Other artists *do* use trash to create their sculptures. Why might this artist choose to create her sculptures of trash in clay? Would you make this same choice? Why or why not?

Artist Information for Educators

Since the mid-1970s, Mishima Kimiyo has created extraordinarily realistic ceramic sculptures of objects that are typically discarded by modern society including newspapers, *manga*, and cardboard boxes. These clay sculptural objects range from small to comically oversized. In creating these pieces, Mishima expects to draw attention to modern society's propensity for consuming and discarding massive quantities of these items; a critique on the disposable mentality of contemporary culture.

Comparison Questions

Introduce Information:

- Both of these are clay sculptures made by Japanese artists. Neither is meant to be used for a typically practical purpose; only to be looked at and enjoyed as works of art. One is highly naturalistic, while the other is very abstract.
- As an artist, do you (or would you) prefer to create sculptures that are naturalistic or abstract? Why?
 - Try to picture each artist working. Do you picture one artist working faster than the other? How do you think their techniques differ? How do you imagine their personalities might differ?