

Graphic Heroes, Magic Monsters: Japanese Prints by Utagawa Kuniyoshi from the Arthur R. Miller Collection

Kuniyoshi Kabuki Puppet & Stage Activity

Use the dramatic and beautiful figures found in Kuniyoshi's prints to create puppets and a shoebox kabuki-style theater. Invite your students to write an original play and put on a performance. Ask them to reflect on their plays and describe their creative choices.

Kuniyoshi & Kabuki Actors

Utagawa Kuniyoshi made portraits of kabuki actors throughout his artistic career. As a young man he studied with an artist named Toyokuni I, who created the standard for actor portraits in the 19th century. Later, in the 1840s, when portraits of kabuki actors were banned, Kuniyoshi created ingenious ways to sneakily represent them. A print he made entitled "Kabuki Actors as Turtles" shows many turtles gathered together to sip sake. Each turtle's face was a likeness of a real kabuki actor and his shell was decorated with a pattern evocative of his crest. In this way, Kuniyoshi winked at his well-informed public and gave them pictures of their beloved celebrities while obeying the law.

Kabuki in the late Edo period was a dramatic and popular theater form attended by townspeople. Borrowing from dance, legend and history, the plays featured male actors in elaborate costumes and bold makeup. The actors performed in a highly stylized manner employing striking postures and exaggerated facial expressions to great expressive ends.

The word kabuki is derived from the verb *kabuku*, which in the 17th century meant "to be unusual or out of the ordinary" and was used to indicate the offbeat quality of the kabuki experience. After 1704, scenes from everyday life were incorporated and many of the basic stories were adapted from noh plays (classical, aristocratic Japanese theater).

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Magic markers
- Popsicle sticks
- Glue stick
- Tape
- Kuniyoshi images
- Paperboard or thin, light cardboard
- Scissors
- Shoebox or small cardboard box
- Materials to decorate stage (felt, glitter, colored paper, aluminum foil, etc.)

DIRECTIONS

- Select your favorite character from one of the Kuniyoshi images
- Print the image in black-and-white and color with magic markers
- After coloring, cut out the figure
- Rub the glue stick on the back of your figure and place on a piece of cardboard to paste down and make strong
- Trace the figure's outline on the cardboard
- Following the lines you drew on the cardboard, cut away the extra cardboard around the figure
- Tape a popsicle stick to the back of the cardboard figure
- To create a stage, lay the open shoebox on its side
- Color and decorate the box inside and out. Cut a strip of cardboard 2 inches wide and glue onto the open shoebox 2 inches from the left to make a *hanamichi*—a long path extending out from the stage
- To make a *seri* or stage trap, cut out a small rectangle in the floor of the shoebox 1.5 inches from the right side, tape back in place and remove as needed

BENCHMARK SKILLS

- Recognize the elements and principles of design
- Read and write about art to reinforce literacy skills
- Reflect on the process of making art.

References

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