

## LESSON PLAN

# Hokusai and Slow Looking

**Subjects:** Visual Arts, Language Arts

**Grade Levels:** Upper Elementary, Middle School/Junior High, High School

**Duration:** 40–60 minutes

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## Objective

Students will experience “slow looking,” an observation technique that encourages students to slow down, select one artwork, and observe it deeply for a prolonged period in order to gain appreciation and insights.

## Essential Questions

- What are the benefits of slow looking? Are there any drawbacks to this technique?
- How is slow looking different from how you would usually observe a piece of art?
- What do you think could be gained by regularly practicing slow looking?

## Background Information on Observation Techniques

### Slow Looking

Slow looking is being embraced by art institutions to help their visitors have a more satisfying experience looking at art. The concept asks gallery visitors to forego trying to see everything in the museum and instead identify one artwork to spend a prolonged period of time with. In the article “The Art of Slowing Down in a Museum,” Stephanie Rosenbloom reports that the average museum visitor spends fifteen to thirty seconds in front of an artwork. In “The Art of Slow Looking in the Classroom: The Cross-disciplinary Benefits of Paying Close Attention” by Emily Boudreau, we learn that the average person’s attention span is eight seconds.

Slow looking can be adapted to suit many different age groups and environments. The process is detailed in Rosenbloom’s article as “pick a wing and begin by wandering for a while, mentally noting which works are appealing or stand out. Then return to one that beckons. For instance, if you have an hour, wander for 30 minutes, and then spend the next half-hour with a single compelling painting. Choose what resonates with you, not what’s most famous (unless the latter strikes a chord).” Teachers of younger students will want to adapt the time span of slow looking to fit the age group. Slow looking is also compatible with virtual viewing of artwork.



## Eye Palming

Eye palming is an exercise that can be offered to students prior to slow looking to help relax them and focus their attention. Start this exercise by asking everyone to wash their hands. Participants will then sit in a comfortable position and rub their palms together to warm them. Ask students to form their hands into cup shapes and then gently position them over their closed eyes. Relax like this for a few minutes. Remind students that their hands should not be pressing on their noses and no light should be entering between their fingers. Tell students to focus on the blackness and to imagine a calm place while taking deep, even breaths. Do this for one to three minutes. This activity can be repeated multiple times.

## Background Information on Artist

### Katsushika Hokusai

The Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) began his training in his teens as an apprentice to a woodblock carver and printer. He also apprenticed in a workshop of an *ukiyo-e* artist before advancing to create designs for woodblock prints and inexpensively produced novels.

Although we know him as Hokusai, the artist called himself many names throughout his life as he developed his artistic styles. He left the printmaking workshop and began painting on his own at age thirty-five, using the pseudonym Sōri. In his early paintings, the artist used ink and light pigments on paper—materials that were inexpensive and suited his circumstances before he achieved fame.

Hokusai's fame and abilities were renowned by the time he reached his sixties. The artist was in his seventies when he created the designs for the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (*Fugaku sanjūrokkei*) in the early 1830s. A single image from this series, *The Great Wave Off the Coast of Kanagawa*, has become a globally recognized icon. Mount Fuji, which holds symbolism for Japan and the Japanese people, was a lifelong obsession of the artist, who explored the sacred mountain. In another homage to Japan's sacred mountain, the set of books titled *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji* (*Fugaku hyakkei*), published in 1834, Hokusai ended the postscript of the first volume with this statement:

*From the age of 6, I had the habit of sketching the shapes of things, and from the age of 50, I painted a number of works. But before the age of 70, my paintings fail to convey reality. As I turned 73, I partially succeeded to capture the physique of all living things and the vitality of plants. For that reason, from age 86, I made great progress while at age 90 I did so even more. It is my greatest wish to reach 100, when my work would truly become marvelous. If I live to be 110, every dot and every line would be as if coming to life.*

—Katsushika Hokusai in his postscript from *Fugaku hyakkei*, published in 1834 at age 75 (Translated by Frank Feltens)

## Background Information on Selected Hokusai Artworks

### Boy Playing Flute

A boy sits beside his empty basket, clearly preferring to play the flute instead of continuing his work. His face is content and happy in this idle moment of music and peace. The image exudes a feeling of calm and perfect bliss that can be found in many of Hokusai's works.

### Thunder god

In the upper right portion of this painting is the Thunder God, who beats the drums carried on his back during storms. Japanese painters enjoyed depicting this deity among rolling clouds and sparks of lightning. Hokusai's painting reflects his virtuosity in capturing the latent energy of the deity as he hovers among black clouds splattered with ink to express the violence of the storm. This work, which gives Hokusai's age as eighty-eight (by Western calculation, eighty-seven), displays the skill and energy he retained even in the last years of his life.

### Pounding Rice for Mochi

Pounding rice for mochi (rice cakes) is a longstanding Japanese custom that marks the end of the old year and the beginning of a new one. Worshippers offer mochi to the gods and consume the rice cakes to ensure their own well-being in the coming year. In its treatment of this familiar activity, Hokusai's humorous rendering resembles his widely circulated printed books—Hokusai manga. Here, a man strains to separate a mallet from the sticky rice while a woman struggles to hold the wooden container in place. An inscribed poem to the right reads:

At the advent of spring  
we prepare offerings of rice cakes,  
round as a mirror,  
in which the season finds reflected  
her own youthful countenance.  
(Translation by Alfred Haft)

## Vocabulary

**eye palming:** a technique used in the practice of yoga to rest and relax the eyes.

**observation:** the act of looking at an object with the intent of gleaning information from it.

**slow looking:** an observation technique that encourages the viewer to slow down, select one artwork, and observe it deeply for a prolonged period of time.

**ukiyo-e:** "pictures of the floating world." A tradition of Japanese woodblock printing dating from about 1600 in which images of kabuki theater, courtesans, daily life, and landscapes were popular.

## Materials

**Worksheet:** Hokusai and Slow Looking for each student.

## Procedure

1. Explain slow looking as an observation technique. Tell students you will not discuss the displayed artwork(s) or the artist until after the slow looking activity.
2. Ask students to put away all distractions (cell phones, writing paper, pencils, etc.).
3. Begin with eye palming, the relaxing and focusing technique. Adjust how much time you spend on this activity and the number of times you perform it to suit your environment.
4. Display one of the three suggested Hokusai paintings for the entire class to respond to. Give students a time limit and let them know that you are setting a timer. Time may vary from three to ten minutes, depending on the class. There should be no talking, movement, or other distractions during slow looking. Alternatively, divide students into three groups and assign each group one of the three artworks.
5. When the timer sounds, remove the displayed artwork. Pass out the **Worksheet** and have students work silently to collect their thoughts in writing.
6. After the silent writing period, display the artwork(s) again for the class to reference during a whole group discussion. Allow students to use their **Worksheet** for reference as they respond as a group to the **Discussion Questions**. At the end of the discussion, share the Hokusai biographical information and the background information on the selected artwork(s).

## Discussion Questions

### Describe

- What did you notice first in the painting?
- As you spent more time slow looking, did you notice anything you didn't notice at first?

### Analyze

- What aesthetic decisions did the artist make?
- What did you notice about the color palette? About the composition?

### Interpret

- What is the narrative, theme, or concept behind this artwork?
- Is it possible to have more than one interpretation of this artwork?

### Inquire

- Why do you think the artist made this artwork?
- What would you like to ask the artist, if you could?

## Extensions

### Visual Arts

- Repeat the slow looking process with other artworks.
- Go to a park with public sculptures and use slow looking to observe three-dimensional artworks.
- For high school students, assign the homework task of introducing slow looking to a friend.

## English Language Arts

- Write a descriptive essay about the artwork based on the **Worksheet** notes.
- Write a gallery label for the artwork based on the **Worksheet** notes.
- Write an imaginative story about a character from one of the artworks. Frame the story by choosing one of the following prompts:
  - If this artwork is the beginning of a story, what might happen next?
  - If this artwork is the middle of a story, what might have happened before? What might be about to happen next?
  - If this artwork is the end of a story, what might the whole story be?

## Social Studies

- Research Japanese philosophies and religions and how they have influenced new year traditions (Pounding Rice for Mochi) and forces of nature (Thunder god).

## Resources

Boudreau, Emily. "The Art of Slow Looking in the Classroom: The Cross-disciplinary Learning Benefits of Paying Close Attention." *Usable Knowledge*, Harvard Graduate School of Education (January 2020).

<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/20/01/art-slow-looking-classroom>.

*Hokusai: Mad about Painting* exhibition website: <https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/hokusai-mad-about-painting/>.

Rosenbloom, Stephanie. "The Art of Slowing Down in a Museum." *The New York Times*, October 2014.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/12/travel/the-art-of-slowing-down-in-a-museum.html>.

Tishman, Shari. *Slow Looking: The Art and Practice of Learning Through Observation*. New York: Routledge, 2018.



## Lesson Plan Artworks



### Boy Playing Flute

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849)

Japan, Edo period, ca. 1840

Album leaf; ink on paper

Gift of Charles Lang Freer

Freer Gallery of Art

F1904.254





### Thunder god (detail)

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849)

Japan, Edo period, 1847

Ink and color on paper

Gift of Charles Lang Freer

Freer Gallery of Art

F1900.47







### Pounding Rice for Mochi (detail)

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849)

Japan, Edo period, ca. 1822

Ink and color on silk

Gift of Lawrence and Sonia Klein

Freer Gallery of Art

F1992.24





## Reference Artworks



### The Great Wave Off the Coast of Kanagawa

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849)

ca. 1830–32

Woodblock print

Metropolitan Museum of Art

JP1847





**Self Portrait**

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849)

ca. 1840–49

Ink and blood on paper

Musée Guimet

EO 1456