

Painting Nature

Shasei and Painting the Subjective Experience

FEATURED ART

[Puppies by Maruyama Ōkyo](#)



Puppies by Maruyama Ōkyo

Objective One

Students will be able to define and apply the term “subjective” to works of art.

Objective Two

Students will be able to determine how works of art can capture both appearance and feeling, establishing a definition for *shasei* and applying it to works of art.

Objective Three

Students will be able to list and explore what other senses help both the artist and the viewer to associate a sense of personality with animals.

Recommended Readings for Teachers

1. [“Why do Ōkyo’s puppies look so cute? The significance of Edo period artists observing nature to create art” by Brenda Jordan](#)
2. [“Wildlife Personalities Play a Role in Nature” by Jim Robbins](#)
3. [Excerpts from “The Logic and History of ‘Kawaii, Cute, Art’” by Kaneko Nobuhisa, *Cute Edo Paintings*](#)

LESSON PLAN

Objective One

Students will be able to define and apply the term “subjective” to works of art.

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Image	Puppies by Maruyama Ōkyo
Video	Shasei: Ōkyo’s Puppies
Worksheet	Shasei and Painting the Subjective Experience

Prepare students to take notes using the worksheet PDF or in a notebook. Ask students to close their eyes and think about puppies. Keeping their eyes closed, ask students to raise their hand and use a word or a phrase to describe what they are thinking, such as fuzzy, soft, wriggly, wobbly, licks a lot. Write their comments on the board. If students are stuck, ask leading questions such as how do puppies feel when you hold them? Do puppies have a smell? Explore how students experience puppies through a variety of senses.

Ask students to open their eyes. Project the image of Ōkyo’s *Puppies*. As a group, in pairs, or individually, ask students to think about how puppies experience and explore the world around them and write their responses. You can list the five senses on the board (smell, taste, sight, hearing, feeling) and have students consider each from a puppy’s perspective. As students work, play the video *Shasei: Ōkyo’s Puppies*.

Objective Two

Students will be able to determine how works of art can capture both appearance and feeling, establishing a definition for *shasei* and applying it to works of art.

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Images	Puppies by Maruyama Ōkyo Puppies by Nagasawa Rosetsu
Videos	Rosetsu’s Puppies: A Closer Look Shasei: Ōkyo’s Puppies
Worksheet	Shasei and Painting the Subjective Experience

Show the video *Rosetsu's Puppies: A Closer Look*, asking students to examine and compare Rosetsu's *Puppies* to Ōkyo's *Puppies*. Ask students to note that while the puppies are rendered with different brushstrokes and styles, both artists sought to portray the essence of puppies. Students will compare their list of experiences and feelings toward the artworks to understand the concept of subjectivity; their concepts of puppies are based on their personal experiences, feelings, and opinions, which may or may not be reflected in the art, as each artist has their own concept of "puppy-ness."

Replay the video *Shasei: Ōkyo's Puppies*, pausing to ask students what the art historian in the video means when he observes, "Ōkyo wasn't just painting what he saw with his eyes," but was also painting "the sense of wonder puppies create in people." Students will be introduced to the term *shasei* and will write this term to understand how art can capture both appearance and feeling. One key to understanding *shasei* is that the artists weren't just observing the animals but were also experiencing them through their own five senses to imbue them with personalities. They achieved this by closely observing their subjects in their natural habitats.

Objective Three

Students will be able to list and explore what other senses help both the artist and the viewer to associate a sense of personality with animals.

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Images	Three Monkeys and Wasps by Mori Sosen Puppies by Maruyama Ōkyo
Video	Shasei: Yūtei's Flock of Cranes
Worksheet	Shasei and Painting the Subjective Experience

Students will continue to refine and clarify their understanding of *shasei*. Students will closely study *Three Monkeys and Wasps* by Mori Sosen and watch the video *Shasei: Yūtei's Flock of Cranes*. Students will consider other ways artists can determine the personality of an animal using the five senses. Students will be asked to write a clear, concise definition of *shasei*, citing evidence from the artworks.

CROSS-CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

Art and Biology

Direct students to the *Impressions of Nature* videos to select from a wide variety of animals and create a short film using clips of animals sleeping, eating, moving, hunting, etc. For the biology student, this investigation can lead to a study of the bones and muscles that enable movement. Art students can illustrate the information shared by the biology student, and the final product can be presented to the class with film segments of moving animals with drawings of the underlying bones and muscular structures.

Art or Language Arts

Collect bark or easily found natural objects that fit in one's hand (branch, pinecone, grass). Students should first study the object carefully, noting characteristics and appearance. From there, students cannot look at the object but only hold it in their closed hand, feeling the object. Students will write a highly detailed and descriptive account of the object or draw it. Once this exercise is complete, the teacher should engage students in a discussion about how their different senses—sight versus feeling—aided in their understanding of the object.

Art History

Assign "Why do Ōkyo's puppies look so cute? The significance of Edo period artists observing nature to create art" by Brenda Jordan for students to explore a variety of Ōkyo's works and chart the development of the Maruyama school of painting.

Art History or Language Arts

The ability of the artist to capture the essence or "soul" of their subject is often what differentiates great artists from so-called copyists. Art history students could consider the work of contemporary artists, including photographers, who have captured their subject's essence. While this is a subjective measure of art, this exercise could also be useful for students in literature class, as it hones their ability to research as well as defend a subjective point of view.