

Brooklyn Museum

Teacher Resource Packet

Youth and Beauty: Art of the American Twenties

October 28, 2011–January 29, 2012



Youth and Beauty

Art of the American Twenties

About the Exhibition

Youth and Beauty: Art of the American Twenties explores how painters, sculptors, and photographers described their changing world in the years between the end of World War I and the onset of the Great Depression. Throughout the twenties, many artists created images of liberated modern bodies and the changing urban-industrial environment with an eye toward ideal form and ordered clarity—qualities seemingly at odds with a riotous decade best remembered for its flappers and Ford Model Ts. American artists of the Jazz Age struggled to express the experience of a dramatically remade modern world, demonstrating their faith in the potential of youth and in the sustaining value of beauty. This exhibition presents 138 works by artists including Thomas Hart Benton, Imogen Cunningham, Charles Demuth, Aaron Douglas, Edward Hopper, Gaston Lachaise, Luigi Lucioni, Gerald Murphy, Georgia O'Keeffe, Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Weston, and, featured in this packet, Yasuo Kuniyoshi.

About the Artist

"Art is universal because people are universal. The stuff from which art is made, feeling, intuition and imagination, is part of all people everywhere."

—Yasuo Kuniyoshi¹

Yasuo Kuniyoshi was born in Okayama, Japan, in 1889. Possessing an adventurous spirit, he decided at age thirteen that he wanted to either join the military or live in the United States. His father consented to the latter, and at age seventeen, Kuniyoshi arrived alone in Seattle, Washington, with only a few words of English and a small sum of money. He began working in a railroad yard and enrolled in a public school, where a teacher noticed his drawing skills and encouraged him to become an artist. Although he had never considered a career as an artist before, Kuniyoshi decided to enroll in art school in Los Angeles, where he discovered his passion for painting. In 1910 he moved to New York City, where he found a community of artists, attended several art schools, and visited museums for the first time in his life. He began exhibiting his work in group and solo shows, eventually establishing himself as a renowned artist in the United States and Japan. Kuniyoshi became a venerated educator at the Art Students League and the New School for Social Research, and served as the first president of the Artists Equity Association from 1947 to 1950. He participated in many social organizations, especially Japanese American ones, such as the Japanese American Committee for Democracy. He also contributed to the war effort during World War II, designing posters for the Office of War Information, although he was not allowed to participate in certain activities because he was not an American citizen. While Kuniyoshi considered himself an American artist, he highly valued his Japanese heritage. According to a statement he made in the *Magazine of Art* in March 1940, his artistic aim was "to combine the rich traditions of the East with my accumulative experiences and viewpoint of the West."



¹ Donald B. Goodall, introduction to *Yasuo Kuniyoshi, 1889–1953: A Retrospective Exhibition*, exh. cat. (Austin: University Art Museum, University of Texas, 1975), 18.

Description of *Self-Portrait as a Photographer*, 1924



In the foreground of the painting, a pale young man with a trim mustache wearing a white, cuffed shirt stands with his back to the viewer. His upper body fills the right side of the composition. He looks downward over his left shoulder.

His head is draped with a black cloth that falls to his shoulders. The man's right arm is raised above his head to hold back a swath of red drapery. Revealed behind the drapes is a sparse black-and-white landscape with a single, bare tree, undulating hills, and a cloudy sky. The fingers of his left hand curl around the shutter button of a folding camera with an accordion bellows (the pleated expandable part of a camera), which is aimed toward the barren landscape.

About the Artwork

At the time this painting was completed in 1924, Kuniyoshi was supporting himself and his wife by accepting photographic commissions from other members of the New York art world. Artists and galleries hired him to photograph studio spaces and the artwork made there. *Self-Portrait as a Photographer* shows the artist at work, and the painting creates a modernist, dreamlike ambiguity of meaning often found in his art. For example, Kuniyoshi shows himself using a dark focusing cloth, which covers the back of the camera and the photographer's head in order to prevent environmental light from obscuring the image in the viewfinder. His shrouded head might be read as a metaphor for revealing or hiding identity. Also open to several possible interpretations is the black-and-white landscape, which appears to be the artist's photographic subject. The light brown line running along the bottom of the landscape might indicate the wooden frame of a window, or that of a painting. It is unclear whether the bare tree, hills, and cloudy sky present a black-and-white interpretation of what Kuniyoshi observed outside his own studio (he often worked in rural areas) or whether they represent an artwork he is photographing on commission from a fellow artist. Finally, the position of the camera is ambiguous: is it resting on the windowsill or on an unseen support?

Kuniyoshi and other modern artists experimented with new ways of seeing and with fresh ideas about the nature of materials and the purpose of art. *Self-Portrait as a Photographer* includes several stylistic choices that are common to traditional Japanese woodblock prints (whose pictorial qualities influenced many modernists), as well as techniques used in Western painting (see "East Meets West" activity).

Questions for Looking

What's going on in this painting?

What do you notice about the figure's pose and facial expression? What information might these details convey about this person?

Look closely at the objects the figure is holding and wearing. What might these objects tell us about this person?

This painting is a self-portrait. What aspects of his identity did the artist Yasuo Kuniyoshi choose to include here? What do you think they communicate about him?

Kuniyoshi often painted from a combination of direct observation, memory, and his imagination. What do you see that he might have observed around him? What might have been painted from memory? What might have come from his imagination? Support your answer with details you find in the painting.

This painting has several visual elements that can be interpreted in different ways. Look closely at the black-and-white landscape. Do you think this is a painting or the view from the window? What do you see to support your idea? Do other areas of the painting seem ambiguous (having several possible meanings) to you? Why?

Activities

East Meets West

Kuniyoshi said that his goal as an artist was "to combine the rich traditions of the East with [his] accumulative experiences and viewpoint of the West." To better understand how Kuniyoshi brought these traditions together in his work, compare the painting *River Scene*, by Charles-François Daubigny, and a print from Japanese artist Utagawa Hiroshige's *Sixty-nine Stations on the Kisokaido Highway* (reproduced in this packet). These works demonstrate how the same principles of art were employed differently by two artists working in art-making traditions from the West and East, respectively.

Begin by defining these four key vocabulary words: perspective, shading, color, and composition (use the chart on the next page as a reference). Work with a partner or in a small group to look carefully at the two artworks for evidence of these principles of art. Record your observations. Share and discuss your findings.

Look closely at Kuniyoshi's *Self-Portrait as a Photographer*. What characteristics can you find from each artistic tradition? In what ways does he break from both traditions? Do you think Kuniyoshi achieved his goal of combining the East and West?



Japanese Woodblock Prints



Traditional Western Painting

<p>Perspective A technique used to suggest three-dimensional forms on a two-dimensional surface</p>	<p>Flattened perspective, where space appears to be fairly shallow</p>	<p>Linear perspective, where space appears to recede far into the distance</p>
<p>Shading The shading of areas to give a sense of form</p>	<p>Limited use of shading</p>	<p>High degree of shading</p>
<p>Color An element of art with three properties: hue (the color name; e.g., red); intensity (a color's strength; e.g., bright or dull red); and value (a color's lightness or darkness)</p>	<p>Flat, outlined blocks of solid color</p>	<p>Blended colors</p>
<p>Composition The plan, placement, or arrangement of visual elements in a work</p>	<p>Off-center placement of the subject</p>	<p>Centrally positioned subject</p>

Extension Activity

Chiura Obata, Isamu Noguchi, Miné Okubo, Hiromu Kira, and Bumpei Usui were all contemporaries of Kuniyoshi's as well as fellow Japanese Americans (works by Noguchi, Kira, and Usui are also included in the exhibition). Research these artists to learn more about their artwork. Discover some of the different ways they chose to combine Eastern and Western artistic traditions.

Self-Portrait as . . .

In the painting *Self-Portrait as a Photographer*, Kuniyoshi emphasized his artistic practice as an important part of his identity. Three years later, he painted himself in another role, in *Self-Portrait as a Golf Player*, 1927 (Museum of Modern Art, New York). Since the beginning of modernism in the nineteenth century, many artists, including Kuniyoshi, have experimented with ways of presenting their identities to the public. Find self-portraits by other artists (your school art teacher and librarian can help), and look closely to see what aspects of their identities they chose to emphasize. Suggested artists include Frida Kahlo, Andy Warhol, and Yasumasa Morimura. Create two self-portraits of your own that explore two different aspects of your identity. You may choose to use mixed media, photography, collage, painting, drawing, or any other medium that works best for you. You can further experiment with your artwork by combining your two portraits in a single work, as in Frida Kahlo's *The Two Fridas*, 1939 (Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City).

Resources

Carbone, Teresa A. *Youth and Beauty: Art of the American Twenties*. Exh. cat. New York: Brooklyn Museum and Skira Rizzoli, 2011.

This catalogue to the exhibition *Youth and Beauty: Art of the American Twenties*, organized by the Brooklyn Museum, features color images of works from the exhibition and essays by Teresa A. Carbone, Bonnie Costello, Randall R. Griffey, and Sarah M. Lowe.

<http://www.discovernikkei.org/en>

This website is devoted to stories and pictures of Japanese immigrants and their descendants.

Meyers, Jane, and Tom Wolf. *The Shores of a Dream: Yasuo Kuniyoshi's Early Work in America*. Exh. cat. Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1996.

This catalogue features color plates of many of Kuniyoshi's paintings and drawings from the twenties and essays exploring the artist's early work.

<http://www.nelson-atkins.org/art/Exhibitions/landscapes/humansandnature.cfm>

The Nelson-Atkins's website for the 2011–12 exhibition *Landscapes East / Landscapes West: Representing Nature from Mount Fuji to Canyon de Chelly* juxtaposes landscape paintings, drawings, prints, and photographs by Chinese, Japanese, European, and American artists from the fifteenth century to the present.

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/newamericans/newamericans.html>
The *New Americans* website offers an interactive online resource for 7th- to 12th-grade students. The site supplements the PBS Independent Lens documentary mini-series, which explores the immigrant experience through the personal stories of immigrants to the United States. The site also includes lesson plans for educators.

Riehlman, Franklin, Tom Wolf, and Bruce Weber, *Yasuo Kuniyoshi: Artist as Photographer*. Exh. cat. Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Edith C. Blum Art Institute, Milton and Sally Avery Arts Center, Bard College Center, with the Norton Gallery and School of Art, 1983.

This catalogue examines Kuniyoshi as a photographer and the relationship between his paintings and his photographic work.

This packet was written by Nicola Giardina and Rachel Ropeik, Senior Museum Educators, with assistance from Alexa Fairchild, School Programs Manager, and Teresa A. Carbone, Andrew W. Mellon Curator of American Art.

Cover (detail), pages 3,6: Yasuo Kuniyoshi (American, 1889–1953). *Self-Portrait as a Photographer*, 1924. Oil on canvas, 20% x 30% in. (51.8 x 76.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Scofield Thayer, 1982 (1984.433.11). Estate of Yasuo Kuniyoshi / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY

Page 2: Peter A. Juley & Son. *Yasuo Kuniyoshi seated in front of "Room 110."* Photograph. Peter A. Juley & Son Collection, Photograph Archives, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

Pages 4,7: Utagawa Hiroshige (Ando) (Japanese, 1797–1858). *Ashida*, from *Sixty-nine Stations on the Kisokaido Highway (Kisokaido Rokuju-Ku Tsugi)*, circa 1838. Woodblock color print, 8 15/16 x 13 15/16 in. (22.6 x 35.4 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Frank L. Babbott Fund, 39.576

Pages 4,8: Charles-François Daubigny (French, 1817–1878). *River Scene*, 1859. Oil on panel, 14% x 25% in. (36.2 x 65.4 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of William H. Herriman, 21.134

The exhibition was organized by Teresa A. Carbone, Andrew W. Mellon Curator of American Art at the Brooklyn Museum.

Sponsored by



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