

## Exploring Portraits, Dress, and Identity in Asian Art

Joanna Pecore

Asian Arts & Culture Center

Towson University, Towson, Maryland

### Discovery Questions

- What can art objects from distant times and places express about the identity of the people and the cultures depicted in them?
- How can exploring this question help students to build research, observation, and analysis skills?
- How would students represent group identity in a portrait?

### LESSON PLAN

#### Materials

- Image: Japanese Woodblock Print of Kabuki Actor, Oyawa-ya Onoe Matsusuke, as Oboshi Yuranosuke in the Play *The Forty-seven Samurai*. Asian Arts & Culture Center Collection, Object #P-026
- “About the Image” Information Sheet for the teacher

#### Preparation

- Study the image and download it to project for students.
- Read “About the Image.”
- Review activities and adapt for your class.



## Activities

### Part 1

1. Share the image with your class.
2. Ask students to *make observations* (What do you see?) and share them with the rest of the class.
3. Ask students to *analyze*.
  - What might these observations tell us about the person in the picture?
  - What might the clothing, hair, accessories, and text help us learn about the person's identity?
4. As students analyze the image in a class discussion, share information about the image to affirm, encourage, and supportively redirect student analyses.
5. Once the class seems satisfied with their decoding of the image, transition to a discussion about portraiture and identity.

#### (Discuss the Image)

- Who do you think created this portrait?
- Why?
- What do you think the creator hopes the viewer will see in terms of the person's individual identity?
- What does the creator hope the viewer sees in terms of the person's social identity?
- How do the clothing, hair, accessories, and other elements contribute to this perception?
- Who are the viewers?
- Do you think they see what the creator intended?
- What else might they see?

#### (Discuss Portraits in General)

- Based on the responses above, what is the purpose of a portrait?
- What strategies do portrait artists use to accomplish their goals?
- What role do dress and adornment play in portraiture?
- How would you define a portrait?
- Create a definition of portrait as a class. (Make it provisional if students are not comfortable with finalizing it).

### Part 2

6. Ask students to research, observe, and analyze portraits in their homes and community based on the working definition of a portrait students created. They may photograph or sketch examples to share in class.

7. In a class discussion of students' examples, consider these questions.

- What messages does it convey? How?
- Who is the presenter?
- Who is the audience?
- How is it staged?
- What role do dress and adornment play in expressing those messages?

### Part 3

8. Create a classroom portraiture studio to create group portraits. Ask them to call on the class definition of a portrait as they work.

- Divide the class in half. Assign half the class the role "portrait artist" and assign half the class to the role "portrait subject."
- Ask "portrait artists" and "portrait subjects" to work together to define a group identity for the "portrait subjects" and identify strategies for expressing the group identity through portraiture by revisiting the questions above.
- The groups work together to plan and create a group portrait that may be a photograph, sketch, painting, or collage.
- Display the final portrait and ask students to write reflections on the process and the final product, the portrait.

## About the Image Information Sheet

Japanese Woodblock Print of  
Kabuki Actor, Otawa-ya Onoe Matsusuke, as Oboshi Yuranosuke  
In the Play, The Forty-seven Samurai  
Asian Arts & Culture Center Collection, Object #P-026

### Observations--What do you see?

- Elegantly posed man
- Samurai hairstyle (male)
- Swords
- White skin (make-up)
- Layered kimono dress
- Crest on kimono
- Fan
- Text

### Analysis--Who is it?

Point out to students that by combining *observations* and *analysis* with *research*, it becomes possible to gain a fairly detailed understanding of this man's identity. In this case, the teacher is providing the class with research results, so students can practice their observation and analysis skills and learn about portraits, dress, and identity. However, when students engage in their own projects, it will be necessary to combine research with observation and analysis.

In the image, the elements below help viewers understand that this is a Japanese male from medieval or early modern Japan. He is also an actor (from the Kabuki theater), playing the role of this man. We can guess that he is a samurai. The crest on his kimono tells us that he is a particular fictional character, Oboshi Yuranosuke, a main character in the famous Japanese story *The Forty-Seven Samurai*. We can discover this by searching the Internet for other images, especially in *ukiyo-e* prints and the kabuki theater, of *The Forty-Seven Samurai*.

*Ukiyo-e* prints of kabuki actors were popular in Japan between 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. People especially liked to have prints of their favorite kabuki actors.

### What the Elements Suggest

- Elegant pose of the man may express his confidence, pride, and status and supports his identity as a samurai, especially the famed character Oboshi Yuranosuke.
- Hair is in a style popular for men in medieval and early modern Japan.
- The *chokuto* sword was carried by samurai.
- White makeup on the skin suggests a kabuki actor.
- Layered kimono dress was a popular style in medieval and early modern Japan.

- Crest on kimono shows the actor is playing the role of Oboshi Yuranosuke, leader of *The Forty-Seven Samurai*.
- Fans were a popular accessory in medieval and early modern Japan.
- The text says “Actor portrait” and there are also the publisher’s approval seal, the publisher’s seal (*Izumi-ya Ichibei*), and the artist’s name (Toyokuni).

### *The Forty-Seven Samurai*

This fictional play is based on an historical account dated to 1701 of a feud between Asano Naganori, *daimyo* (powerful feudal leader lords subordinate only to the *shogun*) of the Ako domain, and the court official, Kira Yoshinaka, which led to Asano’s forced suicide and the eventual revenge of his retainers. To avoid government censorship, the play was set during the earlier Muromachi period (1336-1573) with fictional names for the characters. The production was first created for the puppet stage in 1748 and later adapted for the kabuki theater.

### Who Is Oboshi Yuranosuke?

The Oboshi Yuranosuke is the chief retainer of the fictional *daimyo*, Enya Hangan, in *The Forty-Seven Samurai*. Before Enya’s forced suicide, he asked Oboshi to avenge his death. Oboshi keeps his promise, maintains his loyalty to his master, and bravely and cunningly leads a plot to take revenge.

Caption for image (below)

### **Japanese Woodblock Print of Kabuki Actor, Otawa-ya Onoe Matsusuke, as Oboshi Yuranosuke in the Play *The Forty-seven Samurai*.**

The crest on his kimono shows that the actor is playing the role of Oboshi Yuranosuke, leader of *The Forty-Seven Samurai*. Artist: Toyokuni I (1769-1825). Circa 1925 impression of 1795 original. Izumi-ya Ichibei publishing house. Measuring 21-1/2" H x 15-1/2" W. P-026.

役者舞臺之姿繪  
多羽衣

豊  
國  
魚  
橋  
東市販

