

Classroom Activity

Washi: Japanese Papermaking

Objective Students will learn about a process of making Japanese handmade paper, *washi*, that can be done in school or at home. Students will become aware of the difference between Japanese- and Western-style papermaking.

Grades K-12

Time At least one hour

Materials Water; *kozo* (mulberry) pulp; *neri* (a viscous liquid derived from plants that changes the viscosity of the water and helps to keep the fibers in suspension during the paper-making process); a tub to hold the mixture; a papermaking mold—*suketa* (*su* means screen and *keta* means deckle, a hinged wooden frame that holds the screen); optional: dye, flowers, leaves, bits of paper, etc., for decorating the hand-made paper; and an extractor (a vacuum machine for taking some of the water out of the sheets of paper).

Background Paper is thought to have been invented in China in 105 C.E. and to have spread across Asia along the great Silk Road. It came to Europe as late as the twelfth or thirteenth century. It was introduced to Japan by a Korean priest-physician in 610. The Japanese embraced the material and developed extraordinary expertise in making it. Paper eventually became a staple of everyday existence in Japan; in addition to its use as a writing and artistic material, paper was used in architecture (covering the sliding panels of traditional homes), for clothing, and functional objects, such as fans and umbrellas.

Washi or handmade Japanese paper has the following characteristics not generally found in Western-style papers: it tends to be light-weight and porous, its basic materials are long plant fibers (whereas Western-style paper is often made of wood pulp), it is tough, elastic, and durable, and does not contain nonvegetable matter.

Washi is generally a very stable paper that is not as negatively affected by acid as are many Western papers. (Western-style paper is usually composed of a high percentage of cellulose fiber, which is a kind of carbohydrate that dissolves easily when exposed to acids.) Because of their stability Japanese papers are widely used in conservation.

Procedure Carefully dip the mold into the tub at a right angle and gently but quickly shake the mold back and forth and side to side to uniformly disperse the fibers. This process can be repeated to build up fibers and create paper thickness. Flower petals, colored paper, etc. can be added in between layers. Additionally, dyed pulp can be included. The screen is separated from the deckle. If an extractor is used the sheet of paper is pulled over the extractor to take some water out of the fibers. The paper is then placed on boards to dry naturally. Other clean flat surfaces can be used—such as tables or windows. In Western-style papermaking, water is pushed out by heavy pressing.

Resources Hiromi Paper International, Inc.
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