Japan Past & Present

History of Kawaii & its Development in the Japanese Context

Lesson Plan: History of *Kawaii* & its Development in the Japanese Context
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Target Audience:

High School students, Undergraduate students

Duration:

3-to-4 classes, 50–60 minutes long

Potential Courses to Include this Lesson in:

- Japanese Studies courses
- East Asian Studies courses
- World History courses

Background:

This unit explores the history of cuteness in Japan, tracing its development in literature and ink-brush scrolls from the Heian period (794–1185), through paintings and prints in the Edo period (1603–1868) to the beginning of the modern *kawaii* aesthetic in the early 20th century.

Learning Objectives:

To explore why cuteness appeared so early in the arts of Japan compared to other countries, and to trace the development of cuteness over the centuries. The final unit explains how the *kawaii* aesthetic formed as part of girls' culture starting in the early 20th century.

Core Video Content & Readings:

"Why Cuteness Needs to be Studied." Posted June 29, 2023, by Joshua Paul Dale. YouTube, 8 min., 15 sec, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JB5DthYnbtQ

Dale, Joshua Paul. Short excerpts from *Irresistible: How Cuteness Wired Our Brains and Conquered the World*. London: Profile Books, 2024.

"List of Adorable Things." Excerpt from *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shonagon (966–1017 or 1025). In *Traditional Japanese Literature: An Anthology, Beginnings to 1600*, edited by Haruo Shirane, p. 277. Excerpt translated by Ivan Morris. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

> *#99 – Adorable things*
>
> *The face of a child drawn on a melon.*
>
> *A baby sparrow that comes hopping up when one imitates the squeak of a mouse; or again, when one has tied it with a thread round its leg and its parents bring insects or worms and pop them in its mouth – delightful!*

A baby of two or so is crawling rapidly along the ground. With his sharp eyes he catches sight of a tiny object and, picking it up with his pretty little fingers, takes it to show to a grown-up person.

A child, whose hair has been cut like a nun's, is examining something; the hair falls over his eyes, but instead of brushing it away he holds his head to the side. The pretty white cords of his trouser skirt are tied round his shoulders, and this too is most adorable.

A young palace page, who is still quite small, walks by in ceremonial costume.

One picks up a pretty baby and holds him for a while in one's arms; while one is fondling him, he clings to one's neck and then falls asleep.

The objects used during the Display of Dolls.

One picks up a tiny lotus leaf that is floating on a pond and examines it. Not only the lotus leaves, but little hollyhock flowers, and indeed all small things, are most adorable.

An extremely plump baby, who is about a year old and has lovely white skin, comes crawling toward one, dressed in a long gauze robe of violet with the sleeves tucked up.

A little boy of about eight who reads aloud from a book in his childish voice.

Pretty, white chicks who are still not fully fledged and look as if their clothes are too short for them; cheeping loudly, they follow one on their long legs or walk close to the mother hen.

> *Duck eggs.*
>
> *An urn containing the relics of some holy person.*
>
> *Wild pinks.*

Assigned Materials:

Excerpts from *Irresistible: How Cuteness Wired Our Brains and Conquered the World* .

Online images, see specified websites below.

- Scenes from *Chōjū-giga*. https://www.nhk.or.jp/school/bunkazai/cont_02/cont_02.html
- Hunter Oatman-Stanford. "Naughty Nuns, Flatulent Monks, and Other Surprises of Sacred Medieval Manuscripts" Collectors Weekly, July 24, 2024.
- "Definition of Japanese Kawaii." Posted February 28, 2016, by marukomeOfficial. YouTube, 2 min., 32 sec, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvUzDn5usVw

Images from these three illustrators:

- Yumeji Takehisa https://yumeji-art-museum.com/gallery-english/
- Nakahara Jun'ichi https://www.junichi-nakahara.com
- Naitō Rune https://www.naitou-rune.jp/works/

Activity/Procedure & Discussion Questions:

Unit 1: Heian Period

1. Introduction
   Watch the short video "Why Cuteness Needs to be Studied" (8:15). (**Note for instructors**: As the video shows, there is a biological basis to the

cuteness response but this is expressed differently depending on the cultural context.)
    - Why do scientists think that cuteness is part of human biology?
    - How did cuteness appear in Japanese art?
    - What impact did new technologies like mass production have on the spread of cuteness? Why?
2. Read pages 16–25 from *Irresistible.*
   Discuss the list of adorable things from *The Pillow Book*.
    - Who was Sei Shōnagon, and why did she write *The Pillow Book*?
    - What items on *The Pillow Book's* list are cute today, and why?
    - Which of them are connected to life in the Heian court? Are these still cute? Why or why not?
    - Sei Shōnagon says, “All small things are most adorable.” Do you agree? If not, why do you think she wrote that?
    - What would you add to the list of cute things if you were living at that time and place?
3. Read pages 26–34 from *Irresistible*.
   (**Note for instructors**: Refer to *Irresistible* on the importance of play in Japan's spiritual tradition.)
   Discuss scenes from the *Chōjū-giga,* or *Scroll of Frolicking Animals*.
    - Describe the actions taking place in the scrolls. Which are familiar today, and why?
    - Some people call this the origin of manga, or the world's first anime. What do you think?

   Compare the images in the scrolls to marginalia in European medieval manuscripts (reference: "Naughty Nuns, Flatulent Monks, and Other Surprises of Sacred Medieval Manuscripts")
    - What are the differences, and why do you think they are different?
    - Both *The Pillow Book* and the *Scroll of Frolicking Animals* employ the technique of reduction. How is this used in cute products and characters today?

Unit 2: Edo Period

1. Read pages 75–82 from *Irresistible*.
   Discuss the puppies in the works of Maruyama Ōkyo (1733–1795) (and his student Nagasawa Rosetsu if there's time) and the cats of Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798–1861).
   - What techniques does Maruyama Ōkyo use to emphasize the cuteness of the puppies in his paintings?
   - What are some of the ways that Utagawa Kuniyoshi uses cats in his prints?

   Compare their works to animals in 18th century European paintings and porcelain.
   - What are the differences between the realism of the European works and the characterizations in the Japanese works?

Unit 3: Modern Era (from Meiji period onwards)

1. Read pages 88–96 from *Irresistible*.
   View and discuss the illustrations of Yumeji Takehisa, Nakahara Jun'ichi, and Naitō Rune.
   - How did *kawaii* develop as part of Japanese girls' culture in the early twentieth century?
   - Compare the illustrations of the three artists listed above. Can you tell from their works who came first and who is the most recent? Why do you think so?
2. Conclusion
   Watch the video "Definition of Japanese Kawaii"
   (**Note for instructors**: As students will see at the end, this video is actually a commercial for a brand of instant ramen.)
   - What do you think of the examples of *kawaii* presented in the video?
   - The video claims that *kawaii* is part of the Japanese DNA. How does this compare with the scientific research on cuteness described in the video "Why Cuteness Needs to be Studied" that you watched at

the beginning of this lesson?

Evaluation:

Students can choose one of the featured authors, artists, or illustrators and do further research for a final paper. Or, they could choose an example of contemporary *kawaii* and write about how it is related to past examples.

Instructor Reference Materials:

Frederick, Sarah. "Girls' Magazines and the Creation of *Shoŏjo* Identities." In *The Routledge Handbook of Japanese Media,* edited by Fabienne Darling-Wolf. London: Routledge, 2018.

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Oatman-Stanford, Hunter. "Naughty Nuns, Flatulent Monks, and Other Surprises of Sacred Medieval Manuscripts." Collectors Weekly, July 24, 2014. https://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/naughty-nuns-flatulent-monks-and-other-surprises-of-sacred-medieval-manuscripts/

Shamoon, Deborah. *Passionate Friendship: The Aesthetics of Girls' Culture in Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012.

Yiengpruksawan, Mimi. "Monkey Magic: How the 'Animals' Scroll Makes Mischief with Art Historians." *Orientations* 31, no. 3 (March 2000): 74-83.