



Berkshiremuseum

Aquatic Life

Gyotaku: Japanese Fish Printing

Description

The art of gyotaku (Pronounced ghio-ta'-koo) has been used in Japan for more than a century to record catches of sportfish. The Japanese fish printing technique has provided information in ichthyological studies. *This activity is provided courtesy of the Marine Science Center in Newport, Oregon.*

Materials

- Water-soluble block printing ink (easiest to work with because it does not run and dries slowly), textile silk-screening ink, India ink, or tempera. Dark colors give the best effect.
- Rice paper, newsprint, or other moisture tolerant paper. Printing on the classified ads can be aesthetically pleasing.
- A fresh, flat fish with scales intact (flounder, bluegill, carp or rockfish work well). Plastic fish can also be purchased for this purpose from a variety of natural science and arts & crafts supply catalogs like *Nasco*.
- Paint brushes
- Newspaper
- Modeling clay
- Straight pins
- Paper towels

Objectives

Students will:

- Be able to use art materials to show pattern, symmetry and morphology of fish.
- Note characteristics that all fish possess (fins, gills and most often scales).
- Understand the process of print making.
- Understand and appreciate the diversity and beauty of marine life.

Procedure

- 1 Prepare the fish by washing it well with biodegradable, non-toxic soap; to get a good print, you need to remove all of the dirt, grit, blood and protective slime. In traditional *gyotaku* the fish is printed whole and intact, but using a cleaned fish stuffed with paper towels also yields good results.
- 2 Rinse the fish and pat it dry with some paper toweling. Cover a table with several layers of newspaper and lay the fish down on the paper. Place pieces of modeling clay under the tail and fins to raise them up, making them level with the body. (If you neglect this step, your print will reveal a strange finless species!)
- 3 Place pieces of paper towel into the nostrils, gill slits and anus to prevent any liquid from leaking out onto your fabric, then arrange the fish as you want it to appear in the print. You can spread out the fins or shape the mouth as you like. Secure the position with pins stuck through the clay. Let the fish dry, then remove the pins; the fins will stay fanned out.
- 4 To make your *gyotaku*, slide pieces of paper towel under the fins and tail to cover the clay. Brush a thin coat of ink onto the fish from head to tail in one direction. Be sure to cover all the fins, the lips and the gill cover, but leave the eyes unpainted.
- 5 Remove the pieces of paper towel from under the fins and tail. With clean hands, carefully lay your rice paper or newsprint on top of the fish. Beginning at the head and moving down to the tail, rub your fingers flat over the surface of the fish, being careful not to fold or move the fabric. Any part you don't touch will be left out of the print.
- 6 Gently lift the paper off the fish and set it aside to dry. When the ink has dried, you can use a very small brush to paint an eye in the "eye spot." Try placing a small white dot in the eye to make it look like a real fish eye.
- 7 Re-ink your fish and print again; you can print all day, if you can stand the smell! If you used non-toxic ink and made only a few prints, you can still eat your fish -- wash it well, fillet it and cook it up.