

ROGER SHIMOMURA

AN AMERICAN KNOCKOFF

Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University
January 17 – March 29, 2015

Teachers Guide

This guide is to help teachers prepare students for a field trip to the exhibition, *Roger Shimomura: An American Knockoff* and to offer ideas for leading self-guided groups through the galleries. Teachers, however, will need to consider the level and needs of their students in adapting these materials and lessons.

Goals

- To introduce students to the work of Roger Shimomura
- To identify characteristics of the artist's style
- To identify the stylistic influences in the artist's work
- To identify and explore themes and motifs in the artist's work

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Discuss how Roger Shimomura uses the parts of art and principles of art
- Discuss the stylistic influence of comic books, American pop art, and Japanese wood block prints in the artist's work
- Discuss the artist's use of humor and irony
- Discuss the artist's use of family biography and memory to address the issue of Japanese American internment during WWII
- Discuss the artist's use of self-portraiture to address stereotypes and issues of racism, xenophobia, and cross-cultural relations

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INTRODUCTION: **(adapted from the exhibition catalog)**

For four decades, Roger Shimomura's paintings, prints, and theater pieces have addressed artistic forms and sociopolitical issues of Asian America. He does this through a style that combines his childhood interest in comic books, American Pop Art, and traditional Japanese woodblock prints, thereby evoking his Japanese ancestry while locating him firmly within modern American artistic practices. Through this artistic device, he is able to bring together a wild mixture of compositions that offer up jarring patterns of criticism within visually compelling works of sumptuous color and lighthearted Pop directness.

A number of Shimomura's early works address his childhood experiences at the internment camp of Minidoka during WWII, while in his current series the artist inserts himself as an aging Asian Everyman in various guises, both funny and poignant. He does this as an imposter, or a battler against a host of ironic, stereotypical settings: punching at a gaggle of Disney cartoon characters, joining Chinese Mao-era brigades, and attacking Japanese stereotypes and assuming identities of iconic American figures such as Superman.

Roger Shimomura received his BA in commercial design from the University of Washington in 1961, and his MFA in painting from Syracuse University in 1969. He began teaching at the School of Fine Arts at the University of Kansas in 1969. Retired in 2004, Shimomura now splits his time between studios in Lawrence, Seattle, and New York City.

BEFORE THE MUSEUM VISIT:

- If possible, visit the exhibition on your own beforehand.
- Use the images *American in Disguise* and *Block Party* and suggested discussion and activities, to introduce students to the work of Roger Shimomura.

Looking at the work of Roger Shimomura

knock-off \ 'näk-,ōf \ *noun* : a cheap or inferior copy of something

Far too many American-born citizens of Asian descent continue to be accepted as only "American knockoffs." This latest series of paintings is an attempt to ameliorate the outrage of these misconceptions by depicting myself battling those stereotypes or, in tongue-in-cheek fashion, becoming those very same stereotypes.

Roger Shimomura



American in Disguise
2012
Acrylic on canvas
34 x 34"
Hallie Ford Museum of Art

In his most recent series, *An American Knockoff*, Roger Shimomura uses self-portraiture and the light-hearted style of the beloved comic books of his youth and American Pop Art to address serious issues of racial stereotypes and xenophobia, and to ask the question “What does it mean to be an American?”

From the Artist:

...One of the primary themes in this series has to do with the physical appearance that Asian people in this country have and how it affects how other people perceive them, rightly or wrongly. In this painting I'm wearing a kimono not because I have ever worn a kimono for any occasion, other than maybe a costume party, but because people in the majority think I should look this way. They look at me and say, "This person is Asian." Now, along with that go a lot of traits and habits and so on that have no basis in fact, which simply are not there for people like myself who have been in this country for three generations or, for my children, four generations. They are no more Japanese or Asian than a lot of their Caucasian counterparts, which is curious enough. But because the connotation of being Asian in this county has been so negative – because of wars, because of exclusion laws and so on, it is not a comfortable identity to be wearing. Not only is it inaccurate, but it's frequently insulting. By wearing the Superman outfit underneath, I'm saying, "I too aspire to those American values that are in this country, to those rewards available for working hard and trying to attain success, like every other American, regardless of their cultural background or ethnic heritage."

Suggested Discussion

Before sharing the title of the work and the artist's statement above, show students the image *American in Disguise*.

- What do you see here?
 - Briefly describe what you see in this picture. What is your first impression of this work – subject matter, mood, etc.?

Share with students the title of the work and Roger Shimomura's statement.

- How does the artist's statement affect your viewing of the painting? Do you look at it in a new way or consider new things? How does he get his message across?
- Like many American boys growing up in the 1940s and '50s, Shimomura loved, and was an avid collector of, comics and superhero toys. How does this influence the style and content of his work? (blocks of flat, bright colors, even when used as shading; outlined figures, a variety of patterns, etc. as well as direct references to specific characters)
- Discuss the juxtaposition between Shimomura's style and subject matter and the themes he addresses. How does it affect the artist's message? Explain.
- Discuss the use of humor and irony when dealing with serious or sensitive issues. Do you think it's an effective tool? Why or why not?
- Discuss the role of self-portraiture in Shimomura's work. How does having the artist part of the narrative affect the narrative and its message? Explain.
- Discuss the meaning of "knockoff" and how it relates to Shimomura's work.

For younger audiences

- Describe what you see in the painting. Where does your eye go first? Where does it go next? Why?
- How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principals of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
- Who is Superman? What words would you use to describe him? What qualities does he have that people like? Why might he be considered a symbol of America?

- This is a self-portrait of artist Roger Shimomura, who is an American of Japanese ancestry. What is the artist doing? What do you think he wants to tell us about himself as he pulls open his traditional Japanese kimono to show us the Superman costume beneath it?

Suggested Activity

American in Disguise expresses the idea that how we see ourselves is often not how others see us. Create a self-portrait that reflects how you see yourself (and how you want to be seen) and how you think others see you. You can choose from a variety of media and techniques (draw or paint a picture, construct a collage of different images, etc.). How will your composition show the two “sides” of the self-portrait? Share your work and explain your choices.



Block Dance

2007

Acrylic on canvas

36 x 45”

Courtesy of the artist, Lawrence, Kansas

Born a third generation Sansei in Seattle in 1939, Roger Shimomura experienced at an early age the mixed messages that come from being Japanese American. With the outbreak of World War II, along with 110,000 other Americans of Japanese descent in Washington, Oregon, and California, his family was interned at one of the several federal camps set up for temporary relocation of people who posed a “potential threat to national security,” via President Roosevelt’s 1942 Executive Order 9066. Forced to abandon their home and neighbors, the Shimomuras took up residence at Camp Minidoka in Hunt, Idaho.

Since the late 1970s, Roger Shimomura has created series of works that address the issue of the internment of Japanese Americans, based on his family’s experience at Camp Minidoka and his own research. *Block Dance* is part of the fourth series, *Minidoka on my Mind*, which he describes as “the culmination of years of my perusing images culled from books, magazines, government publications, and the internet.”

From the Artist:

Camp Minidoka was broken down into blocks. Each block used to have their independent social events. The block dance was one of the camp favorites. Deep into the night the incarcerated would jitterbug to recorded music by Glen Miller and other American big band favorites.

Suggested Discussion

Before sharing the title of the work and the artist's statement above, show students the image, *Block Dance*.

- What do you see here?
 - Describe what you see in this picture. What is your first impression of this work – subject matter, mood, etc.

Share with students the title of the work and the artist's statement.

- How does the artist's statement affect your viewing of the painting? Do you look at it in a new way or consider new things?
- How does the artist suggest the ordinary lives of American teenagers during the 1940s? How does he suggest they lived under extraordinary conditions and in reality were not allowed to be ordinary American teenagers?
 - How do the compositional elements emphasize this contradiction? (strong vertical lines of wall and window suggesting a prison; the glimpse of barbed wire through the window in the background)
- How are *Block Dance* and *American in Disguise* similar? How are they different?
- What do Shimomura's images of life in Camp Minidoka (as seen in *Block Dance* as well as other works in the exhibition) tell us about human resilience?

For younger audiences

(This can follow a discussion on Japanese American internment during World War II; there are several books written for grades 1-5 listed in the Suggested Reading section)

- Describe what you see in the painting. Where does your eye go first? Where does it go next? Why?
- How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principals of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
- What is the mood of this picture? Where do you see that?
- What tells us this scene isn't from today, but from an earlier time in America?

- What might the black wall that blocks our view and cuts off some of the figures suggest?
- Do you think this picture is happy or sad? Or both? Why?

Suggested Activity

Write a descriptive paragraph, short story, or poem from the point of view of one of the characters in *Block Dance*. Describe the sights, the sounds, and the environment as well as the physical sensations and emotions.

AT THE MUSEUM:

- Review with students what is expected – their task and museum behavior.
- Focus on the works of art. Encourage students to look closely at each work of art and consider starting their exploration with the same “Describe what you see” strategies they used with *American in Disguise* and *Block Dance*.

Things to look for in the exhibition:

Find examples and discuss the following:

- The artist’s persona as “as an aging Asian Everyman in various guises” who battles stereotypes and misconceptions.
- The use of humor and irony.
- The artist’s affection for American culture as well as his sharp critique of American culture, often in the same work.
- The use of the personal (family biography, autobiography) to address the universal (history, injustice, cultural conflict).
- Stories of Camp Minidoka told from different points of view: the artist’s grandmother, the artist as a young child, and the artist as a chronicler of an historic event.
- The juxtaposition of everyday American life and the extraordinary circumstances of life in an internment camp.
- The influence of comic books, in subject matter as well as style. Note especially the use of blocks of flat, bright colors, even when used as shading; outlined figures, expressive lines, a variety of patterns, exaggerated movement, and extreme foreshortening

Things to look for in the exhibition (cont'd):

- The influence of American Pop artists like Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, whose work Shimomura studied as an art student. They too were inspired by popular culture and its icons and used the brightly-colored graphic and narrative style of comic books and advertisements in their art. Look for the visual reference to Lichtenstein's famous Brushstroke series:



Roy Lichtenstein working on a Brushstroke painting in 1967

<http://www.cavetocanvas.com/post/6372474096/roy-lichtenstein-at-work-on-a-brush-stroke>

- The influence in style and subject matter of traditional Japanese woodblock prints. There are several examples on view upstairs in the Hallie Ford Museum of Art's Sponenbergh Gallery.

RESOURCE:

Bruce, Chris and Anne Collins Goodyear, *Roger Shimomura: An American Knockoff*. Pullman, WA, Museum of Art/Washington State University, 2014.

SUGGESTED READING:

Available through Chemeketa Cooperative Regional Library

Inada, Lawson Fusao, *In this Great Land of Freedom: The Japanese Pioneers of Oregon*. Los Angeles, Japanese American National Museum, 1993.

Inada, Lawson Fusao, *Legends from Camp: Poems*. Minneapolis, MN, Coffee House Press, 1993.

Inada, Lawson Fusao, *Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience*. Berkeley, CA, Heyday Books, San Francisco, 2000. **High School/Adult**
An anthology drawn from poetry, biography, news accounts, formal government declarations, letters, and autobiography along with political sketches, and cartoons.

Kessler, Lauren, *Stubborn Twig*. Corvallis, OR, Oregon State University Press, 2008. **Young Adult**

Lee-Tai, Amy and Felicia Hoshino, *A Place Where Sunflowers Grow (Sabaku ni saita himawari)*. San Francisco, Children's Book Press, 2006. **Grades 1-3**

Mochizuki, Ken, *Baseball Saved Us*. New York, Lee and Low, 1993. **Grades 1-4**
(also available in Spanish)

Oppenheim, Joanne, *Dear Miss Breed: True Stories of the Japanese American Incarceration during World War II and a Librarian who made a Difference*. New York, Scholastic Nonfiction, 2006. **Grades 7-10**

Uchida, Yoshiko, *The Bracelet*. New York, Philomei, 1993. **Grades 2-5**

Uchida, Yoshiko, *The Invisible Thread* [an autobiography]. New York, Beech Tree Paperback, 1995. **Young Adult**

Yamasaki, Katie, *Fish for Jimmy*. New York, Holiday House, 2013. **Grades 1-3**

SUGGESTED WEBSITES

In the Shadow of My Country: A Japanese American Artist Remembers

<http://www.densho.org/learning/shadow/module/shadow.html>

This multimedia program features artist Roger Shimomura, who was held at Minidoka, Idaho, as a three year old, and found inspiration in his grandmother's journals for the series An American Diary. A virtual exhibition, *In the Shadow of My Country* displays these sharply ironic paintings tempered by the grandmother's patient, hopeful words. Complementing the central images are the poignant series Memories of Childhood (depicting Shimomura's earliest memories of Minidoka), photos of daily life in the detention camps, an interview with the artist, and quotations of Japanese Americans incarcerated as children.

At the end of this program there is a link to a comprehensive teachers guide on Japanese American internment.

In The Shadow of My Country: An Artist Remembers was created by Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project:

Densho's mission is to preserve the testimonies of Japanese Americans who were unjustly incarcerated during World War II before their memories are extinguished. We offer these irreplaceable firsthand accounts, coupled with historical images and teacher resources, to explore principles of democracy and promote equal justice for all.

Ansel Adams's Photographs of Japanese American Internment at Manzanar from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalog

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/manz/>

Photographs documenting the lives of Japanese Americans interned during World War II at the Manzanar Relocation Center, in Inyo County, California.

COMMON CURRICULUM GOALS

The suggested discussions and activities included in this packet can be used to support the following Common Curriculum Goals developed by the Oregon Department of Education. For specific benchmarks for your grade level check with your school district or on the Oregon Public Education Network (O.P.E.N.) www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=53

The Arts

Create, Present, And Perform

Create, present and perform works of art.

Select and combine essential elements and organizational principles to achieve a desired effect when creating, presenting and/or performing works of art.

Apply the use of ideas, techniques and problem solving to the creative process and analyze the influence that choices have on the result.

Describe the creative process used, and the effects of the choices made, when combining ideas, techniques, and problem solving to produce one's work.

Express ideas, moods and feelings through the arts and evaluate how well a work of art expresses one's intent.

Create, present and/or perform a work of art by controlling essential elements and organizational principles to express an intended idea, mood or feeling.

Aesthetics and Criticism

Apply critical analysis to works of art.

Use knowledge of essential elements, organizational principles and aesthetic criteria to describe works of art and identify how the elements and principles contribute to the aesthetic effect.

Respond to works of art and give reasons for preferences.

Describe personal preferences for works of art using aesthetic criteria and identify how essential elements and organizational principles contribute to the aesthetic effect.

Historical and Cultural Perspectives

Understand how events and conditions influence the arts.

Distinguish the influence of events and conditions on works of art.

Understand how the arts can reflect the environment and personal experiences within a society or culture, and apply to one's own work.

Explain how works of art from around the world reflect the artist's environment, society and culture.

Understand the place of the arts within, and their influences on, society.

Explain how the arts serve a variety of purposes, needs and values in different communities and cultures.

Explain the influence of the arts on individuals, communities and cultures in various time periods.

Social Sciences

Historical Knowledge

Relate significant events and eras in local, state, United States, and world history to past and present issues and developments.

Analyze ideas critical to the understanding of history, including, but not limited to: populism, progressivism, isolationism, imperialism, communism, environmentalism, liberalism, fundamentalism, racism, ageism, classism, conservatism, cultural diversity, feminism, and sustainability.

Civics and Government

Understand and apply knowledge about governmental and political systems, and the rights and responsibilities of citizens.

English Language Arts

Writing

Text Types and Purposes

Anchor Standard 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Write narrative, expository, and persuasive texts, using a variety of written forms – including journals, essays, short stories, poems, research reports, research papers, business and technical writing – to express ideas appropriate to audience and purpose across the subject areas.



