

MATERIALS

- all purpose chipboard 4"x6" or 4"x6" wooden plaque (cut to resemble a house with a hole drilled into the top for hanging)
- pencils
- permanent markers
- paper for drawing drafts
- acrylic paints
- paintbrushes
- containers for water
- ribbon or cord for hanging
- hole puncher

RESOURCES

- Museum of International Folk Art- online collections
<http://collection.internationalfolkart.org/collections>
- Smithsonian, National Museum of Asian Art - online collections
<https://asia.si.edu/object/FSC-PA-186/>
- Wikipedia, background information
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ema_\(Shinto\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ema_(Shinto))

VOCABULARY (Definitions on page 4)

- **Ema**
- **Fortune**
- **Shinto shrines**
- **Sacred**
- **Offering**
- **Symbol**

NATIONAL VISUAL ARTS

STANDARDS

- **Creating:** Conceiving and developing new artistic ideas and work.
- **Presenting:** Interpreting and sharing artistic work.
- **Responding:** Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning.
- **Connecting:** Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.



Temple offering. Tokyo, Japan. Museum of International Folk Art, gift of James McGrath

Ema, Japanese Wishing Plaques

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginnings of human culture, people have sought blessings and good fortune from the sacred realm. Whether that realm is believed to include certain deities, gods, spirits, or other forces, a sense that both harm as well as great *fortune* may emanate is universal among humans everywhere. The practice of writing a personal wish or prayer on a wooden plaque, called *ema*, usually takes place at *Shinto shrines* throughout Japan.

OBJECTIVES

- To understand the way that Ema are used in Shinto Temples in Japan (historical and cultural understanding).
- To describe and discuss the process of making an Ema, including the use of symbols and imagery, their meaning and the materials that are used (perceiving, analyzing and responding).
- To explore the Japanese tradition of Ema, create your own wishing plaque and then hang it up in a designated place (creating and performing).

ASIA



Asia is the largest continent in the world, both in landmass and population. The continent is comprised of 48 countries which makes it a vast and culturally diverse region. Across the Asian world, people reach out to the sacred realm to harness protection, blessings, and good fortune for themselves, their loved ones, and their communities. Powerful, divine beings reside in a sacred realm, potentially bringing great *fortune* or great harm to people in the physical world. They are approached with immense respect for the powers they hold.

Almost universally, yet through varied means and belief systems, people have found ways to connect with these powers to bring stability to their lives; to bring love and fertility, prosperity and security, good health and longevity, and to divert ill-will and harm.

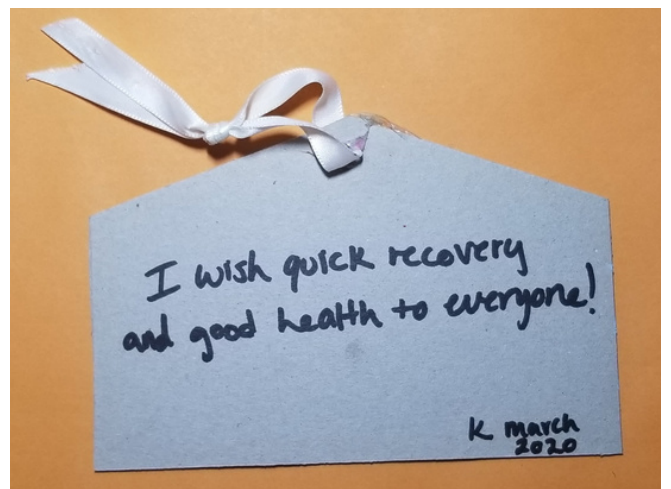
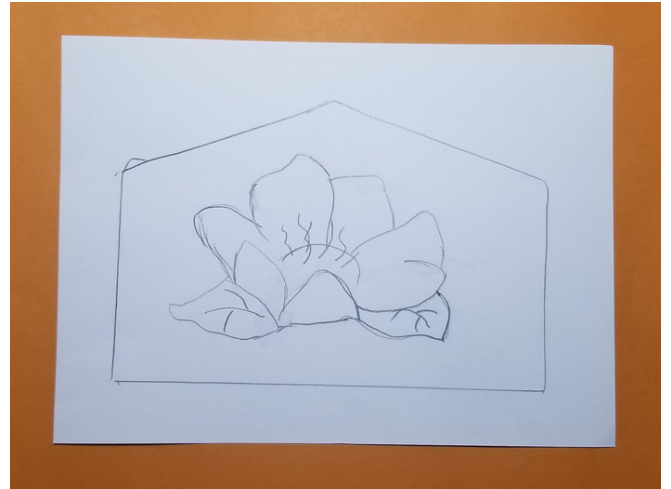
Japanese Ema

MOTIVATION

- Show students images of Ema or if possible show the real thing. Explore the different animals and symbols used on the Ema and what they represent.
- Talk about what it is to make a wish and how to express this with a drawing. Explain that each student will be making their own Ema

PROCEDURE

- Give each student a piece of chipboard (wooden plaque) and have them draw the form of a home or use a pattern to trace and cut-out the form. (pattern available on page 4)
- Place the plaque on the drawing paper and trace around the edge. Use the tracing to sketch ideas. Then decide what wish or thought to write on the back of the Ema.
- Use a pencil to draw the final image on the plaque. Then write your wish on the back of the plaque. Trace the pencil outlines with a permanent marker (Remind the students to write their name and the date on it as well).
- Use a hole puncher and create a hole at the top of the plaque. Then use a piece of ribbon or cord and thread this through the hole in the Ema. Tie a knot to create a loop for hanging the plaque.
- Apply paint to the drawing and set aside to dry



EVALUATION

- Have a discussion with the students about the image they chose to use and how it represents the wish they are making.
- Establish an area where the Ema can be hung one on top of the other. Leave them up for a period of time, and then look at them again to see if any of the wishes have come true.

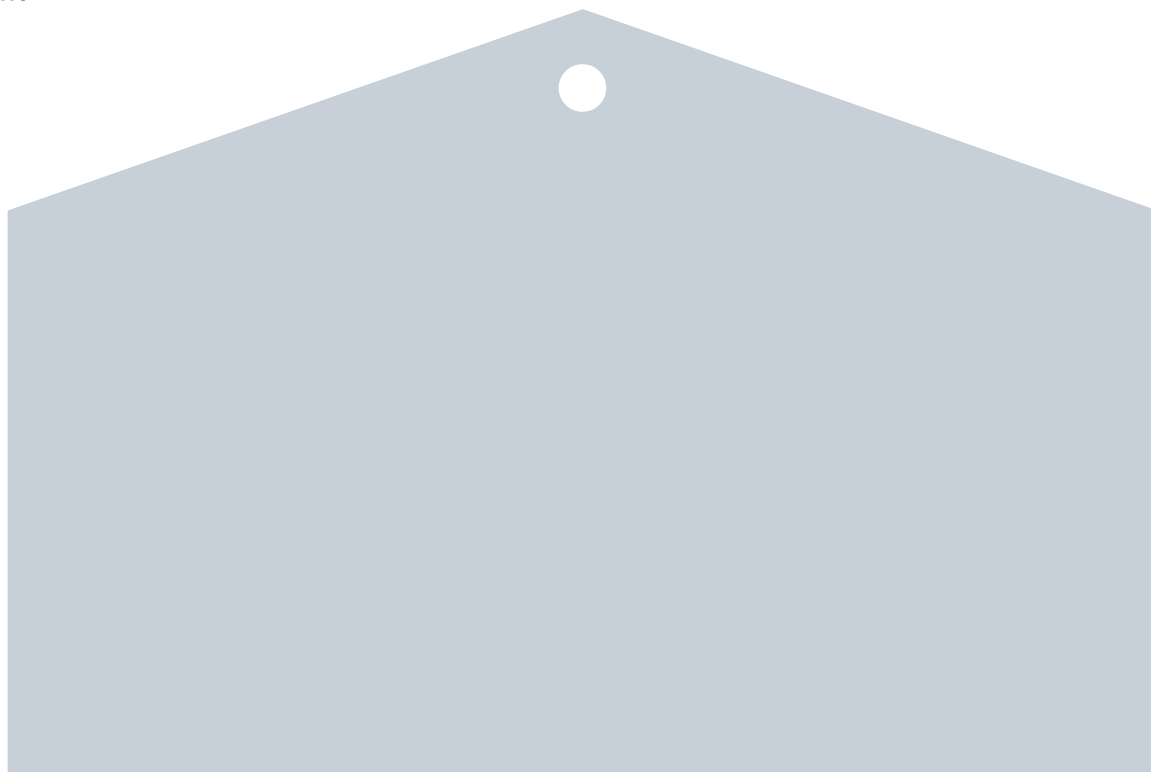
EVALUATION

- Have students search other cultures and report how they seek blessings and good fortune? (social studies)
- Students can create good luck charms from other cultures. (Visual Arts and Social Studies)

VOCABULARY

1. **Ema** - wooden wishing plaques. The name ema remains (e means "painting or picture;" ma means "horse").
2. **Shinto shrines** - are places of worship and the dwellings of the kami, the Shinto "gods". Sacred objects of worship that represent the kami are stored in the innermost chamber of the shrine where they cannot be seen by anybody.
3. **Offering** - a thing offered as a religious sacrifice or token of devotion.
4. **Symbol** - something that stands for something else, an object having cultural significance.
5. **Fortune** - chance or luck as an external, arbitrary force affecting human actions.
6. **Sacred** - regarded with great respect and reverence by a particular religion, group, or individual.

Ema - Pattern



Ema, Japanese Wishing Plaques



Museum of International Folk Art, Education Collection

The practice of writing a personal wish or prayer on a wooden plaque, called *ema*, usually takes place at *Shinto shrines* throughout Japan. This practice dates back to the Nara period in the 8th century, when members of the aristocracy and later the military elite would donate horses (believed to be vehicles of the gods) to the local shrine along with wishes for protection from some negative force. Eventually, painted plaques with horse images came to replace the actual animals as the *offerings*, and by the Muromachi period (14th - 16th centuries), the subject matter of the plaques expanded beyond just horse images—though the name *ema* remains (e means “painting or picture;” ma means “horse”).

By the 17th century Edo period, making such offerings at shrines became common among everyone in society to receive blessings and good fortune. In contemporary Japanese society, this is most commonly done during certain times of the year, like the New Year and during exam season. People purchase their *ema* at the local shrine and write their prayer on the back and then hang it at a designated place—usually under the exterior eaves of the shrine roof or around a sacred tree—for the gods to receive. Nowadays, the kinds of wishes most often seen are for good health, marital bliss, childbirth, success on school exams or at work, and traffic safety.

Today are recognizable as a small wooden plaque with an image painted on the front, often accompanied by the word *gan-i* (meaning “wish”), and a string through a hole at the top for hanging. The traditional roof-shaped top edge is meant to evoke the pitched roof of a horse stable, harkening back to *ema*’s origins. Today, a wide variety of *ema* shapes can now be seen: other animals like the face of a fox (*inari*), or characters from pop culture such as *rilakkuma* and *Hello Kitty*. Even on the traditionally shaped *ema*, a broad range of images are available—everything from the 12 zodiac animals (especially popular during the New Year season), to images heroic warriors or auspicious *symbols*. Of course, the original picture of a horse can also be found.



Ema depicting yokai characters from the manga series, "GeGeGe no Kitaro". Totori Prefecture, Japan. 2018, Museum of International Folk Art, IFAF Collection.

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CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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Myers, Tim, and Robert Roth. *Tanuki's Gift: a Japanese Tale*. Marshall Cavendish, 2003.

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WEBSITES

Museum of International Folk Art- online collections
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Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia - background information
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ema_\(Shinto\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ema_(Shinto))

VIDEOS

2016 Moving Japan
<https://www.youtube.com/watchv=OKXXkqFUhc0c>