

Traditional Japanese Homes—Past and Present

Objective: Students will learn about traditional Japanese homes as described in Japanese literature and as seen in the present through print and online resources. We will use Murasaki Shikibu's *The Diary of Lady Murasaki* to look at detailed descriptions of living quarters during the Heian period, read and discuss the *Old Japan* chapters on homes, and then compare those homes with ones shown on the *Kids Web Japan* website and in the book, *Japan Style*. Students will also learn about Japanese traditions and rituals associated with the home and its furnishings.

Standards addressed:

People in Societies Standard--Cultures

5-7 Benchmark A: Compare cultural practices, products, and perspectives of past civilizations in order to understand commonality and diversity of cultures.

Indicator 6.1 Compare the cultural practices and products of the societies studied, including a. class structure, b. gender roles, c. beliefs, d. customs and traditions.

Geography Standard—Human Environment Interaction

6-8 Benchmark C: Explain how the environment influences the way people live in different places and the consequences of modifying the environment.

Indicator 6.5 Describe ways human settlements and activities are influenced by environmental factors and processes in different places and regions including a. bodies of water; b. landforms; c. climates; d. vegetation; e. weathering; f. seismic activity.

Lesson requirements:

Time: one to two days; three with an extension and/or project.

Materials: *The Diary of Lady Murasaki*, *Old Japan-Make it Work!*, computer access.
Optional craft materials for the extension project

Lesson Plan:

1) Introduction: Read excerpts from *The Diary of Lady Murasaki* and ask students to list items found in the home that is described. Compile a class list on the whiteboard, and circle unfamiliar terms to research. Post the definitions in the classroom as they are found. Some suggested passages are listed below:

Pages xxiv-xxviii: ARCHITECTURE, from the INTRODUCTION—screens, flooring, and general layout

Page 4: read translator's footnote about sliding screens

Page 55: Lady Murasaki's room

Page 68-74: Appendix 1—maps of the mansion and palace

Pages 75-89: Appendix 2—"Additional Sources"

***As an alternative,** read a Japanese folktale, picture book, or passages from historical fiction and ask students to listen for descriptions of Japanese homes. Compile a class list of furnishings mentioned in the book.

2) Project the book, *Old Japan*, onto a screen or whiteboard and discuss the details of a traditional Japanese home in the past. Use pages 16-21. Compare and contrast with the items described in *The Diary of Lady Murasaki* or other literature. Read, “How do they live now?” on page 61 of *Old Japan* about modern homes.

3) View the *Kids Web Japan’s* pages on traditional homes. From the home page, under “LEARN”, click on “Explore Japan”. Then click on “Housing, Food, and Clothes.” Read the paragraphs under “Housing.” Then, at the bottom of the page, select the questions, [Why do the Japanese take off their shoes when entering the house?](#) and [What's a traditional Japanese room like?](#) This may be done as a whole class or individually in a computer lab.

4) Give the students time to explore Kids Web Japan’s “Virtual Culture,” found at the top left of the page under “PLAY.” From here, students will select “Japanese House”, where they will be able to read, answer questions about what they’ve read, and create a virtual Japanese home.

**** As an alternative**, the pages above could be printed and assigned as homework prior to this lesson. Students could be asked to list or define furnishings, customs, and traditions associated with the home. See the next two pages of this lesson plan for a list of terms from all the housing sections of *Kids Web Japan*.

5) Share modern photos of Japanese homes and Japanese style in books and magazines. A list of suggestions for printed resources is included in the Resources section below. (*Japan Style*)

6) Project/extension: Students may make a diorama, model, or map of a Japanese home or tatami room.

Resources

Andrew, Haslam, and Clare Doran. *Old Japan*. New York: Thomson Learning, 1995. Print. Make It Work!

"Kids Web Japan." *Web Japan : Top Page*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Web. 01 Apr. 2011.
<<http://web-japan.org/kidsweb/index.html>>.

Macdonald, Fiona, David Antram, and John James. *A Samurai Castle*. New York: P. Bedrick, 1995. Print.

Murasaki, Shikibu, and Richard John Bowring. *The Diary of Lady Murasaki*. London: Penguin, 2005. Print.

Taschen, Angelika, and Reto Guntli. *Japan Style: Exteriors, Interiors, Details*. Köln [etc.: Taschen, 2008. Print.

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DIRECTIONS: Describe, define, or draw the following items found in a traditional Japanese home:



1. genkan	2. tatami	3. futon	4. shoji / fusuma
5. oshi-ire	6. zashiki	7. tokonoma	8. ikebana
9. zataku	10. zabuton	11. chadansu	12. kotatsu
13. butsudan	14. kamidana	15. fuda	

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DEFINITIONS OF TERMS (as described by *Kids Web Japan*)

1. **genkan:** entrance to the home-- for removing, storing, and putting on shoes
2. **tatami:** rectangular mats made of a thick base of rushes; have been used for 600 years in Japanese homes; cool in summer and warm in winter.
3. **futon:** bedding which can be rolled up and stored during the day
4. **shoji, or fusuma:** sliding, paper-screen doors; paper squares glued on a wooden lattice
5. **oshi-ire:** closet
6. **zashiki:** a room for guests
7. **tokonoma:** a small alcove with a slightly raised floor. A vertical scroll of calligraphy is displayed in the center, and a seasonal ikebana (cut flower arrangement) or other ornament is placed on the floor.
8. **ikebana:** cut flower arrangement
9. **zataku:** low table
10. **zabuton:** flat, square cushions upon which people sit at the zataku
11. **chadansu:** cabinet in the living room, originally used to hold supplies for the tea ceremony
12. **kotatsu:** a heated table. The top and sides are covered with a futon to keep in the heat, and a board is placed on top of the futon so families can use the kotatsu as a table.
13. **butsudana:** Buddhist altars, which are shaped like a cabinet with doors that swing open.
14. **kamidana:** altar for Japanese gods, which is kept on a shelf near the ceiling.
15. **fuda:** paper or wooden tablet with writing on it, which is kept in the kamidana.

OPTIONAL TERMS from “The History of Japanese Houses”

Four housing styles:

shinden-zukuri: 11th century; houses of the aristocracy; symmetrical with long hallways connecting rooms.

shoin-zukuri : style of house created by the samurai.

gassho: a style of house for common people in Shirakawa-go; farmers across the country adapted their homes to their own region.

kura-zukuri: homes with Japanese-looking exteriors but interiors made from more fire-resistant materials.