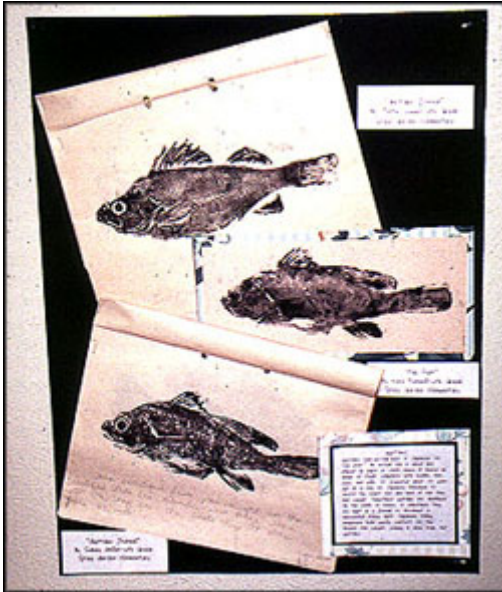


Gyotaku: Japanese Fish Printing



Gyotaku (guh-yo-tah-koo) is Japanese for "fish print." An actual fish is inked and placed on paper or cloth, where it leaves an image of itself, complete with eyes, scales, fins, and gills. It is a relatively new technique, originating about 100 years ago as a way for Japanese fishermen to record the exact size and kind of fish they had caught. Sometimes gyotaku are displayed on the walls of homes, or sometimes they are kept in a journal to document a successful fishing spot. Japanese fishing magazines hold yearly contests for the largest fish caught; judging is done from the gyotaku.

Fishermen in the United States are sometimes accused of exaggerating the size of the fish they have caught or let go. In Japan, the gyotaku provides an accurate record of the catch. In addition, the print is a work of art, to be hung on the wall and admired, not only for the size of the fish, but for the aesthetic appeal of the print. The western fisherman might have his fish mounted and hung on the wall to be admired, but it is not a work of art. Also, when fish are prepared in this way by a taxidermist, the meat cannot be eaten. After the Japanese fisherman records his fish as a gyotaku, he can take the fish home and eat it. What cultural differences can be discerned from these practices?

There are two methods of printing from a fish. The indirect method (kansetsu-ho) involves molding wet paper directly onto the fish, carefully tamping it down so that it will pick up all the details, then letting it dry. The paper itself then becomes the plate. The second method is called chokusetsu-ho. It is faster and easier to make multiple images with this technique. First, the fish must be fresh, clean, and dry (frozen fish may also be used). Remove the slimy residue from the fish's scales with salt, vinegar, or alcohol. Lay the fish on a flat surface and gently fan out the fins and tail. Lumps of plasticene clay can be placed under the fins and tail to elevate them. Apply watercolor, sumi ink, or water-based printing inks directly to the fish with a soft brush, sponge, or foam brayer. Finally, place a sheet of paper over the inked fish. Hold the paper with one hand at the fish's middle section. With the other hand, gently press the paper so that it comes into contact with the entire inked surface, especially the fins and tail. Then peel back the paper to reveal a mirror image of the fish.

Gyotaku may also be done on fabric. Use fabric paints instead of water-based paints.

References:

Nasco Fish Replicas, 901 Janesville Ave., P.O. Box 901, Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin 53538-0901; 414-563-2446 or 1-800-558-9595.

Olander, D., *Gyotaku fish impressions*. Frank Amato Publications, P.O. Box 82112, Portland, Oregon 97282.

Questions to Consider

Nasco makes rubber fish replicas for gyotaku. This allows teachers to bypass the issues of availability, preparation, and perishability of real fish in the classroom. Aesthetically speaking, is the rubber fish a valid substitute for a fresh fish when making an art print? Would the experience of printing with a rubber fish give as much insight into the culture of the Japanese people and their artwork? Many teachers would not try gyotaku because of the smell and mess of the fish. In this case, would it be better to substitute a rubber fish, or just not do the gyotaku? Does working with real fish constitute a health hazard to students?

compiled by Rebecca Arkenberg