



JAPANESE KAMON



Detail, window, c. 1885

Butterfly

Leaded glass

Tiffany Glass Company, New York City, 1885–92 (60-006)

Tiffany's "Butterfly" window features two round mosaic areas that are similar to Japanese family crests.

GRADES/LEVEL:

Kindergarten–8th grade/Elementary and Middle School

TIME REQUIRED:

45–50 minutes

LESSON OBJECTIVES:

Students will:

- learn what a *kamon* is and its relationship to Japanese culture.
- create their own *kamon*, and use it in a monochromatic design.
- learn about symmetry, asymmetry, and the relationship between positive and negative space.

MATERIALS:

- 8 ½" x 11" plain white paper (at least 3 sheets)
- Graphite drawing pencil
- White pencil or crayon
- Kamon template (see end of lesson)
- Ruler
- Scissors
- Glue stick
- Example images of kamon (see end of lesson)

VOCABULARY:

Approximate Symmetry: a form of visual balance that is attained when individual elements are arranged to create a sense of equilibrium; the use of similar forms on either side of a central axis.

Asymmetry: the lack or absence of symmetry; an image that is not the same on both sides but still maintains artistic balance.

Geometric shape: a shape with clearly defined edges (circles, triangles, rectangles, etc.).

Kamon: Japanese word for a symbolic image related to a specific family or branch of the family; a Japanese family crest.

Monochromatic: containing or using only one color.

Negative space: space that is “empty.”

Organic shape: a shape with curved or irregular edges (clouds, leaves, puddles, etc.).

Positive space: space that is “filled.”

Symbol: something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention.

Symmetry: a well-proportioned, well-balanced image that is the same on both sides.

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION:

Kamon, or Japanese family crests, are traditional designs and patterns that symbolize a family name. They are similar in nature to European coat of arms, but unlike the colorful, elaborate coat of arms, traditional kamon are black and white with strong lines and symmetrical shapes. Most kamon are circular, though as families grew and it became necessary to distinguish various familial branches, kamon were modified, either by changing their shape, or by introducing new elements to the design.

Kamon began as a tradition in the noble classes, but later, warriors and commoners adopted the practice of using them. Today, kamon are seen mostly on ceremonial occasions like weddings and funerals. Despite being less prominent in modern times, kamon are still an important aspect of Japanese cultural identity. Kamon are also an example of the Japanese aesthetic that, during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, found much acclaim in the West—simplified forms, clean lines, and honest construction.

INSTRUCTIONS:

- 1) Begin by sharing examples of traditional kamon at the end of this lesson, or finding examples of traditional kamon online. Have students think about symbols that represent their family. On a blank sheet of white paper, have students sketch ideas for their personal kamon. Sketches may be based on traditional designs, personal connections to nature or symbols, or a combination of the two.
- 2) Once a design is chosen, give each student a copy of the kamon template at the end of this lesson. Have students redraw or trace their chosen design using white pencil or white crayon inside the black circle.
- 3) Have students cut out the black circle. They may choose to leave the outer white circle as a border, or remove it entirely.
For an additional challenge, continue with steps 4-8.
- 4) Have students fold the cut-out black circle in half. Students should then unfold, and cut along the crease, creating two halves. Depending on the design, the halves may be symmetrical, asymmetrical, approximately symmetrical, or a combination of all three. Don’t panic! These contrasts will make the design interesting.
- 5) Have students choose one half of the circle to be the “positive” side and one half to be the “negative” side. Have students glue the “positive” side of the circle onto a clean sheet of white paper exactly as it is.
- 6) Have students take the “negative” half of the circle and cut out all the black (or negative) space. When all the black space is cut out, students should be left with something that looks like a “stencil” of their original design. Have students set the white piece aside and work with the black pieces.

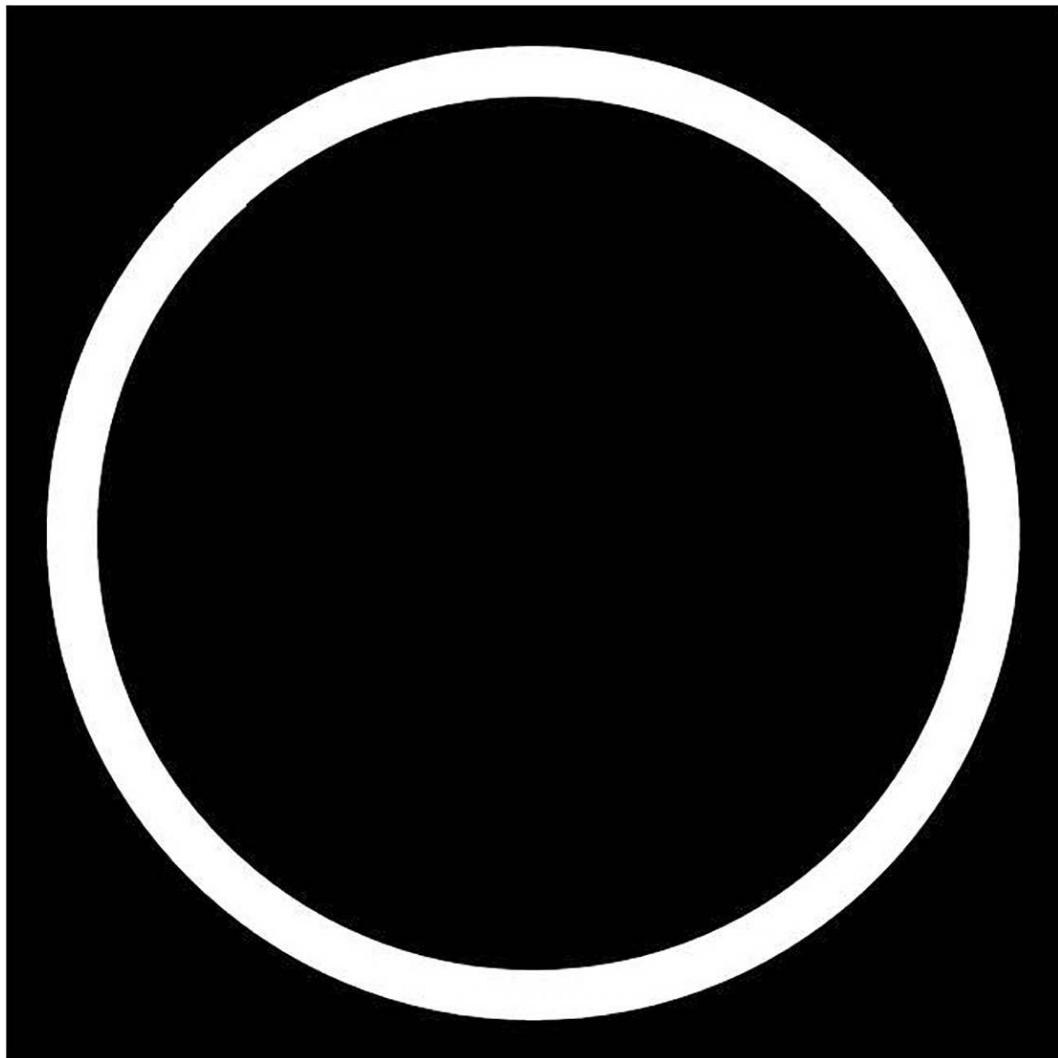
- 7) Have students look at the “positive” half of the circle. Like a puzzle, match up where the black pieces from the “negative” half of the circle would go on the “positive” side. Lay the black pieces on top of the “positive” half and then, like pages in a book, flip the black pieces over and onto the blank side of the white paper. Line up the cut edges of the “positive” circle and the black “negative” shape and glue the black shape down. As each shape is glued down, the original design should begin to emerge in the white spaces between the black pieces.
- 8) Students should repeat this process until all the black pieces are glued down. Have them color over the design on the “positive” side with white pencil or crayon to make it stand out more. For an added challenge, see if they can use the unused portion of the “negative” side of the circle to create a second image, or incorporate it into a new design.

ASSESSMENT:

Students should:

- effectively create a monochromatic design.
- effectively use positive and negative space in their design.
- effectively use the principles of design to create a cohesive, finished work of art.

KAMON TEMPLATE



EXAMPLES OF JAPANESE KAMON

