





Shimomura Crossing the Delaware by Roger Shimomura, acrylic on canvas, 2010. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Raymond L. Ocampo Jr., Sandra Oleksy Ocampo, and Robert P. Ocampo ©Roger Shimomura

About the Artist

Roger Shimomura, born June 26, 1939, combines American culture with Asian traditions to create artworks—paintings, prints, and performances—that play on Asian stereotypes and generate thought-provoking questions about racial and cultural identity. During World War II, Shimomura and his family were imprisoned at a camp in Idaho, where they became familiar with the widespread xenophobia taking place at that time.

During his time as a professor at the University of Kansas, Shimomura explored the complexities of American cultural identity and the challenges of being of Asian descent in the United States through his art.

Shimomura combines the traditional “look” of Japanese culture and American material culture to draw his audience’s attention to the unconscious stereotypes that are all too often overlooked. While at the University of Kansas, Shimomura faced questions about how long he had lived in the United States or what part of Japan he was from. Shimomura noted the confusion on their faces when he answered that he was from Seattle, signaling the idea that “American-born citizens of Asian descent continue to be thought of as only ‘American knockoffs.’”

Aware of the controversial nature of his work, Shimomura reflects, “if my work is seen as raising more questions than it answers, I’d be pleased, because I’m not sure what those answers are.”

About the Portrait

What if George Washington was Japanese American? With this thought, Shimomura created *Shimomura Crossing the Delaware*, a play on Emanuel Leutze’s 1851 painting, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Shimomura placed himself as Washington, in the iconic pose, but replaced the Continental army soldiers with Japanese samurai. In addition, Shimomura remakes the body of water they cross to resemble San Francisco Harbor, with Angel Island (the processing center for Asian immigrants) in the background. The work echoes the compositional format of a Katsushika Hokusai woodblock print. In this portrait, Shimomura presents a platform to discuss Americanism and patriotism and how these two “isms” apply to all Americans across racial and ethnic lines.

Portrait Observations:

1. Describe what each sitter is wearing. How are their outfits similar, and how are they different?
2. Describe the setting of this portrait. What type of landscape do you see in the background?
3. What objects do you see in the portrait?
4. Describe the sitters’ facial expressions. In what direction are they looking?

Portrait Analysis:

5. How do the different elements in the portrait combine to tell the story? Consider the setting, clothing, pose, facial expressions, and objects.
6. What can you tell about the sitters based on their clothing?
7. How can we interpret the presence of the objects found in the painting?
8. Why might the artist have arranged the sitters in these particular poses? What can we determine about the relationship among the sitters?
9. How is Americanism and patriotism reflected in this portrait? Why would the artist include these elements?

Looking Activity Part 1: Claim, Support, Question

“Claim, Support, Question” is an Artful Thinking routine that will help students dive into Shimomura’s artwork. Ask your students to create a three-column chart, labeling the columns Claim, Support, and Question. After giving your students time to look closely, ask

them to make a claim about the painting in the first column, provide visual evidence to support their claim in the next column, and ask an unanswered question about the claim in the third column. Have students share their responses with the class and create a discussion about any emerging themes. This activity helps students uncover the layers of a portrait.

For more information about the Claim, Support, Question strategy, please visit <http://pzartfulthinking.org/?p=35>.

Looking Activity Part 2: Compare and Contrast

- After participating in the Claim, Support, Question routine, show students *Washington Crossing the Delaware* by Emanuel Leutze in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s collection (<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/11417>).
- Spend time discussing the similarities and difference of the two paintings, using the Portrait Observations and Analysis questions to guide your inquiry.
- What questions from the Part 1 Looking Activity have been answered after looking at *Washington Crossing the Delaware*? What new questions do you have after comparing and contrasting the two portraits?

For more information about Roger Shimomura, visit:

The National Portrait Gallery’s “Portraiture Now: Asian American Portraits of Encounter” web exhibition at http://npg.si.edu/exhibit/encounter/statement_shimomura.html

Virtual Asian American Art Museum Project at <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/vaaamp/roger-shimomura>

