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## Art Masterpiece: Ohara Shoson, "*White Birds in Snow*"

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**Keywords:** Diagonal, Distance, block print

**Grade:** 3-6th

**Lesson Activity:** Foam Block Print



### Learning about the work:

As we look at Shoson's print *White Birds in Snow*, we step into the world of nature where we see birds called cranes flying down from the sky, perhaps to catch their dinner. Shoson saw beauty in this simple flight that the cranes repeat again and again each day. The Japanese often try to show the beauty of simple everyday actions in their artwork. This picture is a **print**, probably made from three carved wooden blocks. Shoson carved the cranes, the snow and the whites of the branches from the main block, and then inked it with light black, blue and blue-green. On a second block, areas of burnt orange were inked. The rest of the wood was carved away. On the third block only the very dark area-the branches, the eyes, beak and legs of the birds, and perhaps the artists signature-were left raised from the surface. Shoson used his cutting tools like a paintbrush. With only a few carefully placed lines, shapes and colors, he tells us a lot about his picture.

### Learning about the Artist:

**Ohara Koson** (Kanazawa 1877 - Tokyo 1945) was a Japanese painter and printmaker of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, part of the *shin hanga* ("new prints") movement.

He was born Ohara Matao; it is thought that he started training in painting and design at the Ishikawa Prefecture Technical School in 1889-1893.

He moved to Tokyo in the middle to late 1890s to study painting with Suzuki Koson. In Tokyo, he produced some woodblock triptychs illustrating episodes of the Russo-Japanese War (*senso-e*), but most of his production was prints of animals (*kachō-ga*). For 14 years between 1912 and 1926, Shoson produced only paintings. He then returned to creating woodblock color prints under the name Hoson. He worked at first with publishers Akiyama Buemon (Kokkeidō) and Matsuki Heikichi (Daikokuya), signing his work Koson. He worked for three different print shops who published his work. When Shoson changed publishers, he also changed his name; **Koson**, **Shoson**, and **Hoson** are all the same artist.

Through his association with Watanabe, Ohara's work was exhibited abroad, and his prints sold well, particularly in the United States. He was active designing prints until at least 1935, and died at his home in Tokyo in 1945.

### Possible Questions:

- What is happening in this picture? (birds are flying in to nest, to land or to catch fish.)
- How did the artist make it look like the birds are flying? (By gradually changing the wings and the bodies of the birds, making the bird's necks point diagonally across the picture. Diagonal lines show movement.
- Start with the smallest bird high up in the picture and work down to the largest bird. How do the shapes and sizes of birds change? (The birds get larger as your eyes move down the picture. The legs move from the back of the bird's body to the front. More lines can be seen on the wings of the largest bird. The bird's neck comes closer to its body)
- Why did Shoson make all of these small changes? (To show distance and movement)
- What else about the shape of this paper helps to show distance? (It is very tall rectangle)
- What time of day and what season is shown in this print? How can you tell? (Early morning or early evening because the sky is still mostly dark. Snowflakes in the sky and snow on the branches indicate winter. Also, the colors seem to be the colors of a winter sky)
- How does this picture make you feel after you have looked at it for a few minutes? (Calm, happy, peaceful?)

### Materials:

Scratch foam 4x6 rectangles, 6x9 white construction paper, printing ink (up to three colors), brayers, foil trays, newspaper, dull pencils, 9x12 black construction paper

### Activity:

- Give each student 1 piece of foam, 1 dull pencil, 1 white and 1 black construction paper.
- Using a dull pencil, students will etch their design on to the foam sheet.
- Remind students that grooves they are creating will remain white when the block is printed. They should also remember that the image will be in reverse. So if they write their names on the block, they should do so backwards.
- Take their foam block to the printing station. See Note below on printing directions.
- Students will then mount both the foam block and their dry printed image on the black construction paper using glue.
- Have them sign their masterpiece!

### **\*\* PLEASE NOTE\*\***

Set-up one or two adult supervised ink-rolling and pressing stations. One area will be for the ink-rolling and next to it an area for printing. When rolling the ink brayer use a tin foil cookie sheet or plastic tray and place a small dab of ink on it; roll back and forth a few times to ensure the brayer is evenly covered with ink. The ink should make a smooth, even layer on the tray and brayer. **It's important to NOT use too much ink as it will fill in the etchings and not print on paper.**

**\*\*Printing Smocks are recommended!!**

Roll the brayer evenly over the foam block. Press the foam block onto the white paper and press using rubbing sticks. Remove the foam block and let printed image dry.