

Art Analysis Assignment: Commodore Perry and the Black Ship Scrolls
Niskayuna High School, Niskayuna Central School District, Niskayuna, New York
World Connections: An Interdisciplinary 10th grade class
February 2005

Tim Ryan, 10th grade student

Anonymous Japanese Artist, "First Contact"
<http://dl.lib.brown.edu/repository/repoman.php?verb=render&id=1073496978593750>

William Heine, "Landing of Commodore Perry, Officers' & Men of the Squadron"
<http://dl.lib.brown.edu/repository/repoman.php?verb=render&id=1073496094296875>

When Commodore Perry of the U.S. Navy was commissioned by President Fillmore in 1853 to go to Japan to open the country for trade, two artists painted Perry's visit. One was an artist named William Heine who came with the Americans and the other was an unknown Japanese artist. Both paintings reflect the differing views of Americans and Japanese concerning the expedition.

The first painting is by the Japanese artist and is titled, "First Contact." (Link to <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/repository/repoman.php?verb=render&id=1073496978593750>) In it an American is pointing a gun towards the Japanese. This shows that the American is forcing the Japanese man to show him something. The Japanese probably thought that the Americans were forcing them to show them their country. Japan had stayed fairly isolated and this would of have caused the Japanese to be uneasy. They did not know what these people that were coming to their country were like. In Matthew Perry's own writings, he wrote that he was going to open Japan by whatever means necessary, including force, if needed. The Japanese had a hostile view of outsiders. Japanese people got this view when the missionaries came in the 1600's. These missionaries gained much support from the Japanese people. The shoguns saw this as a political threat

and banished the practice of all Christianity. Once they banished this, the Japanese people developed a negative view of Christians and outsiders. When Matthew Perry and his expedition came to Japan, the negative view that the Japanese had towards outsiders is portrayed in the picture. The artwork is appealing in two main senses. The first is how the only two objects that stand out in the painting are the mountain in the background, possibly Mt. Fuji, and the American naval officer. This contrasts with the brown and greens and grays of the rest of the portrait. The second is how the artist makes it look like the Japanese boatman is driving the boat away from shore towards the ocean.

The second painting titled, “Landing of Commodore Perry, Officers’ & Men of the Squadron” (LINK to <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/repository/repoman.php?verb=render&id=1073496094296875>) by William Heine. In this painting, Heine shows the Americans in gallant force with many men. The American soldiers are in perfect line with excellent uniforms and are very well organized. In contrast the Japanese soldiers are very few in number, poorly organized and have very primitive weaponry. The Americans have rifles whereas the Japanese have spears and shields. There are many ships, the entire fleet, with American flags flying and leading right up to the shore. On shore, Heine shows the Japanese warmly welcoming the Americans. All of the Japanese citizens of the town are anxiously crowding the harbor to see Perry and his men arrive. The soldiers, in perfect formation, leave an opening large enough for Perry to meet the Japanese and have everyone see the excellence of the Americans. Heine also has everyone in the painting focusing on Perry, stressing his importance. The artist has portrayed information in a way that Americans would like. Although not necessarily as welcome as Heine makes it look, the painting shows how the

Americans entered into Japan. Heine shows the superiority of the United States with how forceful he makes them look. The soldiers are in perfect posture and line and the entire fleet of ships is in the harbor with flags flying.

The two paintings, “First Contact” by the unknown Japanese artist and “Landing of Commodore Perry, Officers’ & Men of the Squadron” by William Heine show the viewpoints of Japan and America when Matthew Perry traveled to Japan in 1853 to open up the country for trade. While each is not entirely true, both paintings are not entirely false either. It is amazing how two artists can portray the same event so differently.