
Kazuo Ishiguro (born 1956) writes from the perspective of an aging Japanese artist caught in a world of shifting values—the rigid formalities of Imperial Japan before World War II, and the democratic attitudes that prevail in postwar Nagasaki. Trying to reconcile “what is” with “what could be,” Ishiguro’s protagonist paints a literary portrait of a “floating world” that is, as much, a “sorrowful world.”

How to Use This Discussion Guide

Creating bridges between the literary and visual arts is what makes the MFAH Book Club unique, as all art arises from the context of its time and place. The MFAH Book Club uses works of art from the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), and from collections around the world as points of departure for discussions of major themes in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *An Artist of the Floating World*.

How to Participate

Bring your book for a docent-led MFAH Book Club tour that links themes and excerpts from the book with select works of art, generates lively discussion, and reveals new ways of looking at visual art.

For individual readers, a small circle of friends, or small book clubs: Tours are held on specific dates and times throughout the season. Visit [www.mfah.org/bookclub](http://www.mfah.org/bookclub) to see the schedule. RSVP to bookclub@mfah.org with your name, the number of participants, and the date and time of the tour you’ve selected from the list.

For large book clubs (12 or more participants): Read and discuss the book together, then arrange for a group tour by e-mailing bookclub@mfah.org with your contact information, the number of participants (12 or more), and at least two preferred dates and times.

Tours related to *An Artist of the Floating World* are available through September 30, 2012.
Defining the Floating World

The term *ukiyo*, or floating world, refers to the entertainment districts that arose during Edo period Japan (1615-1868), a time when the country was virtually isolated from the rest of the world. Located primarily in Japan’s three main cities—Edo [now called Tokyo], Osaka, and Kyoto—*ukiyo* were sophisticated centers of urban pleasures where a rising middle class could enjoy everything from kabuki theatre and geishas, to teahouses and bars, and even bathhouses and brothels.

Woodblock prints depicting the pleasures of the floating world, referred to as *ukiyo-e*, meaning “pictures of the floating world,” appealed greatly to the middle class. But the world *uki* can also mean “sorrow,” a sobering reminder that pleasure is fleeting.

The pleasures of *ukiyo* were the primary subject matter of *ukiyo-e* prints and paintings during both the Edo and the Meiji (1868–1912) periods of Japanese history. The term *ukiyo-e* was not used for art made after 1912. However, during the first half of the 20th century, the *shin hanga* or New Prints movement drew inspiration from *ukiyo-e* traditions. The protagonist of *An Artist of the Floating World* was active in this movement.

“The Floating World”

The novel is narrated by Masuji Ono. This is a tale of the ephemeral, the personal, the memory of the morning (or year or decade) after. His thoughts and statements are often euphemistic and implicit, not explicit. How does this relate to the “floating world”?

Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang began to explore the properties of gunpowder in art-making while living in Japan (1986 to 1995). Small-scale experiments led to massive “explosion events” such as the one which produced the MFAH’s *Odyssey* (2010), which is permanently installed in the Arts of China Gallery. How does this compare to Shiba Kökan’s *A Courtesan Blowing Soap Bubbles* of c. 1775–81 in the exhibition *Unrivalled Splendor: The Kimiko and John Powers Collection of Japanese Art*? Do either of these relate to the concept of “the floating world” as described in Ishiguro’s novel?
The underlying idea of “the floating world,” the temporality of earthly pleasures, is not unique to Japan, though its context—in tea houses, entertained by geisha, attending Kabuki or Noh performances—is unique. Do the following three works of art from other cultures relate to the “floating world”?

1. Among the Kwakwaka’wakw (often called Kwakiutl) of the Pacific Northwest, wealth and status were determined by how many possessions you could give away. During ritual festivities called potlatches, gift-giving was the predominant activity, and was conjoined with dances, performances, and feasting from bowls like the museum’s Sea Lion Feast Bowl. At the end of the multiday ceremony, the Chief appeared wearing a mask of the male guise of the Dzunuk’wa – called Gi’kaml (or Geekumhl) – such as this mask from the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology, symbolizing his great wealth. How does this relate to the “floating world”?

2. In the Netherlands and Flanders during the 16th and 17th centuries, the genre of paintings called vanitas became popular. Vanitas is a Latin word meaning “emptiness,” and evoking the transient nature of earthly life, including vanities sought and acquired. William Claesz. Heda’s Banquet Piece with Ham appears as if a real breakfast had been abruptly abandoned; a beaker is upset, plates are negligently piled up, glasses are half-emptied, and the lid of the silver pitcher is left open. Does this transience of life relate to the “floating world”? How?

3. Inspired by the French Impressionists, some American painters of the late 19th century adopted a brighter range of colors, less polished brushwork, worked en plein air (in open air) and captured scenes of leisure, both domestic and public, rather than illustrated historical or mythological subjects. Does Girl in Blue Arranging Flowers by Frederick Carl Frieseke (1874–1939), an American who spent most of his life as an expatriate in France, relate to the “floating world”? Why or why not?
Buddhist Thinking

Ono’s father and Ono himself kept Buddhist altars in their receptions rooms (see pp. 41–42 and 48–50). The MFAH’s Arts of Japan Gallery and the exhibition Unrivalled Splendor: The Kimiko and John Powers Collection of Japanese Art (through September 23, 2012) present a plethora of Buddhist ceremonial objects, such as the Tokyo National Museum’s Kasha (Incense Burner) and Set of Six Ritual Bowls, and the scroll in Unrivalled Splendor depicting famed Buddhist philosopher Bodhidharma. Why might these or similar objects belong on or near Ono’s altar? What else can you imagine is fitting for an altar?

The Unrivalled Splendor exhibition includes two paintings, each demonstrating an idea fundamental to Buddhism and its relation to Daoism (or Taoism) and Confucianism, two other predominant spiritual philosophies of eastern Asia.

Three Vinegar Tasters is another allegorical painting depicting one of the most important ideals of medieval China and Japan. The three men, standing left to right, are:

• Lao-tse, founder of Daoism
• K’ung Fu-tse (or Confucius), founder of Confucianism
• Gautama Sakyamuni, called the Buddha, founder of Buddhism

Each dips his finger into a vat of wine, symbolic of orthodoxy; however, the wine has spoiled to become vinegar. There are two possible explanations:

1. Lao-tse reacts with a sweet expression because life is fundamentally good.
   Confucius reacts with a sour expression because life needs rules. The Buddha reacts with a bitter expression because life is suffering. As all three scholars react differently, the three teachings are different.

2. All dip into the same vat, so the three teachings are one.

Which of these two explanations resonates for you, and why? Can both be simultaneously true—one teaching, three perspectives?
Buddhist Thinking (continued)

Ray Grigg, in *The Tao of Zen* (Alva Press, 1994), tells the story behind the three laughers, in a chapter on “Playfulness”:

[The drawing] shows a Taoist, a Confucian, and a Buddhist circled together in uproarious laughter. Apparently the Buddhist had taken a vow never to leave the monastery but, in the enthusiasm of visiting with his two friends, he inadvertently wanders over the bridge of the ravine that defines the monastery’s grounds.

The distant roar of a tiger breaks the spell of their visit and they realize the vow of confinement has been broken. They clasp each other’s hands and laugh. This is the playful spirit that supersedes vows and teachings and ideologies.

Are the three laughers laughing in the same spirit? Or perhaps the Daoist and Confucian laugh at the Buddhist, while the Buddhist laughs nervously at having broken his vow?

Bunsei, *The Three Laughers of Tiger Valley*, mid-15th century (Muromachi period), ink on paper, the Kimiko and John Powers Collection.

Final Question

Ono describes his love of art and art-making, his dedication to his teachers in turn, and his generous support of peers. However, he tells tales that reveal his naivety, unworldliness, and even occasional carelessness or cruelty toward others. How is it possible for one person to reconcile such opposite ways of being?

About the Author


Ishiguro has written original screenplays, was awarded an Order of the British Empire (1995) for services to literature and the *Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* (1998), and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He lives and works in London.