

# “Mitatae” in Japanese Culture

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## What is Mitatae?

The Japanese word Mitatae (見立て : "to see as") literally means “to interpret one thing as another” or “to liken one thing to another.” Mitatae is a key element in artistic creation across Japanese cultural practices, including Japanese painting, waka poetry, kabuki, ikebana, the tea ceremony, and garden design. For example, the dry landscape rock garden at Ryōan-ji in Kyoto, often dated to the Muromachi period, comprises fifteen stones arranged in white sand and is commonly read as a tiger with its cubs, hence the name “Tiger Cub Crossing Garden.” The same composition has also been interpreted as evoking deep mountains and secluded valleys, and even the universe. Among the "E-Tehon" (絵手本 : graphic magazines) popular during the Edo period, "Mitatae-Ehon" (見立絵本 : Mitatae picture books) became particularly widespread as a form constructed through the Mitatae technique. Among these, Ehon Mitatae Hyakkachou (絵本見立百科鳥), written by Yamamoto Kamenari and illustrated by Kogawa Kobune (1755), presents everyday objects reimagined as “trees” and “birds” on the upper half of each page in a Japanese-style bound volume. In the adjacent space, a short text provides a witty reinterpretation of the image. The book consists of fifty paired units of image and text (Fig. 1).



Figure 1 "Ehon Mitate Hyakkachou" (Picture Book Mitate Hyakkachou), 1755  
left: Japanese-bound cover (facsimile by Ozaki Hisaya, 1970); center: opening illustration  
(the bird's body is transformed into a broom and dustpan, and the leaves into bird feathers;  
right: explanatory diagram)

The term highlighted in red in Fig. 1 refers to an “ebōki” (broom) and a “chiritori” (dustpan), both used for cleaning. These terms are written in kanji that incorporate the meanings “tree” and “bird,” respectively. This wordplay is visually conveyed in the illustration. Through this visually articulated wordplay, the picture book served as a catalyst for the subsequent boom in Mitate-Ehon. Mitate, often comic in effect, is essential to the work’s construction. These observations suggest that satirical sensibility informed everyday life in Edo society. Japanese everyday printed goods—such as ukiyo-e (Japanese woodblock prints, often priced at roughly the cost of a bowl of noodles) and uchiwa-e (printed fan images)—came into vogue in Europe from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. It can be suggested that this vogue was associated with an admiration for Japonism, which promoted the integration of life and art. In other words, it reflects a stance of appreciating beauty in everyday life.

Meanwhile, everyday life in Edo at the time was so cold that it was referred to as a Little Ice Age. Famines were also frequent. In this situation, mitate was positioned as a useful approach to bridging the gap between everyday life and art, something that could not be found in institutionalized art. For example, physical phenomena such as natural disasters like typhoons and earthquakes can be understood by visualizing (analyzing) their origins in " Fūjin (wind gods) and Namazu(catfish). This may also have brought a sense of calm.

### **Mitate in Japanese Art Education**

The discussion now turns to art education in Japan. Since the Meiji period, amid modernization, drawing has been framed mainly in terms of its practical value. Since the promulgation of the Education System in 1872, instruction and methods in drawing have centered on the accurate reproduction of objects, through practices such as ruled drawing (罫画) and copying from exemplars (臨画). This orientation aligned directly with a policy of enriching the nation through increased productivity, and the Edo-period tradition of Mitate was effectively discontinued within formal education from the Meiji period onward. Against this

background, the Kōsei education (構成教育 : Composition Education ) movement systematized the basic formative training developed in the preliminary course of the German art school Bauhaus (1919-1933). This approach was introduced to Japan and strongly influenced prewar practice. This material was systematized in “Kōsei Kyōiku Taikei (構成教育大系) ” by Renshichirō Kawakita and Katsuo Takei (School Art Association Publishing Division, 1934) (Fig. 2).



Figure 2, left: cover; right: children's works, collages using maple, ginkgo, and chrysanthemum leaves, from p. 3

In the opening section, “What is Kōsei education?”, the main principles of Kōsei education are stated as follows:

Kōsei education is not about arranging circles, squares, or triangles. It is not about drawing so-called Kōsei patterns. It is not about applying complicated logic to paintings, sculptures, or architecture. It is about drawing on the most ordinary aspects of everyday life, examining them anew, and identifying the

essentials of appreciation and creation.

Kōsei education in Japan adopted modern Bauhaus methods while incorporating everyday life into classroom practice, encouraging discovery and reinterpretation. The technique of collaging leaves as objects served as a way for children to express the diverse inputs they encountered from around the world. Connections to Japanese sensibilities may also be discerned, for example in the use of Ma (間) in pictorial space.



Figure 3, Subject: Shapes Born from Light and Shadow, from the Ministry of Education-approved textbook "Art and Crafts, Year 4," (Nihon Bunkyo Publishing, 2021).

Even in contemporary art textbooks, the creative interpretation of space within such everyday scenes is frequently featured as subject matter. Figure 3 shows a textbook spread featuring examples of "creative material-based play" using artificial light on the left black background and natural light on the right yellow background. This subject explores not only light but also the dynamic metamorphosis between reality and shadow. The resulting fluid, dynamic forms evoke the “Edo Hyakutai” (Hundred Aspects of Edo) found in “Hokusai's Manga”.

The “dynamic vitality” inherently present within children can be said to originate from their “Mitata play”—the activity of finding ways to live within the world.

### **Listening to the Voices of Nature**

Not only in Japan, the metaphorical technique of Mitata (representation of a metaphor) is a fundamental human cognitive method, embodying the principle of meaning generation. Early cave painters perceived life in images projected by torchlight onto the uneven surfaces of cave walls. It may be suggested that the consciousness and desires lurking in their inner darkness were projected onto the cave’s darkness. In this sense, they encountered themselves through the act of painting. Mitata is an act and phenomenon deeply connected to human culture, values, and sensibilities. It is grounded in a sustained concern with the richness of human existence, even if some aspects do not lend themselves to empirical study.

CONNECTEDkind (Ck) was developed in response to social disconnection associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Under such conditions, it becomes particularly important to hear the voices of nature and return them to the world as metaphorical expression. The originator, Laura, whose background is rooted in Latvia, may be particularly attuned to perceiving forms in a rich natural environment. The act of accepting shapes from the natural beauty of Latvia and giving them new meaning (life) from a multifaceted perspective seems like an act that will lead to the salvation of the world.

In Ck activities, we focus on the shadow cast by physical objects. While an entity itself carries one determinate meaning, the amorphous shadow can be understood as a “Space for Imagination” open to the universe (Fig. 4). They reflect the vernacular cultural identity of humans, who have traditionally lived in harmony with nature. Ck offers profoundly important insights into the long-term sustainability of humanity.



Figure 4. Laura's droplet work; reproduced with permission of the artist.