Ema - Japanese Wishing Plaque

Hopes and dreams for a better life are universal human desires that are uniquely expressed in different cultures around the world. This project draws inspiration from the Japanese ema (絵馬), or shrine wish plaques. Using recycled cardboard, you will create your own plaque inscribed with a wish to hang in your home!

Stingray Ema (2006.16.124)

What are ema? In Ancient Japan, Shinto and Buddhist worshippers used to dedicate horses to temples and shrines. However, since not everyone had horses, some people would make a substitute dedication by painting images of horses on wooden plaques. The Japanese character for ema is 絵馬, which means “picture horse”. On the back of ema, people wrote their wishes or prayers and hung them in the shrine.

In modern times, ema are not limited to images of horses, but can show any animal or symbol. Some shrines will even offer limited edition ema with images pertaining to specific holidays!
Prompts for Looking at Art:

Take a look at the images of ema in the USC Pacific Asia Museum's collection below as well as images of ema found in Japanese shrines.

- Are all ema shaped the same? What shapes do you notice in the different ema?
- How do people choose to personalize their ema?
- What kind of wishes do you think people write down on their ema?

Heart Ema at Sanko-Inari Shrine in Inuyama, Japan
Fox Ema at Fushimi-Inari Shrine in Kyoto, Japan

Octopus Ema
Ink on wood
2006.16.115
Gift of Dawn Ishimaru Frazier

Tiger Ema
Ink on wood
2006.16.79
Gift of Dawn Ishimaru Frazier
Questions to Inspire Your Artwork:
- What are your current hopes and dreams?
- What animal do you have a positive association with? What do you like about that animal?

Materials Needed:
- Cardboard
- Scissors
- Coloring materials, such as paint, markers, pastels, or crayons
- String
- Pencil

Optional Supply Ideas:
- Glitter
- Cookie Cutter

Instructions:

**Step 1**
Cut out a 4” x 6” piece of cardboard. If you prefer, you can cut the cardboard into a different shape, such as an animal, star, or heart.

Tip: If you want to make a shape that is not a rectangle, try using a cookie cutter as a stencil!
Step 2
Punch a hole on the top center part of your cardboard shape.

Step 3
Next, sketch the animal or symbol you want on the front of your ema with a pencil. After completing your sketch, you can start painting or coloring in your design!

Step 4
Allow the front of your ema to completely dry. When it's dry, flip the board over and write your wish down. You can also decorate the back of your ema.

Step 5
After both sides of your ema are dry, tie a string into a loop and thread it through the hole you punched on the top of the cardboard. Now you can hang your ema in a special place in your home so your wishes may come true!

This project was designed by Kaitlin Lam, Education Assistant, for the USC PAM Education Department