



Kazuo Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World*, Vintage, 1986

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

All art arises from the context of its time. The MFAH Book Club uses works of art from the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), and from museums around the world, as the hub for a series of questions directly related to a specific book. Creating bridges between the literary and visual arts—this is what makes the MFAH Book Club unique.

Discuss the questions with your book club or a friend, or just think about them if reading on your own, then bring your book and take a guided tour of select works at the MFAH on a Book Club Tour!

How to Book an MFAH Book Club Tour

To complement your reading and discussion of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *An Artist of the Floating World*, tours are available February 17 through May 31, 2012. These discussion-based, docent-led tours will feature art works selected from the MFAH collections that evoke timeless human themes.

To book a tour at a time of your own choosing:

Read and discuss the book in your own book club, then [book your group for a guided tour](#) led by a gallery educator. A minimum of 6 people are required.

Not in a book club? Reading on your own or with a friend? The MFAH has scheduled walk-in tours for each book selection on specific dates and times throughout the season. Visit www.mfah.org/bookclub for the walk-in tour schedule, and to register for a specific tour.

The Floating World

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 a sophisticated world 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 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”?

The entertainments and amusements of the “floating world” are also ironic allusions to its impermanence, perhaps a sorrowful meditation on the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth from which Buddhists seek release through achieving *nirvana*. In light of this, discuss Ono’s conversation with his teacher, Seiji Moriyama (called “Mori-san”), about the temporality of the “floating world” (pp. 144–151)—especially: “It is hard to appreciate the beauty of a world when one doubts its very validity” (p. 150).

The Floating World... Art Links



How does the impermanence of the “floating world” relate to European art? Consider these works of art at the MFAH from different time periods and in different styles:

A genre of paintings called *vanitas* became popular in Flanders and the Netherlands during the 16th and 17th centuries. The word is Latin, meaning “emptiness” and, loosely translated, corresponds to the transient nature of earthly life including vanities sought and acquired. How does this image convey the *vanitas* theme?

Ferdinand Bol, *Woman at Her Dressing Table*, c. 1645, oil on canvas, the MFAH, gift of Mrs. Harry C. Hanszen, 69.4.

The Floating World... Art Links *(continued)*

The Impressionists and Post-Impressionists often worked quickly, sometimes in one sitting and often *en plein air* (in open air), to capture scenes of leisure. Their subjects included evenings at the ballet and opera, strolls in the park, a day at the horse races, boating on leisure craft, or travel by train. Do these four paintings from the MFAH's Audrey Jones Beck Collection depict the same kind of "floating world" as Japanese *ukiyo-e*? Which feels most fleeting, and why?



Clockwise from top left: Henri-Jacques-Édouard Evenepoel, *At the Moulin Rouge*, 1897, oil on canvas, the MFAH, gift of Audrey Jones Beck, 2002.121.

Armand Guillaumin, *View of the Seine*, Paris, 1871, oil on canvas, the MFAH, gift of Audrey Jones Beck, 71.5.

Berthe Morisot, *The Basket Chair*, 1885, oil on canvas, the MFAH, gift of Audrey Jones Beck, 98.294.



Henri Edmond Cross, *Sunset on the Lagoon*, Venice, c. 1903-4, oil on canvas, the MFAH, gift of Audrey Jones Beck, 98.276.

Color Field painters explored the expressive potential of large expanses of sensual colors and nuanced surfaces. How does this example from the exhibition *Revelation: The Major Paintings of Jules Olitski* (February 12–May 6, 2012) capture the same sensation intended by Japanese *ukiyo-e* "floating world" images?



Jules Olitski, *Patutsky in Paradise*, 1966, acrylic on canvas, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, purchase, 1982. © Estate of Jules Olitski/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Artists, Power, and Censorship

One of Ono's teachers, Matsuda, speaks of changing the world for the better (pp. 170–174). How can artists change the world positively? How can they change it negatively?

Ono defines himself by his relationships with his teachers, talks about how revered he was by his students, how politically and socially influential he was, and how everyone in the bar stopped what they were doing to hang on his every word. Do you think he was a better student or a better teacher, and why?

Artists, Power, and Censorship... Art Links

Ono painted *Complacency* while he was working in Mori-san's workshop, but he was already swaying under the influence of Matsuda (pp. 164–168). Consider the following questions:

- Why did the Tortoise react as he did to the painting?
- What does Ono reveal about the inspiration for his painting and its symbolism?
- Was Mori-san's (Ono's teacher) reaction to such paintings too extreme, just right, or too permissive from your perspective?

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 installed in the Arts of China Gallery. About his art-making, Cai has referenced the following tenet of former Chinese leader Mao Zedong: "Destroy nothing, create nothing." How does Cai's work relate to the "floating world"? How does Zedong's tenet relate to censorship?



Cai Guo-Qiang, *Odyssey*, 2010, Gunpowder and pigment on paper, the MFAH, museum commission with funds provided by the Caroline Wiess Law Accessions Endowment Fund, and the Chao Family in honor of Ting Tsung and Wei Fong Chao, with additional funds from Friends of Asian Art 2010, 2010.1660.

Loyalty and the War

Ono reveals that he studied and worked for three masters during his career: Takeda, Mori, and Matsuda. As he was planning to leave Takeda, he said to the Tortoise: "Master Takeda doesn't deserve the loyalty of the likes of you and me. Loyalty has to be earned. There's too much made of loyalty. All too often men talk of loyalty and follow blindly. I for one have no wish to lead my life like that" (p. 72). Taking this and Ono's other acts, do you consider him loyal? If not, why?

Throughout the novel, there is the impression that Ono committed a horrible deed during World War II. We learn that he used his artistic talent in the service of the imperial movement—to support Japanese Emperor Hirohito and Japanese nationalism. Was that noble or not, based on a Japanese perspective before, during, and after the war?

Discuss Ono's betrayal of his student Kuroda. We learn (pp. 108–114, 181–184) that Kuroda was incarcerated and beaten during the war. What does this reveal about Ono's character?

Loyalty and the War... Art Link

There are three instances when Ono is confronted with the re-evaluation of one's shameful past. The first occurs during a chance encounter with Miyake (pp. 53–56), about a corporate leader who committed suicide. Second, while negotiating Noriko's engagement with the Saito family (pp. 116–127), he admits his own wartime art-making was a "negative influence." And third, he describes the shame and suicide of composer Mr. Yukio Naguchi when speaking with his grandson, Ichiro (pp. 154–155).

In Dante's *Inferno*, the first of three parts of *The Divine Comedy*, Dante takes an allegorical journey through the nine levels of Hell. The Roman poet Virgil is his guide, descending through nine concentric circles, each inhabited by successively worse sinners. In the lowest circle of Hell, at the center of the earth, reside the worst sinners in history: those guilty of treason and betrayal, doomed to spend eternity encased in ice.

View this engraving made by Gustave Doré, from an 1885 edition housed among the MFAH's Hirsch Library's rare books, and read this excerpt from Canto 34:

Thereby Cocytus wholly was congealed.

With six eyes did he weep, and down three chins
Trickled the tear-drops and the bloody drivel.

At every mouth he with his teeth was crunching
A sinner, in the manner of a brake,
So that he three of them tormented thus.

To him in front the biting was as naught
Unto the clawing, for sometimes the spine
Utterly stripped of all the skin remained.

"That soul up there which has the greatest pain,"
The Master said, "is Judas Iscariot;
With head inside, he plies his legs without.



Gustave Doré, *Illustration for Canto XXXIV*, in Dante Alighieri, *Dante's Inferno* (from *The Divine Comedy*), trans. Henry Francis Cary, ill. Gustave Doré (New York: Cassell & Co., c. 1885), the MFAH, Hirsch Library, gift of May Cage Gray.

Of the two others, who head downward are,
The one who hangs from the black jowl is Brutus;
See how he writhes himself, and speaks no word.

And the other, who so stalwart seems, is Cassius.
But night is re-ascending, and 'tis time
That we depart, for we have seen the whole."

Examining Doré's engraving, did Ono commit such a wrong as to deserve this fate? Is this how you imagine the fate of those who betrayed you?

The End of The War

After unleashing the destructive power of two atomic bombs, one over Hiroshima and one over Nagasaki, the setting for *An Artist of the Floating World*, the Japanese military capitulated to Allied forces. On September 2, 1945, representatives of the Empire of Japan, headed by Foreign Minister Mamoru Shigemitsu and General of the Imperial Army Yoshijirō Umezu, signed the instrument of surrender ending World War II on the *USS Missouri*. At the start of that ceremony, Douglas MacArthur—General of the Army, Commander in the Southwest Pacific, and Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers—declared:

It is my earnest hope, indeed the hope of all mankind, that from this solemn occasion a better world shall emerge out of the blood and carnage of the past, a world founded upon faith and understanding, a world dedicated to the dignity of man and the fulfillment of his most cherished wish for freedom, tolerance, and justice.

Also read the following excerpt about “Shame, Honor, and Duty” in Japanese culture:

In Japan, relationships between people are greatly affected by duty and obligation. In duty-based relationships, what other people believe or think has a more powerful impact on behavior than what the individual believes. Shame occurs through others’ negative feelings towards you or through your feelings of having failed to live up to your obligations. In contrast, the culture of the United States and most of the West is based on guilt... where truth, justice, and the preservation of individual rights are more important components of consciousness.

In western culture, guilt can be relieved through confession, self-righteousness, or the justice system, but in Japanese culture, shame cannot be removed until a person does what society expects, which may include drastic measures such as committing suicide.

Source: Excerpt from “Shame, Honor, and Duty” by Nebraska-born Nisei Takako McCrann, Ph.D., Director, English as a Second Language, Bellevue University, from documentary “Most Honorable Son” (KDN Films, 2007).

For more, see: www.pbs.org/mosthonorableson.

How do these quotations illuminate Ono’s recollections of his past?



Lt. C. F. Wheeler, “Gen. Douglas MacArthur signs as Supreme Allied Commander during formal surrender ceremonies on the *USS MISSOURI* in Tokyo Bay. Behind Gen. MacArthur are Lt. Gen. Jonathan Wainwright and Lt. Gen. A. E. Percival,” September 2, 1945, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, 80-G-348366.

Ono describes his discussion with Suichi, his son-in-law, about Japanese soldiers killed during the war—including Ono’s only son, Kenji (pp. 56–58). Suichi says (p. 58): “Brave young men die for stupid causes, and the real culprits are still with us. Afraid to show themselves for what they are, to admit their responsibility. . . . To my mind, that’s the greatest cowardice of all.” Do you think Suichi includes Ono among the “real culprits”?

Home, Family, and Social Acquaintances

Why does Noriko, Ono's younger daughter, treat her father with little respect, and at times, with contempt (pp. 106–108, 114–115)?

Ono and others behave in a passive-aggressive manner, with implicit rather than explicit communication, deflection of both praise and criticism, and outbursts of laughter to cover awkward moments. Discuss this in the context of one or more of the following situations in the novel:

- Shintaro and Yoshio thank Ono (pp. 20–21)
- Noriko discusses Miyake with Ono (pp. 51–53)
- Ono and the Tortoise discuss “new approaches” (pp. 159–165)

Ono's older daughter, Setsuko, suggests her father to take certain “precautionary steps” when negotiating Noriko's engagement in future (pp. 48–49). Why does she say this? Discuss how this impacts the negotiations for Noriko's engagement to Taro Saito (pp. 116–127). Why, toward the end of the novel (pp. 190–194), does Setsuko deny making the suggestion?

Home, Family, and Social Acquaintances... Art Links



Ono has two daughters, Setsuko and Noriko. Looking at the image here—a woodblock print in the MFAH collection—which daughter comes to mind based on personality traits described in the novel?

Hashiguchi Goyo, *Woman at a Hot Spring Hotel*, 1920, woodblock print, the MFAH, gift of Nanako and Dale Tingleaf, 2008.35. (Note: This print is not currently on view.)

Home, Family, and Social Acquaintances... Art Links *(continued)*

Ono's father and Ono himself kept Buddhist altars in their receptions rooms (see pp. 41–42, and 48–50). What is the significance of these Buddhist altars?

Buddhist ceremonial objects feature prominently in the inaugural exhibition of the MFAH's Arts of Japan Gallery, *Elegant Perfection: Masterpieces of Religious Art from the Tokyo National Museum* (February 17–April 8, 2012), and in the exhibition *Unrivalled Splendor: The Kimiko and John Powers Collection of Japanese Art* (June 17–September 23, 2012). Look at these objects, one from each exhibition, and consider the accompanying questions.

The burning of incense in Buddhist religious practice is often thought to purify one's surroundings. Ono's father burns Ono's art in order to discourage him from inhabiting a world which tempts one to become "weak-willed and depraved" (p. 46), and to encourage him to go into business. How is the burning of incense and burning of works of art the same or different?



Incense Burner with Handle, Heian period, 12th century, gilt bronze, Tokyo National Museum, in *Elegant Perfection: Masterpieces of Religious Art from the Tokyo National Museum*.



The Three Laughers of Tiger Valley, Bunsei (active mid-15th century), Muromachi period, hanging scroll (painting), ink on paper, in *Unrivalled Splendor: The Kimiko and John Powers Collection of Japanese Art*.

This kind of long-handled censer, very popular in Japan during the Nara period (710–794), was inspired by the Chinese Tang period. Discuss the ways in which traditional Japanese culture is displaced by novelties of Western culture in *An Artist of the Floating World*. 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 Taoist and Confucian laugh at the Buddhist, while the Buddhist laughs nervously at having broken his vow? Thinking about *An Artist of the Floating World*, is Ono the type to adhere strictly to traditions and rules or does he readily embrace change? Discuss a specific scenario.

Not just in Japan, but in other times and places, altars or ceremonial objects are brought into the household. Think about and describe an object you possess that is meaningful.

The Measure of One's Life

Like everyone—from youthful and impulsive, to senior and introspective—Ono changes. He has two formative conversations: one with Mori-san, one with Matsuda. Mori-san asserts: “But I’ve long since lost all such doubts, Ono. . . . When I am an old man, when I look back over my life and see I have devoted it to the task of capturing the unique beauty of that world, I believe I will be well satisfied. And no man will make me believe I’ve wasted my time” (pp. 150–151). On the other hand, Matsuda spoke of changing the world for the better (pp. 170–174) as a younger man, but as an older man he seems dissatisfied with what little he accomplished (pp. 89–96). What is Ono’s measure of his life?

Literature and Real Life

The divide between pre- and postwar generations is a recurrent theme in literature. In *An Artist of the Floating World*, we see one man and his family grappling with the “before and after” of World War II in Japan. Consider other notable examples:

- French and Indian War: James Fennimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826)
- Napoleonic War: Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (1869)
- American Revolutionary War: Jimmy Carter, *The Hornet’s Nest* (2003)
- American Civil War: Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895)
- World War I: Ford Maddox Ford, *No More Parades* (1925)
- The Vietnam Conflict: Bobbie Ann Mason, *In Country* (1985)
- Operation Iraqi Freedom: Luke S. Larson, *Senator’s Son* (2010)

Discuss your personal experiences with parents, siblings, other family, and friends who have experienced war.



Kazuo Ishiguro, 2005. © Randy Quan, www.randyquan.com.

About the Author

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in 1954 in Nagasaki, Japan. His family resettled in England in 1960. His first novel, *A Pale View of the Hills* (1982), published after completing studies (University of Kent, Canterbury and University of East Anglia) won the 1982 Winifred Holtby Prize of the Royal Society of Literature. *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) received a Whitbread Book of the Year award in 1986 and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Three years later, in 1989, Ishiguro won the Man Booker Prize for Fiction for *The Remains of the Day* (1989), later made into an Academy Award-winning film. Other novels include *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* (2009), *Never Let Me Go* (2005, Man Booker Prize nominee), *When We Were Orphans* (2000, Man Booker Prize nominee), and *The Unconsoled* (1995, 1995 Cheltenham Prize winner). He has also written original screenplays. Ishiguro 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 in London with his wife and daughter.