

Drawing Tales and Lessons

Cassone, late 15th century
North Italian (Florence)
Wood with polychromy and oil on panel
Loyola University Museum of Art, Gift of Mr.
and Mrs. Ernest Joresco, 1975-02



Panel 1



Panel 2



Panel 3

Grades: 5 – 9

Subjects: English Language Arts, Social Science, Fine Arts, Foreign Languages

Time Required: 2 – 4 class periods, 45 minutes each

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Lesson Overview

Students will learn that a *cassone* (“big box” or “chest” in Italian) is a marriage trunk. It carried the bride’s *trousseau* (clothing and linens the bride collected for her marriage, pronounced TROO-soh). They will discover that the stories represented on *cassoni* (plural of *cassone*) often acted as examples of moral lessons for the young bride. Students will then think about lessons they have learned from historical, Biblical, or folk tales. They will choose stories with lessons they would want to teach others, draw scenes from these stories in panels on their own *cassoni*, and explain them to one another.

Materials

- Reproduction of the *Cassone*
- Books containing tales and fables, such as *Aesop’s Fables* as told by Savioura Pirotta, *The Dancing Kettle and Other Japanese Folk Tales* retold by Yoshiko Uchida, *Tales of Ancient Egypt* by Roger Lancelyn Green, or *American Tall Tales* by Mary Pope Osborne (all available at Chicago Public Library)
- Either three blank index cards (3x5 in. or 4x6 in.) for each student (lines on one side are OK) or three sheets of plain paper, card stock, or construction paper for each student. Earth-toned paper (light brown, beige, yellow) or kraft paper makes a good background in that it simulates the antique look of *cassoni*
- Crayons, pencils, oil pastels, and other art materials

Lesson Steps

1. Have students look closely at *Cassone*. See how much students can figure out about the work when they take time to look at it, think about it, and share ideas.
2. Use a brainstorming technique, such as Pair Share, to get them started before sharing with the whole class.
 - Pair Share: Students turn to a partner and take turns naming one thing that they notice about the *cassone*. After naming some of the most obvious things, they will soon begin to look more deeply and notice things that their partners did not. They should remember to share these ideas in the discussion later.
3. Use the following questions to begin a discussion.
3. What do you see? What more can you find?
4. What do you think this work is made of?
 - Wood with polychromy (many colors) and oil on panel
5. What is the purpose of this object? If you owned this box, where would you put it in your home?
 - During the Renaissance (14th to 16th centuries), newly married Italian couples commonly received *cassoni*. These boxes, featuring painted panels of religious or historical scenes, were exhibited during the bridal procession, which accompanied the bride to her new home (that of her husband’s family), made the marriage public, and showcased the wealth of the two families. The chests were placed in the newlyweds’ bedroom.
6. Why would you put it there?
 - *Cassoni* were displayed in the bedroom because, during the Renaissance, it served as a public room where newlyweds received guests.
 - What is happening in the three panels on the side of the *cassone*? What figures do you see? What are the people doing? What settings are they in?
 - This *cassone*, which would have contained the dowry of a bride from Florence, Italy, features three panels on its side. The scenes in *cassone* panels were often chosen because

they represented virtuous qualities that the bride should possess. Both religious and historical stories were selected for this purpose.

- The scene on the left side (Panel 1) features Tuccia (pronounced TOO-cha), a vestal virgin. Her story was recounted by the Italian authors Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 28: 12) and Petrarch (*Triumph of Chastity*). When Tuccia's purity was questioned, she proved her innocence by carrying water in a sieve without spilling a drop from the Tiber River to high priest at the Temple dedicated to Vesta, the goddess of hearth and home. Tuccia's story would have taught new brides to be truthful and pure.
- The image in the middle (Panel 2) portrays the Biblical story of Judith and Holofernes (Judith 12 – 13). Judith and her people, the Israelites, were threatened by the Assyrians. Judith bravely sneaked into the enemy camp and beheaded the general, Holofernes (hall-oh-FER-nee), thus saving her people from destruction. This story taught women to be brave, to take care of those close to them (especially their families), and to have civic pride.
- The illustration in the last panel (Panel 3) comes from Rebecca's story in the Bible (Genesis 24). This scene shows Rebecca telling her family that she is engaged to Isaac, one of the patriarchs of the Jewish people. According to the story, Rebecca's choice was predestined, and the fact that she dutifully fulfilled her role taught new brides to be obedient.
- How do you think this box was made? What kind of skills would the artists of this work have to possess to make this chest?
 - We do not know the artists who crafted this piece, which is not unusual during this time since the names of furniture makers were not often recorded. However, we do know this cassone is from Florence, Italy. It is highly likely that it was created in a workshop, where one set of craftsmen made the chest and another painted the scenes.



Italy

Activity

1. Tell students to think about stories that have taught them a lesson, just as the three tales on the cassone's panels presented important lessons to the young bride. Ask them if they wanted to teach someone an important message, which stories would they tell?
2. Have each student choose three tales that someone may have told him/her or from books from the library.

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3. Set out three index cards or sheets of paper for each student with crayons, pencils, oil pastels, and other art materials.
4. Have students draw scenes from the tales for their own cassoni. To give the artwork an antique look, use yellow, brown, or beige paper, or begin by coloring the whole surface of white paper with yellow and/or brown.
5. After they have created their cassoni, students may write the lessons learned on the back of the index cards (the lined side) or paper and share their images with one another while explaining why they wanted to teach these specific lessons.

Expanding the Lesson

Students could do one or more of the following:

- Create their own stories that teach lessons.
- Research marriage customs from other countries.

Vocabulary

cassone: “big box” or “chest” in Italian; a marriage trunk.

dowry: the money, goods, or estate that a woman brings to her husband in marriage.

polychromy: many colors; from the Greek *poly* (many) and *chromy* (colors).

trousseau: clothing and linens the bride collects for her marriage, pronounced TROO-soh.

vestal virgins: the only female priestesses of Rome. They protected the city’s most sacred fires.

Illinois Learning Standards

English Language Arts

- 1 – Reading
- 2 – Literature
- 3 – Writing
- 4 – Listening and Speaking
- 5 – Research

Social Science

- 16 – History
- 17 – Geography
- 18 – Social Systems

Fine Arts

- 26 – Creating and Performing
- 27 – Arts and Civilization

Foreign Languages

- 29 – Culture and Geography