

Ceramic Traditions



Embracing Imperfections



Discuss the importance of imperfections in Japanese Oribe ware ceramics

Lesson Overview

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Learn about the Oribe style of Japanese pottery
- Examine examples of Japanese pottery from historical and contemporary eras
- Explore how art-making can include surprises and irregularities that lead to their own forms of perfection
- Create a work of art from a mistake/imperfection

Vocabulary

Wabi-sabi

The Japanese concept that an object is perfect in its imperfections and that its beauty comes from the fact that it is irregular

Kaiseki

A Japanese traditional meal made up of many small courses, each served in its own unique ceramic dish

Vessel

A bowl or other open container for liquids

Glaze

A coating for ceramics that turns into glass when fired, making the ceramics more attractive as well as protecting the clay and making it waterproof

Tea ceremony

The act of preparing and drinking matcha, a type of tea

Required Materials

- Colored mark-making tools (such as colored pencils, markers, etc.)

Included Resources

- [Inkblot paper](#)
- [Animation of Tea Bowl by Koie Ryoji](#)

For the Teacher

Background Information

Oribe ware is a style of Japanese pottery named for Furuta Oribe, a powerful sixteenth-century warrior, a master of the Japanese tea ceremony, and a ceramicist. Before Oribe's time, most ceramics used in tea ceremonies and traditional *kaiseki* meals were evenly, symmetrically shaped. Oribe was a proponent of a new style of ceramics that were irregular, uneven, and showed a more whimsical, playful uniqueness. His style of pottery became known as Oribe ware, which continues to be a traditional style of Japanese pottery to this day. Oribe ceramics often include geometric or organic decorative details and glaze coloring that highlight specific parts of the vessel. These objects are most clearly identified by their irregular, asymmetrical shapes, their light-colored bodies that are often splashed with green glaze, and their brown and white decoration. In addition, the hand and whims of the potter can be seen in the finished product.

Artwork Description

This deep ceramic cup is made of a beige-colored clay and decorated with a combination of geometric and natural shapes that have been added with white and black. The rim of the cup is glazed lime green, and the glaze has dripped irregularly around the body of the vessel. While the cup is shaped roughly like a four-leafed clover, it is not exactly symmetrical, and the overall effect makes it obvious that it was made by human hands.



Cup, early 17th century. Mino ware in Oribe style: glazed stoneware. Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Robert B. Woodward, 03.87. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

Artwork Description

This tea bowl is an irregular oval shape made of clay and glazed white with blue-green drip marks around the rim and body. The colors are applied unevenly around the bowl, with some drips dropping from the rim to the base and some only forming small dots near the rim. The irregular colors and shape make the bowl look visibly handmade.



Koie Ryoji (Japanese, 1938–2020). *Tea Bowl*, 2005. Oribe ware: glazed stoneware. Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Shelly and Lester Richter, 2013.83.27. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

About the Artwork

For hundreds of years, Japanese potters have been inspired by a philosophy called *wabi-sabi*. It refers to the idea that something with imperfections can be beautiful exactly because of those qualities. While potters sometimes try to make an absolutely smooth, even surface, those in the *wabi-sabi* tradition instead make objects that draw your attention to their irregular, handmade nature. Eating from such vessels was supposed to challenge the senses, giving you more to touch, more to look at, than a perfectly smooth, uniformly colored bowl. It also brought some of nature—and nature’s unpredictability—into the teahouse.

The influence of *wabi-sabi* can be seen in both of these vessels. Even though one is from the early 1600s and one is from 2005, more than four hundred years later, both use some of the same style elements and were both made by potters inspired by *wabi-sabi*. Koie Ryoji was a famous contemporary Japanese ceramic artist who died in 2020. He is known for how spontaneous and playful he could be with his clay. Instead of planning in advance exactly what his vessels would look like, he let the clay and his fingers speak to him, then saw what the result would be. He started making ceramic tiles in a factory right after high school, then began making his own pottery in his early twenties. Throughout his career, he was inspired by, and tried the techniques of, many artists worldwide, including those—such as Jackson Pollock—who didn’t work in ceramics.

Lesson

Introduction/Warm-Up:

Ask students to consider (*think-pair-share*):

- What does the word “perfect” mean to you?
- What does it mean for an object to be “perfect”?

Have students discuss their ideas with a partner, then ask the group to share what they discussed.



Artwork Discussion

First, show students a picture of the historical Oribe ware cup and ask them to share what they notice.

Next, show students an animation of the contemporary tea bowl by Koie Ryoji and ask them to share their observations.

Show students side-by-side pictures of the historical Oribe ware cup and the contemporary tea bowl.

Ask students:

- How do these two vessels relate to the ideas we just shared about things that are “perfect”?
- What clues do you see that make you say that?
(Take multiple answers, reminding students that there isn’t one right or wrong answer and that everyone has a different idea of what “perfect” means.)

Ask students:

- What are some clues on the Oribe vessels that they’re made by hand?
- Why might someone want an object that’s made by hand instead of by a machine?

Explain the idea of *wabi-sabi*, that something irregular or inexact can be beautiful because of those qualities.

Show them the video of Koie Ryoji making a tea bowl and point out his playful, spontaneous style of making pots.

Ask students:

- Why might someone want a pot made like this instead of one that’s more symmetrical or regular?





Koie Ryoji (Japanese, 1938–2020). *Tea Bowl*, 2005.
Oribe ware: glazed stoneware. Brooklyn Museum;
Gift of Shelly and Lester Richter, 2013.83.27.
Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)



Cup, early 17th century. Mino ware in Oribe style: glazed stoneware. Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Robert B. Woodward, 03.87. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

Activity: Creating Art from Imperfections

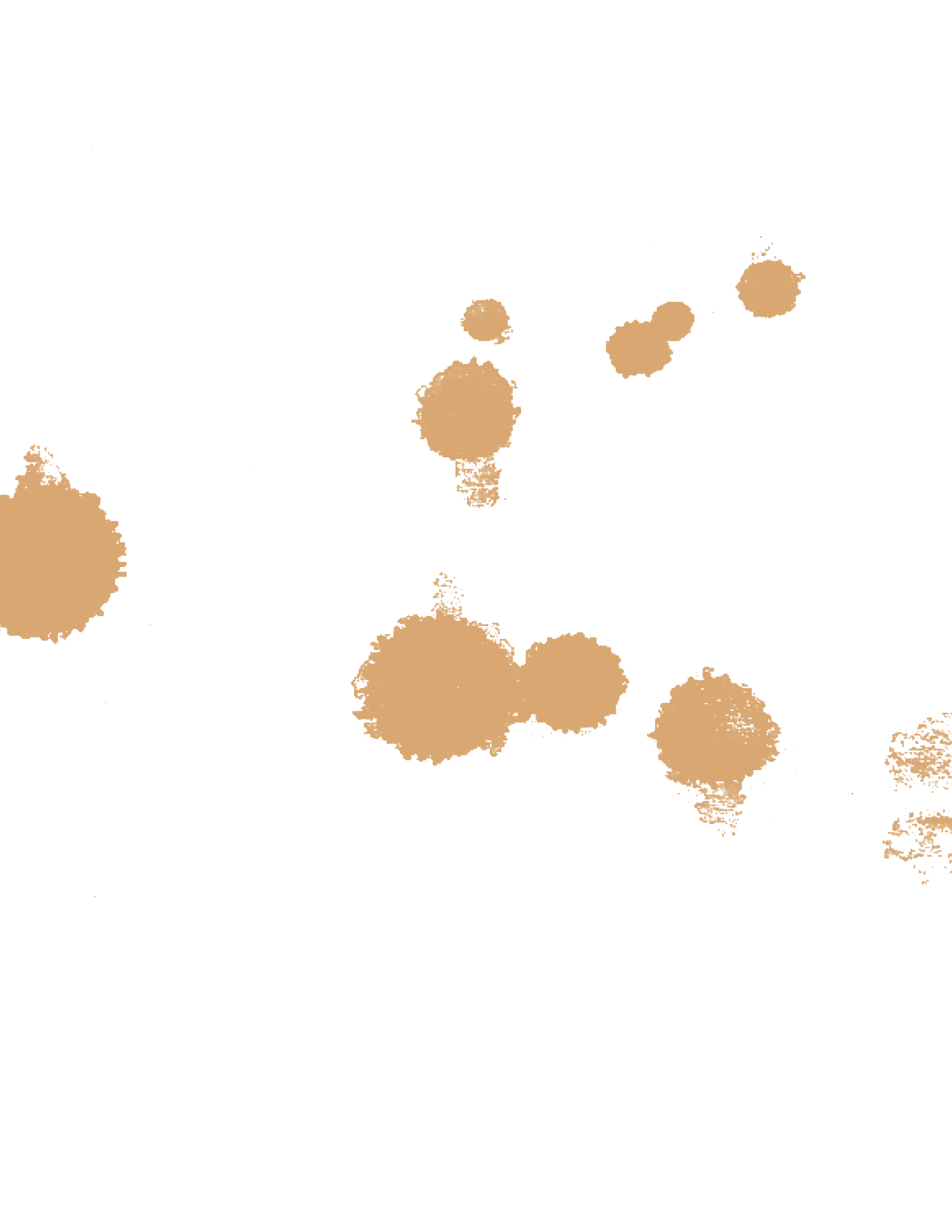
Tell students that they are going to create their own works of art from mistakes or imperfections.

Distribute inkblot paper so each student gets one sheet, along with colored pencils or markers. Explain that this paper contains random blots of color that could be considered imperfections. (If time allows, you can also have students make their own inkblot designs by experimenting with watercolor on paper, then completing the rest of the activity the next day, after their designs have dried.)

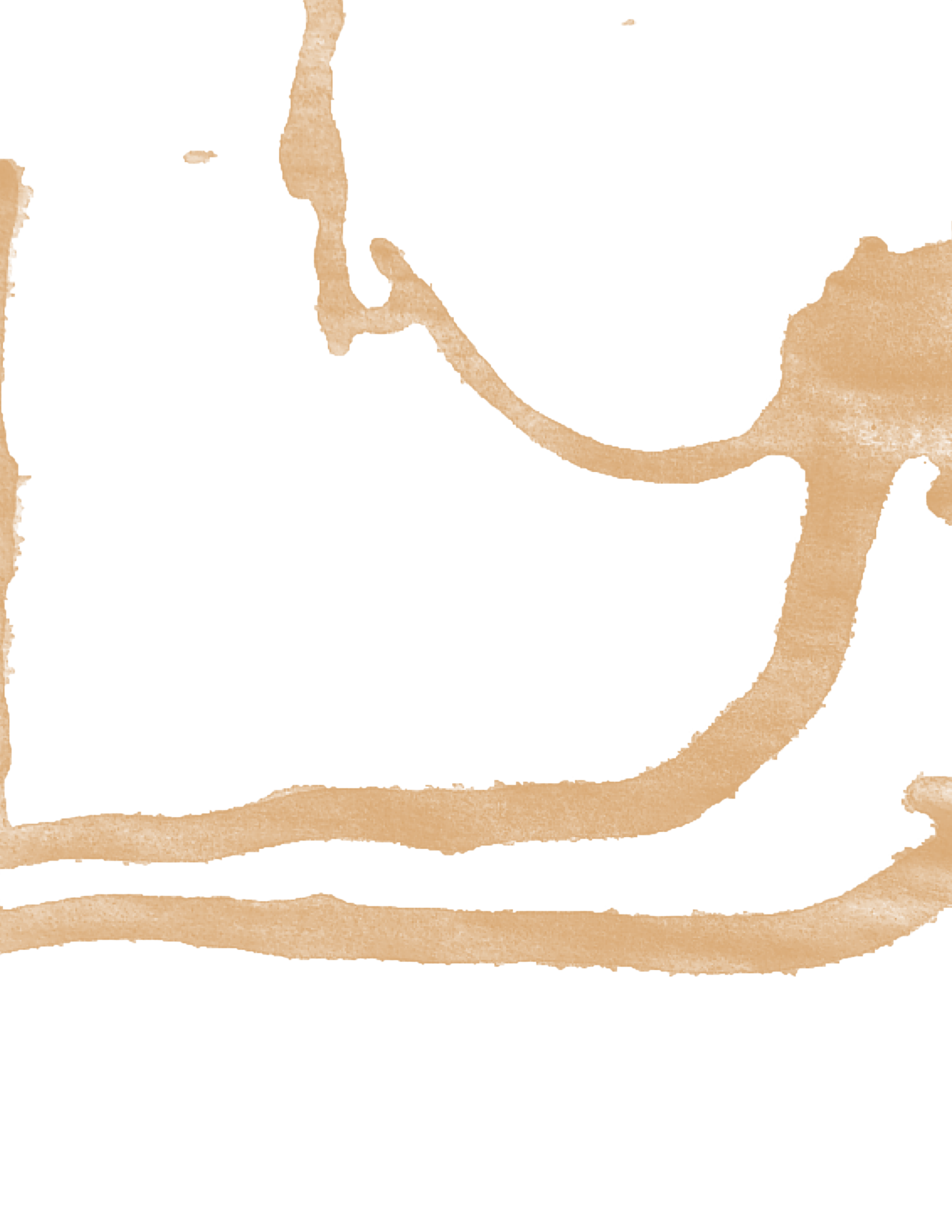
Ask students to use their imagination to turn the inkblots into works of art. For example, one student might see an inkblot and turn it into an underwater scene, or a bouquet of flowers, or an abstract design—the possibilities are endless!

When students are finished, ask them to share their drawings, allowing them to see the artwork their peers created from what were originally mistakes or imperfections.

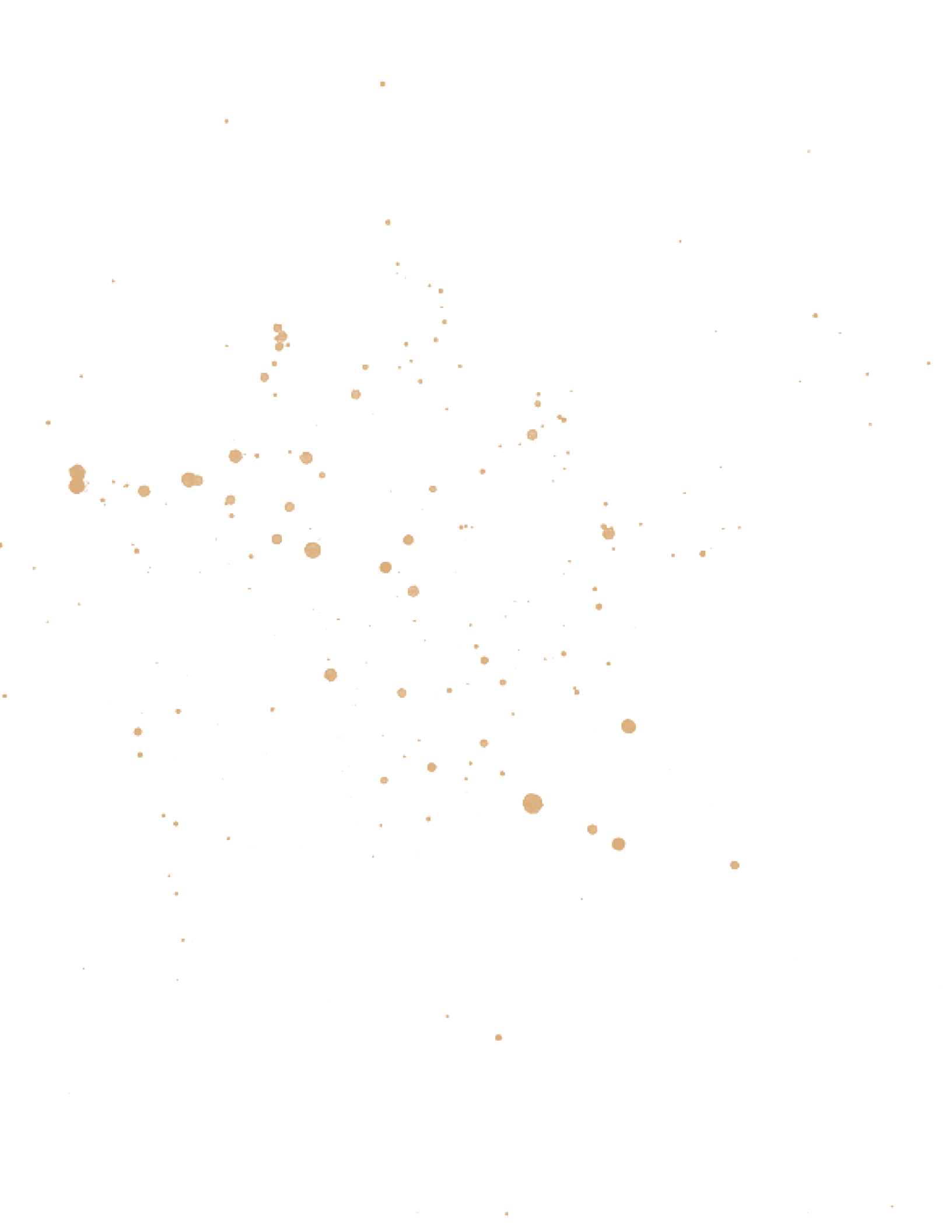


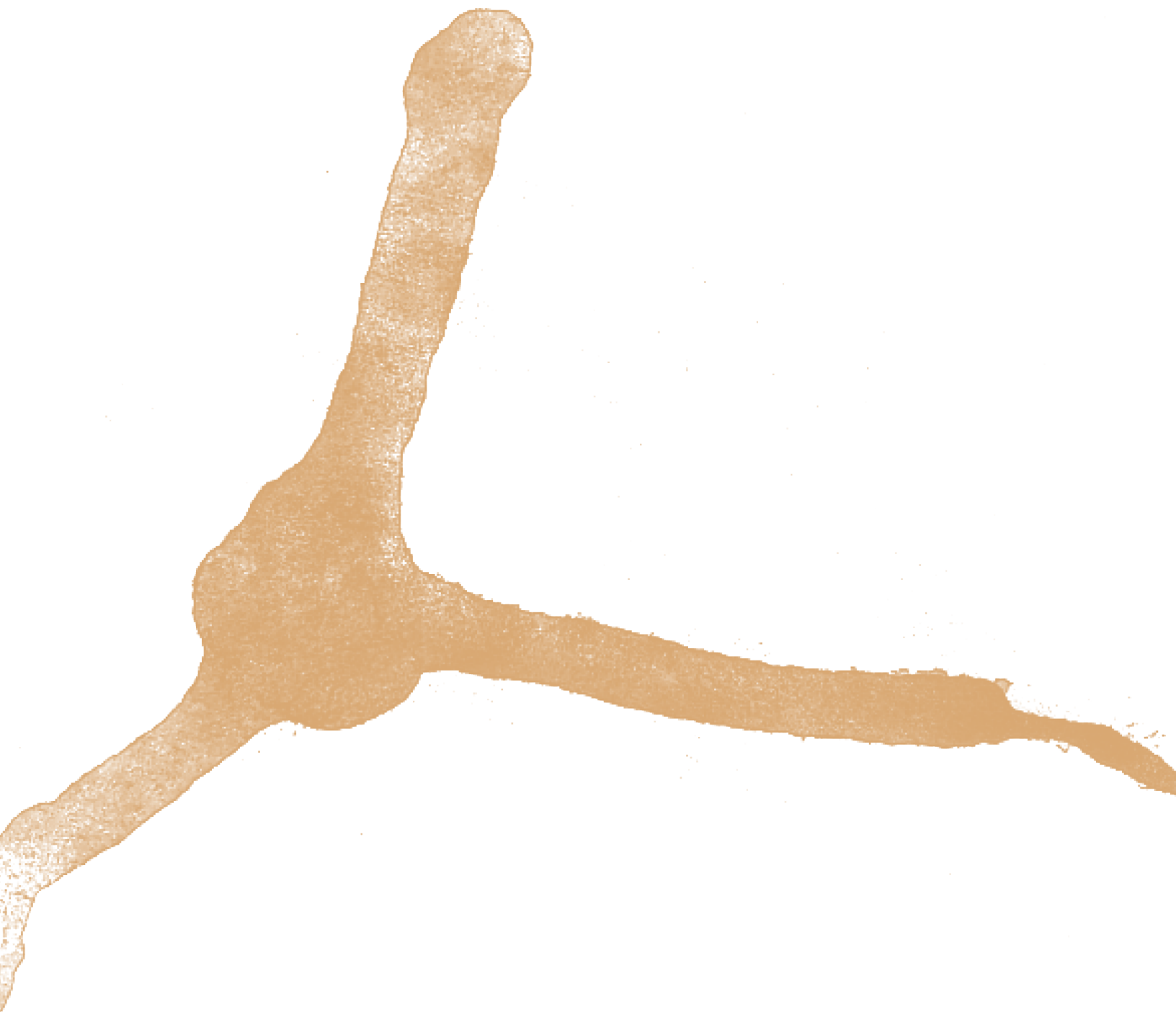












Extension Activities

ELA Connection—Found Word Poetry

Just like students made works of visual art from imperfections, ask them to create writing from random words that might not go together. Give each student a sheet of paper with text on it, such as a page torn from a book or a page from a newspaper. Have students choose three to five words from their page to use in their poem, then fill in the rest using their imagination. When they're finished, ask them to title their poem using just words cut out from their sheet of text!

Arts Extension—Imperfect Cups

Remind students that Oribe ceramics celebrate variations and imperfections, and that no two cups or bowls will be the same. Tell them they are going to take something uniform and make it totally unique. Pass out identical paper cups and colored glue (make this by adding food coloring to craft glue), then encourage students to try different techniques to alter their cup, such as bending, folding, tearing, and gluing scraps back onto the cup. At the end, gather all students' cups on one table and have students walk around to observe and touch each other's creations.

Acknowledgments

Support for our Arts of East Asia curriculum was made possible by the Freeman Foundation.

This resource was written by Rachel Ropeik, Curriculum Consultant, and Abby Getzler, Summer Teacher Institute participant, with assistance from Joan Cummins, Lisa and Bernard Selz Senior Curator, Asian Art, and our 2022 Summer Teacher Institute participants.

The Arts of East Asia curriculum initiative is coordinated by Niles Mattier, Associate Manager of Teacher Services, with assistance from Michael Reback, Senior Manager of School Programs.

Cover:

Cup (details), early 17th century. Mino ware in Oribe style: glazed stoneware. Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Robert B. Woodward, 03.87. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

Koie Ryoji (Japanese, 1938–2020). *Tea Bowl* (detail), 2005. Oribe ware: glazed stoneware. Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Shelly and Lester Richter, 2013.83.27. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)