Making a Fish Print (Gyotaku)

Credit: Smithsonian Institute: Oceans
https://ocean.si.edu/conservation/get-involved/educational-uses-gyotaku-or-fish-printing

Grade Level: Kindergarten to Grade 5

Overview:

Gyotaku (guh-yo-tah-koo) is a traditional form of Japanese art that began over 100 years ago as a way for fishermen to keep a record of the size and species of the fish they caught. They would apply sumi ink to one side of a freshly caught fish, then cover the fish with rice paper and rub to create an exact image of the fish. The ink was non-toxic and allowed for the fish to be washed and prepared for a meal, while preserving records of fish species and sizes. Once the print was completed, the fish could be washed and prepared for a meal. These utilitarian prints were incredibly life like. When done properly they retained even subtle patterns and textures of the fish. The relatively simple black ink prints later developed into an art form that added rich colors and environmental details. For educators, Gyotaku can also serve as a great way to teach children and adults about basic fish anatomy. You can use either real fish or rubber replicas.

Materials:

- Real salmon or rubber salmon model (fish must be cleaned well)
- Water-based inks in a variety of colours
- Newsprint
- Rice paper, kraft wrapping paper, or white construction paper
- Foam paint brushes

Steps:

- Discuss the history of Gyotaku with the students.
- Discuss the anatomy of the salmon: students will learn about the different parts of the salmon: gills, scales, fins, eyes, nares, lateral line, etc.
- Students will create their own fish prints. Place fish on top of newsprint.
- Paint the fish, making sure to cover the entire surface of the fish – include the eyes, fins, and all the scales. Spread the ink evenly over the fish. Make designs, use different colours.
- Place the paper over top of the fish; press firmly, covering the entire fish's surface. Do not let the paper move!
- Carefully remove the paper and set aside to dry.