

Asian Odyssey

A National K-12 Interdisciplinary Curriculum Model

The
Cleveland
Museum
of Art

A world of great
art for everyone

IMAGES OF CHINA

The Universality of Human Experience across Time and Cultures: Chinese Art and the Images in "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter"

Introduction

Art is an expression of human emotions and experience distilled through artistic interpretations in various mediums, such as literature, painting, dance, and music. In Li Po's (701-762) poem, translated by Ezra Pound, the clear poetic descriptions in the five stanzas can be more fully illuminated by the study of Chinese art. The Imagist poets, such as William Carlos Williams, E. E. Cummings, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens, drew inspiration from Eastern art forms and created a new style of poetry concentrating on the "raw power of the image to communicate feeling and thought." This lesson will examine Chinese art, paying specific attention to this "picture power."

Grade Level

This lesson is intended for grades 10-12.

Objectives

- To examine the poem and the selected paintings and art objects for the images they project.
- To look at the influence of Chinese art on American writers.
- To compare the different ways of "reading" an artwork in order to understand the differences between Chinese and American painting.

Concepts

- Symbolism: The Symbolist movement in poetry attempted to portray the emotional effects that objects were thought to suggest.
- The Imagist movement: The poets believed that poetry could be made purer by concentration on the precise, clear, unqualified image. Imagery alone could carry a poem's emotion and message. The movement began as an outgrowth of Symbolism.
- Translation: an oral or written communication in a second language having the same meaning as the oral or written communication in a first language.
- Adaptation: a written work (such as a novel) that has been recast in a new form.
- Landscape: a picture depicting an expanse of scenery.
- Perspective: The system of representing three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface so that the effect is the same as if the scene were viewed from a given point, the objects growing smaller as they recede in depth. The rules

- of perspective were developed and codified in the 15th century by Leonardo da Vinci among others.
- Hanging scroll: A vertical painting format in which a painting on paper or silk is attached to a flexible support and can be rolled for storage.

Key Ideas

- Painting and poetry are complementary art forms; similar emotions can be evoked by words and by images.
- Chinese paintings portray strong emotions through both style and content.
- The style of a painting or poem evokes an emotional response in the viewer or reader.
- It may be a cliché to say that "one picture is worth a thousand words," yet there is no denying that paintings effectively convey meaning. So, both paintings and poems share in conveying emotions.
- The "objective correlative" as described by poet T. S. Eliot is an image or metaphor that arouses an emotional response in the reader. For example, in "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter," the images of autumn and of time passing suggest feelings of loss, longing, and sadness. The image of the paired butterflies reveals the speaker's sense of loss at being separated from her husband.

Materials

Mat Weight in Form of a Bear, 206 BCE- CE 24, CMA 1994.203

Fowling Tower, CE 25-220, CMA 1989.71

The Peach-Blossom Spring, 1650, CMA 1971.227

Wandering Through the Mountains and Forgetting the Years, second half of the 17th century, CMA 1966.367

Conversation in Autumn, 1732, CMA 1954.263

Twilight in the Wilderness, 1860, CMA 1965.233

Handout "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" adapted from Li Po by Ezra Pound.

Handout 2

Handout 3

Procedure: Two-day lesson

(*Note:* If students have not already done activities on understanding Western art within the frame, this lesson could be expanded to three or four days, using a day or two to talk about Western painting.)

Day 1: Images that evoke emotions

1. Ask students what objects have emotional appeal for them and when they believe this attraction began. Do students have a particular object that has emotional impact for them? (Perhaps a favorite childhood toy evokes memories of being loved and cared for memories of being cared for and loved.)
2. Present and discuss the CMA artworks listed above. Students can work alone or in pairs to examine the images and imagine how these objects or paintings would make them feel if they were able to have them in their room. What function

- would the pictures or objects have for them? (Obviously the scrolls could hang and the objects could be decorative accessories with multiple purposes.)
3. Explain to students the different way Chinese scrolls are “read” as compared to the way Western art is viewed. (See handouts on how to “read” a picture, "Analysis of a Work of Art," or the “Psychological Gestalt of the Frame.”)
 4. Discuss compositional differences between Asian and Western styles of painting. Chinese hand scrolls are read horizontally from right to left. The illusion of space is achieved by dividing the composition into three segments: foreground, middle ground, and background. Contrast this with a Western landscape painting. Western landscapes can be oriented either vertically or horizontally, and Western artists have traditionally used perspective to create the illusion of space.
 5. Students should discuss what emotions each of the works evokes from them (not every work will appeal to everyone).

Day 2

1. Hand out copies of the poem “The River-Merchant’s Wife” or use a class text.
2. Present the background of the Symbolist and Imagist movements and explain that this poem is more an adaptation than a translation.
3. Read the poem aloud in the classroom, then divide the students into groups to discuss and answer the following questions.
 - a. What images and events are referred to in the first four stanzas?
 - b. How is the third stanza a turning point?
 - c. How do you know?
 - d. How is the season appropriate to the mood of the poem?
 - e. Why has the husband left?
 - f. What is the story of their relationship that each stanza develops through the imagery?
4. Ask each group to select one of the Chinese art objects presented and decide what emotions the art evokes in them. Compare the imagery and the emotion it evokes to the feelings expressed by the images in the poem: for example, happiness, sadness, nostalgia, and calm.
5. Ask students to reread the stanzas of the poem marking the specific details that are emotionally evocative to the students. Which details in the art were most expressive?

Evaluation

- A. Discuss how “seeing” in literature through imagery is similar to seeing the emotions expressed in Chinese art objects. In other words, how do poetry and fine art both visually express feelings?
- B. Ask students to analyze which medium is more successful in expressing emotions for them as individuals?

Enrichment

- A. Students will write haiku (a Japanese form of poetry) based on their favorite Chinese artwork after searching the CMA web site for additional items.

- B. Students will research Li Po and other Chinese poets to experience a wider range of poets. When were these poets prolific and what influenced their creativity? As Western courtiers wrote sonnets as intellectual exercises and personal expressions of feeling, so did Chinese poets. Being able to write poetry was expected of educated individuals.
- C. Find other translations of Li Po's "The River-Merchant's Wife" and compare the differences with Pound's more poetic adaptation.

Ohio State Standards

1. Compose reflective writings that balance reflections by using specific personal experiences to draw conclusions about life.
2. Write responses to literature that provide an interpretation, recognize ambiguities, nuances and complexities and that understand the author's use of stylistic devices and effects created.
3. Use textual evidence to justify interpretations of literature.

This lesson was created by Liz Glenn, English teacher, Westerville North High School, Westerville, Ohio