

art connections

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a teacher resource guide

Truthfulness, Compassion, Tolerance Traditional Chinese Paintings by Zhang Cuiying

This teacher resource guide connects to the exhibition *Truthfulness, Compassion, Tolerance: Traditional Chinese Paintings by Zhang Cuiying*, presented by Dublin Arts Council and the Ohio Center for East-West Cultural Exchange, October 2 -- 4, 2002.

The paintings in the exhibition *Truthfulness, Compassion, Tolerance* are a collection of traditional Chinese brush paintings by Chinese artist Zhang Cuiying.

Ms. Zhang, an Australian citizen, has held exhibitions in more than 60 cities in over 20 countries around the world. Her art is an expression of her inner peace and personal strength, which have been forged by experiences that few modern-day artists have had to face. In 1996, Ms. Zhang suffered from debilitating rheumatoid arthritis, so severe the artist was no longer able to paint. In 1997, she and her husband were introduced to *Falun Gong*, a self-improvement system for body, mind and spirit that incorporates exercise and meditation. Within weeks of beginning her practice of *Falun Gong*, she recovered completely from the arthritis, and she credits *Falun Gong* for her recovery.

Chinese President Jiang Zenin banned the *Falun Gong* movement in 1999, and launched a nationwide campaign of persecution against its practitioners. Ms. Zhang was arrested and jailed for being an outspoken practitioner, and suffered 8 months of torture and humiliation in Chinese prisons. Finally, through the efforts of the Australian government, she was released and returned to Australia. In addition to sharing her remarkable paintings with a worldwide audience, Zhang's traveling exhibitions have enabled her to raise awareness of *Falun Gong* and human rights abuses in China.

Zhang's traditional Chinese brush paintings exude elegance and peacefulness, reflecting the inner nature of the artist herself. The great traditions of Chinese painting were established during the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties (the 7th – 14th centuries). Examples of four categories of traditional Chinese painting can be found among Zhang's work: religious, landscape, portrait (or figure), and flora and fauna paintings. Exemplifying the traditional connections between painting, poetry, and calligraphy in China, many of Zhang's paintings incorporate calligraphy, and some are based on writings by famous Chinese poets.

A Brief History of Chinese Paintings

Traditional Chinese painting has a history at least 4,000 years old. Considered to be one of the “Three Perfections,” along with [calligraphy](#) and poetry, Chinese scroll painting is thought to be “an aesthetic highpoint in the cultural history of human civilization.”

Calligraphy and scroll paintings are created much the same way, often utilizing the same brushes and inks. Since painting and calligraphy share many of the same materials and techniques, the relationship between the two art forms has always been a close one in China. Calligraphy is a central part of Chinese painting and often is included on the scroll or rice paper.

Chinese paintings are generally placed in one of four categories: Religious, Portraits, Landscapes, or Flora and Fauna. Religious paintings usually represent Buddhas and [Taos](#) Gods. Portraits depict courtesans, emperors, and villages from the past. Landscapes and Flora and Fauna paintings portray the central place of nature in Chinese thought.

Traditional Chinese paintings seem to be very similar to one another, as the art has been bound by tradition and techniques taught with strict guidelines and characteristic elements. However, the Chinese believe that painting is an art given by God. Each painting must represent the inner nature of the artist, the brush carrying with it the artist’s own message. The painter must have a high standard of virtue and mind. So while at first, each painting may seem similar to others, it is a greater representation of the artist’s inner peace and inspiration.

Chinese Dynasties

The history of China is divided into dynasties that represent the changing families or clans of rulers who governed China during a particular time. Sometimes, art in China changed when the ruling parties of China changed, and art historical styles are often described by “dynastic characteristics.” Here are some of the important dynasties in Chinese art history.

Western Han	206 BC-9 AD	During the Han Dynasty, painting started to grow and become very popular. Paper was invented, and the depictions of depth, width, and spaces were achieved.
Eastern Han	25-220 AD	
Northern Wei	386-535 AD	
Tang	618-906 AD	Portrait paintings gained popularity during the Tang Dynasty.
Northern Sung	960-1127 AD	The royal academy of art was established during the Sung Dynasty, and painting is considered one of the greatest achievements in Sung art.
Southern Sung	1127-1279 AD	
Yuan	1279-1368 AD	
Ming	1368-1644 AD	



Religious Paintings

*Having experienced tens of thousands of hardships;
Two feet treading on thousands of demons;
Palms upright, shaking heaven and earth;
In the air stands a giant Buddha.
(Master Li Hongzhi's poem Hongyin)*

The great Lord of Buddhas is saving all beings.

[Buddhism](#) probably arrived in China near the end of the 3rd century AD, and the religion found popularity in both the private and imperial lives of the Chinese. *Bodhisattvas* are beings who have reached the knowledge of enlightenment that, once realized, will permit them to become *Buddhas*. Bodhisattvas choose to remain in the world in order to help all other beings attain release from physical existence, and as such often appear as compassionate saviors or protectors.

When portrayed in paintings, the image of Buddha shows people what it looks like to have achieved *Nirvana*, or total bliss. He is shown as calm and loving, usually with a soft smile and radiant energy. He is often wearing flowing robes, sashes, and ornaments. When seated, the figure is shown cross-legged. The left hand, placed open on the knee, is a gesture indicating charity. Sometimes, Chinese religious paintings will show scenes of Buddha at key moments in his life, or illustrate his teachings. Since Buddhists believe that anyone can be on the path toward Enlightenment, these visual images of the Buddha along his own path are a helpful addition to the writings that people study.



Landscape Paintings

For at least a thousand years, the Chinese have been painting their landscape. Historically, it is believed that the love of nature is inherent, or a part of the soul of a Chinese artist. Kuo Hsi, a famous 11th century Chinese painter of landscapes stated, "An artist should identify himself with the landscape and watch it until its significance is revealed to him."

Landscape paintings have traditionally been China's favorite theme, depicting poetry in nature, or the "nature of nature." While the painting may be of a mountain, there will be many other elements of nature that invite the viewer to wander in their own imagination through the landscape.

Literally translated, the Chinese characters for landscape mean "mountain and water." Almost all Chinese landscape paintings depict mountains and water, generally a river. The mountains symbolize long life; water symbolizes happiness. When together, mountains and water symbolize a long happy life.

When placed in a landscape painting, the human form, is in size and perspective, much smaller, and often dwarfed by the images of nature. Mountains are large within the context of the painting, indicating their importance in Chinese life.



Portrait (or figure) Paintings

Paintings of figures, or portrait paintings, have a long history in China, dating as far back as the Tang Dynasty (618-906 AD). Monarchs and members of the ruling class would commission portraits of themselves to hang during their rule, and to remain as a reminder of their dynasty after they died. Portraits of the dead were often painted on the tombs of individuals or hung at altars in the homes of relatives, as the Chinese believe that death is only one part of life, and those who have passed can come back to affect the lives of the living.

Today, portrait paintings give the viewer a glimpse of the past, telling the stories of individuals and their lives - what they wore, how they were entertained, or how they spent their time. Often, portrait paintings tell a story of a noble or mythological figure in Chinese history. They are another method for telling the history of China and its people.



Flora and Fauna Paintings

The Chinese as a culture have great respect and appreciation for the subtleties and beauty of nature, and this is reflected in their art. Flowers and animals are of equal importance to man and mountain. During the Sung and Yuan Dynasties (960-1368 AD), great strides were made in Chinese paintings, and the main subjects for Sung paintings were mainly animals, pets, or plants and flowers.

Many items of nature have deeper meanings to the Chinese. For example, the peony symbolizes wealth and distinction and is a wish for good fortune. Paintings of peonies are often hung in the home for good luck, and in the office for good business. The crane represents longevity and the wisdom that comes with age. Bamboo symbolizes perfection and has the characteristics of strength, ideality, modesty, nobility, and gentleness.

When painting nature, whether landscape, animals, or flowers, the artist is always seeking the ultimate, essential character of the subject, and attempts to bring out the true spirit of the subject in a natural way.

top to bottom:
Mountain-Bridge-Hut, Listening to Rain, Spring Flower.
 left: *Great Buddha*

Vocabulary:

Buddhism - a religion founded in India during the 6th century BC and introduced to China around the 1st century AD. Buddhism teaches that cravings and desires cause human suffering and hence, continues the cycle of death and rebirth. Buddhists believe that humans should instead live a moderate, moral, and meditative life that will end suffering and bring enlightenment, or nirvana. Achieving this enlightened state is the ultimate goal of an individual practicing Buddhism.

Calligraphy - means "fine writing". During the third and fourth centuries, handwriting with a brush became an art form in China, and considered a higher or purer form of individual expression than painting.

Falun Gong - a Chinese spiritual discipline that includes exercise and meditation. Its principles are based on truth, compassion, and tolerance. The practice of *Falun Gong*, also called *Falun Dafa*, began in China in 1992 and today is practiced by over 100 million people in forty countries.

Taoism - a Chinese mystical philosophy.

Classroom Activities:

Find China on the map. Discuss Chinese Dynasties and the influences the leaders of those dynasties had on the people of China and its place within the great countries of our world. Look at these influences within the context of art history.

Discuss the concept of human rights. Look at the history of human rights and human rights abuses in China. Discuss or have students write about the influence and control the government has over the people of China. Compare and contrast the rights of humans in other Asian countries, like South Korea and Japan. Discuss the concept that art can be healing. How does this apply to the situation in China, or specifically to Ms. Zhang Cuiying's situation?

Find examples of great artworks in the four main categories of Chinese paintings: portraiture, landscape, flora/fauna, and religion. Compare the artworks - how are they the same? How are they different? Does the viewer experience the same thing when looking at a painting like *Spring Flower* by Zhang Cuiying as when looking at *Red Poppy* by Georgia O'Keefe? Look at color, texture, and perspective. Have the students write about the unique differences and similarities between the paintings.

When visiting the gallery:

As you look at each of Ms. Zhang Cuiying's paintings, think about the following: What materials were used to create this painting? What colors did the artist use and why? How is nature depicted in the painting? Does this painting seem peaceful and has the artist captured the essence of the subject in the painting?

Pay careful attention to the perspective of Ms. Zhang's paintings. How are mountains portrayed in comparison to human figures in landscape paintings? How is perspective used in western painting as compared to Chinese painting?

Discuss the use of calligraphy in the paintings. How and what does it add to the uniqueness of the painting?

Sources for information:

Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL, *Dynasties: Masterpieces from the Chinese Collection of the Norton Museum of Art*, Teacher Resource Packet.

<http://library.thinkquest.org>

<http://www.thegalleryofchina.com>

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The Isla Center for the Arts at the University of Guam

<http://www.boston.com/mfa>

<http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu>

<http://www.culturevulture.net>

<http://asiasocietymuseum.com>

The Golden Brush, Collection of Zhang Cuiying's Paintings, ISBN: 957-552-680-5.

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A STATE AGENCY
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