

Chinese Landscape Scrolls

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Purpose:

The target grade of this Art lesson is middle school students in the 6th grade. Students will create a landscape painting in a traditional Chinese style.

Students will:

- Explore and discuss images and writing from Chinese artists, comparing Chinese landscape artwork to Western art
- Paint their own landscape painting using similar Chinese techniques
- Embellish their artwork with a personal seal

Essential Questions:

- What are some elements found in a landscape painting? Could they be considered symbolic?
- What are some of the Taoist beliefs?
- How are these beliefs depicted in Chinese landscape paintings?
- In what ways do Chinese and Western landscape paintings differ?

Materials:

- Descriptive text on *Mountains of the Immortals* and *The Fanghu Isle of the Immortals*
- Pictures of various landscapes and gardens
- White construction/watercolor paper (8.5"x 11")
- One long piece of white paper at least 8.5" wide, such as shelf paper
- Black ink
- Black, red, and gold tempera paint and brushes
- Pencils and erasers
- Plastic cups to hold water
- Mixing trays
- Glue
- wooden dowels
- String/ribbon
- Potatoes, cut in half
- X-Acto knives
- Construction paper (12"x 18")
- Scissors
- PowerPoint presentation of images and information

Lesson Introduction:

Ask students to define the word "landscape," considering how natural elements contribute to that definition.

The Chinese word for landscape is *shanshui* (pronounced "shan shway"), meaning "mountain and water." Read the information on *Mountains of the Immortals* and *The Fanghu Isle of the Immortals* and have students identify these elements of a Chinese

landscape: mountains, trees, waterfalls, clouds, a Taoist temple, immortals, and a crane. As you locate these details, discuss their possible symbolic significance.

Ask students to determine whether these scenes are taking place in an imagined or actual location.

Discuss and review Taoist beliefs based on learning from 6th grade Social Studies curriculum.

Compare the two images to Western art by discussing their composition, perspective, colors, material, and format.

For example: Western paintings, like photographs, tend to present images of landscapes from a fixed point of view with a mathematically constructed illusion of recession, or perspective, which makes space appear to recede toward a single "vanishing point." Chinese landscape paintings use a moving perspective based on the notion of three distances (near, middle, and far – students should know this as foreground, middle ground and background) which allows the eye to move between various pictorial elements without being limited to one fixed, static point of view. Thus, the viewer is encouraged to ramble through the landscape image.

Activity:

Part 1 – Landscape Painting

- Ask students to choose one of the above paintings and make a list of its details.
- Encourage them to imagine entering the landscape, thinking about the following questions:
 - ◆What natural and man-made things do you see?
 - ◆What would you like to explore?
 - ◆How does it feel to be standing under the soaring peaks?
 - ◆What sounds, smells, and textures surround you?
 - ◆Is anyone else with you in the landscape?
- Then students will paint a landscape on a horizontal piece of white construction/watercolor paper. Start with gold paint diluted in water as a wash. While it dries, students can create three different gradations of gray using the black ink. With the black and grays, they can add the details of the landscape.

Part 2 – Creating a Seal or Chop

- In East Asian art, a person's signature is often stamped with a personal seal. Students can make their own seal with a potato. Students may want to research Chinese characters for their seal. Their design will represent their signature on their scroll. Students will sketch ideas for their seal or use the sketch or symbol they created in social studies class. Explain that sketches should be kept simple as they will be carving in a very small space.

1. The design the student decides to use needs to be drawn, in reverse, on the surface of the potato. First draw the design on tracing paper then turn the paper over to see its reversed image.
2. The design is carefully cut out of the potato with a plastic knife. Cutting along each side of the line to be removed at a slight angle, creating a v-shaped cut.
3. When the students are ready, tell them to press the seal into red tempera paint and try printing it on a scrap of paper. If a clear impression does not result more may need to be cut away. Then, have students stamp it onto their paintings.

Part 3 – Creating the Class Handscroll

- Collect all of the landscapes and attach them to a long piece of paper. (or make several smaller ones with 5-6 landscapes)
- Leave five inches on either end of the paper for the wooden dowels. Since handscrolls are read from right to left, roll the scroll around the left dowel. Attach a piece of string to the right side of the long piece of paper.
- Place the rolled handscroll on a long table; as small groups of students unroll it, view the immense landscape. Hang it up in the classroom across a long wall.

Evaluation:

- Group critique
- Art project rubric

Adaptation:

This lesson can be adapted for higher grade levels by having students write a poem based on interpretation of Chinese landscape paintings to be included on the scroll, creating individual hand scrolls and/or using gum erasers to create their seal so it can be used over again.

Lower grade levels based on time, either can eliminate Part 2 of the activity, or can have a few choices of Chinese characters to create their personal seal. In addition, simple landscape templates for these students may need to be created to trace or use as a reference while they are painting.

Standards:

- Compare and contrast visual forms of expression found throughout different regions and cultures of the world.
- Analyze and demonstrate the stylistic characteristics of culturally representative artworks.
- Recognize and demonstrate the qualities and characteristics of craftsmanship in original works of art.
- Interpret selected works of art based on visual clues in the works.
- Compare the ways that selected ideas and concepts are communicated through the perspective of visual art and through the perspectives of other academic disciplines.

Mountains of the Immortals

The style of this handscroll intentionally imitates much earlier landscape paintings of the Northern- and Southern-dynasties period. When China was under the control of the foreign Mongol government, this style represented communion with a distinctively Chinese cultural heritage. The reference to an older painting style is strengthened by the use of bright mineral pigments to color the mountains. This highlights the conception of the mountain as the material form of vital energy, the same concept that allowed the minerals found in mountains to be used as ingredients in elixirs of alchemy.

Chen Ruyan's work is a classic depiction of an immortals' paradise. The visual journey through the painting begins with the Taoist temple nestled in the mountains at the right of the scroll. Further on, an immortal sits in a clearing next to a zither and magical fungi and watches a young attendant dance with cranes, symbols of longevity. In another clearing to the left, two more immortals walk among auspicious animals and plants, while a third immortal rides above them on a crane.

Chen Ruyan was an associate of several famous Yuan-dynasty landscape painters known for their connections with Taoism, including Ni Zan (1306–1374), who inscribed this painting. Chen aided in the downfall of the Yuan government and served the new Ming dynasty until he was executed for an unknown offense in 1371. At the beginning of the Ming dynasty, this was already his most famous work.

The Fanghu Isle of the Immortals

Fanghu (literally, "square jar") is one of three mythical island homes of immortals traditionally thought to lie in the sea off the east coast of China. Fanghu was a common theme in Chinese painting, and this hanging scroll depicting it is one of the finest. Belief in this island dates to at least the third century B.C., when the first emperor of China sent an expedition into the eastern sea in the hopes of making contact with beings who could teach him the secrets of immortality. This expedition remains one of the more tragic events in Chinese history: since immortals were believed to have eternal youth, the emperor sent an embassy of young boys and girls to communicate with them. None returned. Largely because of this event, Taoists came to believe that Fanghu and the other islands either lay beyond violent seas that prevented mortals from finding them or rested on the backs of great tortoises who were constantly in motion, so that the mountains had no permanent location.

Wang Yun depicted the mythical Fanghu rising from such an ocean. In this scroll, a precariously perched, oddly-shaped rock formation rises forcefully from surging waves. The other islands can be seen in the background through mist. The island is inhabited by immortals, whose red-and-green palaces with gold roofs resemble Taoist temples nestled in the folds of the rock. The rest of the mountain is an ideal landscape adorned with magical plants and trees, misty vapors, and mysterious caverns from which waterfalls descend. The inscription in the upper left by the artist indicates that this hanging scroll was painted for a Taoist named Helao and based on an older Song-dynasty composition.



Wang Yun (1652◆1735 or later)

The Fanghu Isle of the Immortals (detail)

Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign, dated 1699

Hanging scroll; ink and colors on silk

142 x 60.3 cm



Chen Ruyan

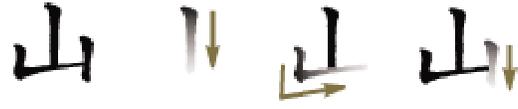
(c. 1331◆1371) **Mountains of the Immortals** (detail)

Yuan dynasty, late 14th century

Handscroll; ink and colors on silk

33 x 102.9 cm

The Chinese character **SHAN**: mountain/s



The Chinese character **SHUI** (*pronounced "shway"*): water, river/s, stream/s

