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China Lesson: The Tang Poets and Landscape Art

Purpose: To have students experience Chinese poetry from the Tang Dynasty and landscape art from throughout the Chinese dynasties.

Essential Questions:

1. What was the role of poetry during the Tang era?
2. How is Chinese landscape art unique?
3. Who are some of the most popular Tang poets?

Rationale: Students will understand that the definition of ‘skilled’ and ‘scholar’ in ancient Chinese society was different than in today’s U.S.

Materials: Copies of poems for students (see Works Consulted)

Images of landscape art (copies for students and images to project to the class)
Basic Classroom supplies

Activities:

This lesson would best fit in after learning of Confucius and Confucian ideals that become a permanent part of Chinese culture.

1. Begin with a discussion about what the students think *should* be known and tested for a very important position in society.
2. After some discussion, review with the students what was required for the civil service exams in ancient China and the influence of Confucius. Be sure to stress the important role of poetry among the scholars (the ability to create art will probably not be an answer for number 1 among the students).
3. Review the basic structural requirements of the Tang poetry.
 - couplets or quatrains
 - 5-7 syllables per line
 - rhyming of the last syllable of each line
 - parallelism with each line
4. This structure is extremely rigid, but students could try to write their own poetry mimicking those requirements.
5. Next, students should read poetry by several Tang poets. Three to consider are Li Bo, Wang Wei, and Du Fu. These are most often anthologized and should be relatively easy to locate. (See Works Consulted.)
6. One exercise that is truly interesting is to compare an exact translation of the Chinese characters with an English translation (or two if available) of the same poem. It is interesting to see how translators fill in the gaps between the words. That may be an interesting exercise for students to experience: How would they create a ‘complete’ English version of the Chinese poem. (NOTE: This could develop into an interesting conversation with the students about what is lost or altered in translation.)
7. Students should recognize the style and content of these poets as well as draw any comparisons to those Confucian ideals.

8. In the late Tang Dynasty Chinese landscape painting became a popular art form among scholars. This art form continued throughout the dynasties. Show students several examples of these works of art. These are also readily available on the web. See attached pages and note most of these are from the Song Dynasty or later because most of the Tang pieces have not survived. Students should also be able to see the emphasis on nature rather than the individual in these pieces.
9. Often poets would place their poems on pieces of landscape art. Be sure to also draw the students' attention to the lack of color, the simplicity of the line, and the emphasis on shading.
10. Assign Poetry Illustration Project.

Assessment:

See the attached Chinese Poetry Project

Grade Adaptations: Target Grade: 9-12 literature or humanities class

The amount of reading could shift per grade level and ability level. Students could illustrate their own poetry rather than one of the Tang poets for the project. Also, students could work in groups if the scope of the project appears too daunting.

State Standards:

From English/Language Arts: Communications, Writing Applications, Literary Text, Reading Comprehension Standard

Works Consulted

“Chinese Poems,” 13 March 2006. <http://www.chinese-poems.com/>.

“Landscape Paintings in Chinese Art.” 2006. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 12 March 2006.

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/clpg/hd_clpg.htm

Murphey, Rhoads. East Asia: A New History. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2004.

“T’ang Dynasty.” Anthology of Chinese Literature: From Early Times to the Fourteenth Century, Volume One. Ed. Cyril Birch. New York, Grove Press, 1965. 217-241.

“T’ang Poetry.” The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces: Expanded Edition, Volume One. Ed. aynard Mack. New York: W.W. Norton, 1995. 1300-1330.

Chinese Poetry Project

50 points

The great Chinese poets often displayed their poetry on paintings of landscapes or other objects from nature. In fact, Wang Wei was more famous from his paintings than his actual poems. Unfortunately, few have survived.

Assignment: You will illustrate one of the ancient Chinese poems that we have discussed in class. It should resemble the ancient Chinese paintings in subject and style. With the subjects, remember that it should be a landscape or nature. In style, the Chinese were very minimalistic—the colors are muted and the lines are simple.

Remember that the poem that you are illustrating should appear on the illustration. (Your chosen poem will obviously be in English.)

Note the examples below. You may also wish to consult art history books on your own. I will have some available for you before and after school and during the L-Blocks.

Of course, you will not be only evaluated on artistic ability. The evaluation will be on the appropriateness of the illustration to the poem, the neatness of its appearance on the page, and the obvious effort put forth.

The size of the illustration should be 8 1/2 x 11 for ease of transportation.



Old Trees, Level Distance, Northern Song dynasty (960–1127)

Guo Xi (Chinese, ca. 1000–ca. 1090)

China

Handscroll; ink and color on silk; 13 3/4 x 41 1/4 in. (34.9 x 104.8 cm)

Gift of John M. Crawford Jr., in honor of Douglas Dillon, 1981 (1981.276)



Old Trees, Level Distance (detail of left half)

Guo Xi (Chinese, ca. 1000–ca. 1090)

Handscroll; ink and color on silk; 13 3/4 x 41 1/4 in. (35.9 x 104.8 cm)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

John M. Crawford, Jr., Collection, Gift of John M. Crawford, Jr., in honor of Douglas Dillon, 1981 (1981.276)



Finches and Bamboo

Emperor Huizong (Chinese, 1082–1135, reigned 1101–25)

Handscroll; ink and color on silk; 11 x 18 in. (27.9 x 45.7 cm)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

John M. Crawford, Jr. Collection, Purchase, Douglas Dillon Gift, 1981 (1981.278)



Summer Mountains, Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), 11th century
Attributed to Qu Ding (Chinese, active ca. 1023–ca. 1056)
China
Handscroll; ink and pale color on silk; 17 7/8 x 45 3/8 in. (45.4 x 115.3 cm)
Ex coll.: C.C. Wang Family, Gift of The Dillon Fund, 1973 (1973.120.1)

Below

The Simple Retreat, Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), ca. 1370
Wang Meng (Chinese, ca. 1308–1385)
China
Hanging scroll; ink and color on paper; H. 53 1/2 in. (136 cm), W. 17 3/4 in. (45 cm)
Signed: "The Yellow Crane Mountain Woodcutter Wang Meng painted this for the lofty scholar of the Simple Retreat"
Ex coll.: C.C. Wang Family, Promised Gift of the Oscar L. Tang Family (L.1997.24.8)



松山樓上景
卷之二
畫



Twin Pines, Level Distance, Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), ca. 1300
Zhao Mengfu (Chinese, 1254–1322)
China
Handscroll: ink on paper; 10 1/2 x 42 1/4 in. (26.7 x 107.3 cm)
Inscribed by the artist
Ex coll.: C.C. Wang Family, Gift of The Dillon Fund, 1973 (1973.120.5)