

Editor's Note: Images featured in this essay are similar to AP Art History curriculum images which could not be re-published due to permissions issues. A link to these AP images are included in each entry.

AP Art History and Chinese Art

By Lisa Hirkaler

The AP art history curriculum identifies 250 works students are required to know, spanning 20,000 years of history and cultures across the globe. The list includes thirty works of Asian art.

I teach in a rural fringe district and am committed to giving my students “equal access” to non-Western artistic traditions, and have taken several courses with NCTA, including the 2011 China study tour. My study tour began with Shanghai at night (with its river of lights), the gardens at Hangzhou, Chengdu, the Yellow Mountains, the ancient capital at Xi'an, and the museums and the contemporary scene in Beijing. In the beautiful national museums and historical spots, I was moved as I came face to face with six of the required Chinese works in the AP art history curriculum. My observation is that the College Board (and NCTA) chose these works with care to provide a single masterpiece from each of the significant historical periods, representing most major styles and media. So my understanding of the AP curriculum is that it takes us sequentially through historical periods, but allows us to experience a different medium in each. These do not provide a complete picture of Chinese art, but they are representative.

There are no significant opportunities for my students to encounter Chinese or other examples of Asian art. However, my students are open, curious, and hungry to understand. When facing Chinese art, they seem first drawn to structures of meaning that appear at first unfamiliar. I encourage this opening. The earliest artifact from China is the jade Cong from the Neolithic Liangzhu culture. The Cong is highly abstract, with a circle inside a square. Terra Cotta Warriors from the Qin dynasty situates each component in highly structured political, economic, artistic, and military relationships.

We try to understand aspects of structure, such as Dao, connecting one with nature, as evident in later landscape paintings of mountains, trees, and rivers; or Confucian ethical narratives for order, as apparent in the scroll paintings with people, leaders, and ways of life. Having opened the door through curious exploration of shifts in cosmic and religious meaning, materials, methods, and visual identifiers become fundamental to the real understanding of art history for high school students. We try to understand how the Neolithic artist imprinted the jade with subtle meaning using the simplest tools, string, and sand to create stylized facial details on each corner. We reflect on casting methods for large sculptures. We research traditional ink painting on paper or silk, traded and re-worked between China and Japan. We find images of mudras (hand positions found on Buddha) on Christian iconography gathered from the Silk Road. Prophets such as Buddha remind one to pray and be mindful and peaceful; ancestor worship places the individual in continuity with heaven and earth. My students and I make a pact to tread lightly with gentle hearts open to listening, research, and understanding another, and with the utmost respect of cultural nuances that are new-and-not within their experiences. I arrange field trips to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (hereafter “the Met”) in New York City. Firsthand experiences in front of authentic artwork are crucial to learning and understanding art history. With patient meditation on both abstract and concrete aspects of each object, the world slowly opens up to them.

The students create a journal/sketchbook capturing a visual understanding of the following works as we learn about the five largest religions across time, digital notecards, actual index cards with information and images, or essays based on past AP art history questions from previous exams. The students are offered participation grades for critical issues and answers to peer questions.

In the essay that follows, I will offer brief observations on the period and medium of each object to introduce what I see as the structure of the AP selection, and end with ideas for reading the interplay with tradition in the works of contemporary global artists. The chart on page ten is a specific organizational guide for Asia art image included in the essay.



AP Art History Image #7. Similar to Jade Cong. Liangzhu, China. Prehistoric stone

Image: Tube (cong) with masks Google Arts and Culture
<https://tinyurl.com/yyv6r6dt>

Original College Board image:
<https://tinyurl.com/y29yy5r4>

Global Prehistoric: Jade cong. This semiprecious stone, with a circle in the center representing the heavens and sky, has squared edges that represent earth; the four corners of the world on the cylinder convey possible spiritual aspects of heaven and earth as the earliest evidence of duality. The jade was carved using string, sand, and primitive tools, yet has excellent facial details on each corner. Neolithic period anthropomorphic works feature art that memorializes those of importance in the Liangzhu culture. Carved and uncarved stone provide understanding to students, as they convey an understanding of the difficult and time-consuming process of carving. Ask students in-depth questions. Why was this person selected to receive this object? What is the significance of the patterns in connection with your understanding of spirituality?



AP Art History Image #193. Terra cotta warriors of the first Qin emperor. Qin Dynasty. Terra Cotta clay.

Image: Terra cotta army, pit no. 1, mausoleum complex of Qin Shihuangdi (d. 210 B.C.), Lintong (Xi'an), Shaanxi Province, China. Qin dynasty (221–206 B.C.). Photo by Maros Mraz, 2007. Photo via *Wikimedia Commons*

Available at the Metropolitan Museum of Art site:

<https://tinyurl.com/y4khwkqq>

Original College Board image:

<https://tinyurl.com/yygwaj9q>

Qin dynasty: Terra cotta clay. Statues of terra cotta warriors represent the highly structured political, economic, artistic, and militaristic Qin period. The burial tomb of the first Qin emperor is filled with thousands of clay soldiers and horses. The warriors are fully painted and secured with bronze weapons and chariots. Offering clay and examples of press mold objects, as well as souvenir replicas that I picked up in Xi'an, China, helps students understand the process of clay mold design and making. Given that some students have not had firsthand experiences with East Asian art or museums, artifact samples are vital to understanding sculpture. Watching documentaries on Terra cotta warriors, such as the following link on YouTube from BBC News, teaches the preservation and conservation process of unearthing Terra cotta warriors, which is essential to understanding the vastness of this space.

“Terracotta Army: The Greatest Archaeological Find of the 20th Century,” *BBC News*, YouTube,

<https://tinyurl.com/ybkc5aqr>.



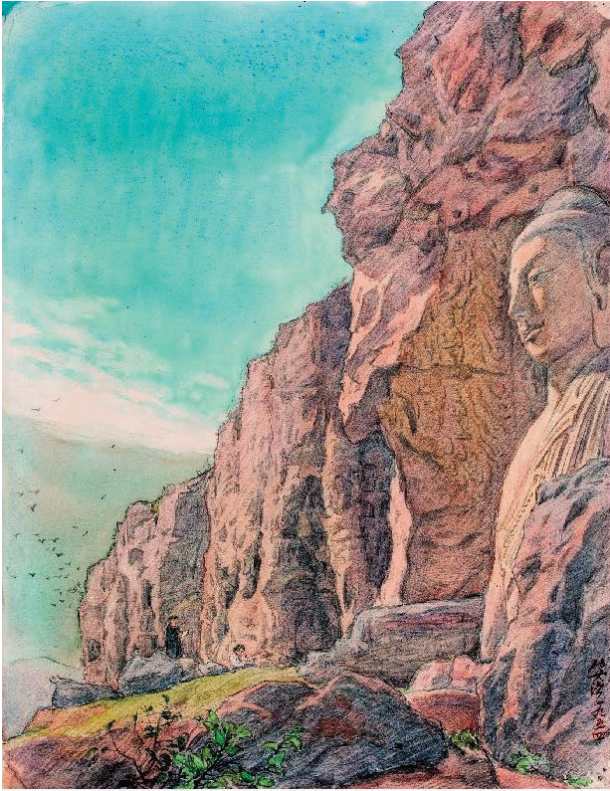
AP Art History Image #194. Funerary banner of Lady Dai (Xin Zhui). Han Dynasty.

Image: T-Shaped Painting on Silk
China Modern Contemporary Art Document, Hunan Provincial Museum
<https://tinyurl.com/y5h2qzmn>

Original College Board image:
<https://tinyurl.com/yygwaj9q>

Han dynasty: Silk textiles. The funeral banner of Lady Dai (Xin Zhui) of woven and painted silk was found draped over a coffin. This robe banner, fit for an empress, with images of heavenly birds and earthly dragons, offers evidence of the yin-yang of duality. Her mortality is evident in the painting on the banner with her ascent into heaven and her immortality with the sun and moon. I bring in silk to teach students about various textiles. I offer examples of hand silk scarves and embroidery for students to touch the material, as this will help students understand the complexity in textiles. Weaving, embroidery, and painting on fabric are demonstrated. We watch videos such as this one by the Asian Civilizations Museum on silkworms making silk.

“Silk Making in China,” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgWVJGRsC90>.



AP Art History Image #195. Similar to Longmen Caves. Tang Dynasty

Images:

Left: Yungang Giant Buddha

Long Museum West Bund via Google Arts & Culture:

<https://tinyurl.com/y45zfr84>

Right: Monk, probably Ananda (Anantuo)

Tang Dynasty (618–907)

Metropolitan Museum of Art

<https://tinyurl.com/y3gzxx8>

Original College Board images:

<https://tinyurl.com/yygwaj9q>

Tang dynasty and Northern Wei dynasty: Cave carving. “Longmen Caves” houses a colossal Buddha, bodhisattvas, Fengxian Temple, and guard protector warriors. The forty-four-foot Buddha of Limestone is in a cave. In situ (on site) works are discussed and compared to art removed from its original location. Buddhism and the Silk Road are re-researched and traced on a map to gain an understanding of how the essence of this spiritual sculpture inspires future sacred statues across cultures. The students keep a religions journal; Buddhism is a crucial component, with its noble truths and paths to enlightenment. The *mudras* (hand positions) show up in Christian iconography. My students compare and contrast stone figurative sculptures in marble from the ancient Near East (actually, Southwest Asia), Egypt, Greece, and Rome to the panoply of ancient Buddha sculptures. Romanesque, gothic, and baroque works featuring images of Jesus are examined and contrasted with pictures of early Tang Buddhas. We also discuss patrons of sacred works, such as Empress Wu Zetian, and the artistic women who elevate the arts over time and cultures.



AP Art History Image #201. Similar to *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*, Fan Kuan. Northern Song Dynasty

Image: *Travelers crossing a mountain stream*, Freer and Sackler Galleries, Washington, DC, via Google Arts and Culture.
<https://tinyurl.com/y6bpopac>

Original College Board images:
<https://tinyurl.com/yygwaj9q>

Song dynasty: landscape painting. “*Travelers among Mountains and Streams*” by Fan Kuan in ink and colors on silk is part of a larger body of work. Beyond the symbolism of strength in the mountains and cleansing waters as nature’s bounty and resilience resides our power to sit and, as in Dao, “be one with nature.” The power of *Qi* is also in the observation, practice, and process of painting atmospheric Asian landscape ink work on silk, rolled in scrolls, or on paper. An understanding of East Asian and Chinese traditional ink painting on paper, silk, and a narrative in scrolls is required, so I share authentic examples of landscape scrolls, 2-D flat lithographs of ink paintings, and screen miniatures of both. I encourage my students to try ink watercolor wash painting, touch a real scroll painting, and handle a Japanese screen, as well as atmospheric lithographs. The students study basics in Confucianism as ethical narratives for order with people, leaders, and ways of life in the scroll paintings. Beyond the understanding of religious shifts, materials, methods, and specific visual identifiers are keys to social and traditional belief. Sharing the following YouTube videos on Met art exhibits is also crucial to understanding landscape painting and 2-D narratives in ink on paper or silk. Before visiting the Met, we watch these videos on Chinese landscape painting:

“Streams and Mountains without End: Landscape Traditions of China,” *Beijing Review*, YouTube,
<https://tinyurl.com/y5o74h4k>.

“Ancient Art Links--Chinese Landscape Paintings at the Metropolitan Museum,” YouTube, <https://tinyurl.com/y5zkb999>.



AP Art History Image #204. David Vases, Porcelain Clay. Yuan Dynasty.

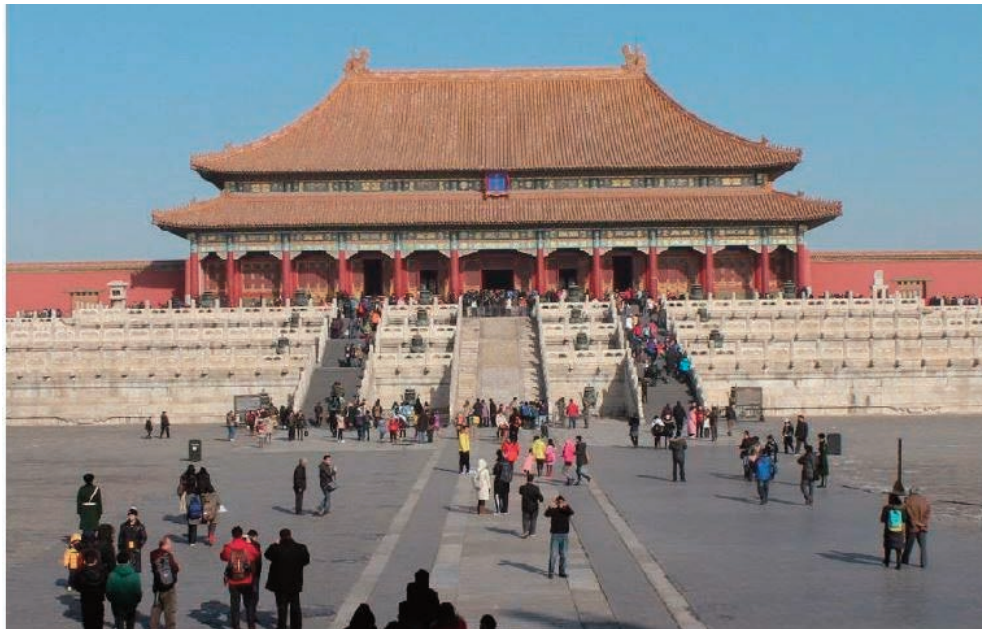
Image: The David Vases, British Museum via Google Arts and Culture
<https://tinyurl.com/y48uk568>

Original College Board images:
<https://tinyurl.com/yygwaj9q>

Yuan dynasty: Porcelain clay. The David Vases porcelains (Percival David) are white porcelain with cobalt blue underglaze and a clear overglaze to seal the shiny surface. Dragons, representing earth and power, cover the body, and there is a phoenix rising around the necks with lotus symbols representing spiritual rebirth, reincarnation, and resilience. There are leaf patterns from nature to keep us connected to earthly realms and to male and female energies. These vases were created to sit upon the altar of a Daoist temple. The following links are comprehensive observations of the David vessels including videos and essays from the China Online Museum and Khan Academy. Students are offered clay with blue underglaze to try painting on this surface.

“The David Vases,” *China Online Museum*, accessed April 24, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yyqw5yb5>.

“The David Vases,” *Khan Academy*, accessed April 24, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yc5u9d99>.



AP Art History Image #206. Forbidden City, Hall of Supreme Harmony. Ming Dynasty.

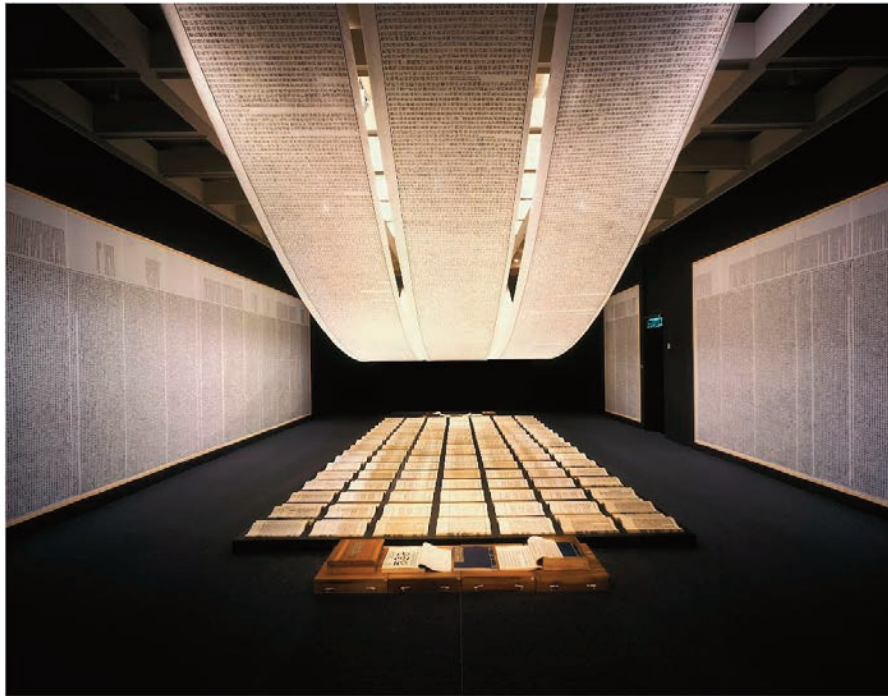
Image: Imperial Palaces of the Ming and Qing Dynasties in Beijing and Shenyang, Namhansanseong World Heritage Center via Google Arts and Culture
<https://tinyurl.com/y4nxqh92>

Original College Board images:
<https://tinyurl.com/yygwaj9q>

Ming dynasty: Architecture. In Beijing during the Ming dynasty, stonemasonry, marble, brick, wood, ceramic tile, and fully painted wooden soffits and doors adorned the spaces. Students explore an aerial view of the Forbidden City on iPads with links to short videos and essays about this architecture. NCTA offers a comprehensive site (nctasia.org) that connects to several resources, including *Asia for Educators*, that features history, art, culture, geography, and literature links.

We examine the protective dragons, colorful roof soffit designs outside the Hall of Supreme Harmony, and spectacular ceilings inside the Palace of Tranquility and Longevity. Students are encouraged to compare and contrast the marble sculptures, including stone scholar rocks, to another culture and list possible references to the sacred and philosophical scholars of the time across the globe. Understanding maps and floor plans is essential to the study of architecture, and this image maps out the progression of entering a sacred portal; again, the students are encouraged to find similar aspects of progress in Greco-Roman and Christian city complexes. Each progression through the floor plan offers a red gate to go deeper into the Forbidden City. The Noon Gate in the central portal was for the emperor. Other paths were for lower ranks. Students try to understand the auspicious colors and meaning behind some of the flowers and birds. At the end of the compound, the largest wooden building in China, Hall of Supreme Harmony, features seventy-two carved columns. In the emperor's throne room, we discuss the murals, floral patterns, carvings, gold gilding, and perspective in the paintings. See the link to the Asian Art Museum video of the Forbidden City from Khan Academy below.

“The Forbidden City,” *Khan Academy*, accessed April 24, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yc4zgvgug>.



AP Art History Image #229. A Book from the Sky. Xu Bing

Image: A Book From The Sky, Hong Kong Museum of Art via Google Images and Culture
<https://tinyurl.com/y5s4qp9g>

Original College Board images:
<https://tinyurl.com/y52j9qyj>

Global Contemporary: Installation. Xu Bing creates mixed-media installations, such as “A Book from the Sky.” This installation of woodblock prints in scrolls and books features characters that are not as they seem. The characters are his creation; my students enjoy deciphering some of the words in art forms that look like Chinese characters but are English words. Students respectfully conclude that understanding the calligraphy content and context is complex. The essence of the works as sacred texts is evocative, as the books are offered from above and sit as an offering below. His square word, English calligraphy, is featured in the below list of YouTube video resources by Smart History.

I teach a lesson on ink painting with authentic brushes, ink blocks, and paper to allow students to try their hand at this art form. I share examples of block prints, antique Chinese books, scrolls, and screens.

The following quotation from the Met’s digital catalog entry on “A Book from the Sky” should assist student thinking about the work: “This set of four books forms part of an eponymous installation first displayed in Beijing in 1988. The books contain 4,000 invented characters that cannot be decoded, raising fundamental questions about the Chinese identity and its relationship to the written word. The artist believes that writing is the ‘essence of culture.’ His subversion of it speaks to our need to communicate and the dangers of distorting or eliminating intended meaning.”¹

“Xu Bing, Book From The Sky,” Khan Academy *Smart History*, YouTube, <https://tinyurl.com/y68hxm8k>.

“Xu Bing: Square Word Calligraphy Classroom,” *ColumbiaNews*, YouTube, <https://tinyurl.com/y45vnm5n>.

“The Chinese Garden Court at The Metropolitan Museum of Art,” *The Met*, YouTube, <https://tinyurl.com/y3nflmn6>.

Correlation of Period with Media and Method in AP Art History Chinese Selections	
<u>Period</u>	<u>Medium/Method</u>
Global Prehistory	Jade/Stone
Qin Dynasty	Clay, Terra Cotta
Han Dynasty	Silk, Textiles
Tang Dynasty	Caves, Grottos
Song Dynasty	Ink Painting
Yuan Dynasty	Clay, Porcelain
Ming Dynasty	Architecture, painted, stone, ceramic
Global Contemporary	Mixed Media Installation

Chart created by author.

Finally, in approaching these objects from China and Asian traditions, it is almost an ethical issue to take the time to examine and appreciate the brilliance of each individual piece. We teach our students to afford the same careful attention and time to non-European traditions and objects as we give to European traditions. But what I have tried to argue here is that the significance of the Asian objects in the AP exam goes beyond the sum of their individual brilliance. There is an argument about the material underpinnings of art and the rich, dense texture of artistic media, embodied in single masterpieces, that invite students to explore more. Students gain a deeper understanding of the art after trying to use the material, so encourage students to explore with traditional materials and techniques in new ways. Those are the two things I want to convey to my students. First, take your time; really look at the auspicious symbols and materials inherent within each dynasty. Second, research and appreciate the intricate power of the Jade Cong, of Lady Dai's funeral robe; appreciate the confident expression of the Terra Cotta Warriors and the David Vases, the subtlety of ink and canvas in *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*, and the allegorical expertise of the *Forbidden City to the Book from the Sky*. Accept this invitation to explore Asian art with these structures within the material categories: stone, clay, fiber, cave in situ carving, paint on paper or silk, ceramics, wooden architecture, and contemporary installations.

Resources for Asian Art Sources on the Web:

Asia For Educators: afe.easia.columbia.edu

Online Museum Resources on Asian Art: afe.museums.easia.columbia.edu

The Metropolitan Museum of Art: www.metmuseum.org

Smarthistory: <https://smarthistory.org>

NOTES

1. "Book from the Sky, ca. 1987–1991," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, accessed April 24, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/y4ahfz5c>.

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