



Source: <http://tiny.cc/y5s5bx>.

Looking for Confucius at the Asian Art Museum

By Gregory Rohlf

Students in my East Asian civilization course learn about Daoism in part by practicing Tai Chi with a credentialed Tai Chi master who brings both a saber and a sword to class for a demonstration. Our outdoors practice session produces some Daoist awareness of the natural world; many students comment later that they had heard things while practicing that they had not heard on campus before, such as the wind in the trees or birds singing. We learn about Zen Buddhism in part by practicing seated meditation, a session that I lead and one that produces inappropriate groans and giggles as students struggle with sitting motionlessly and emptying their minds. Here, too, students grasp that seated meditation isn't so much about "getting in touch with yourself" as it is a strenuous martial-like art. In both cases, these insights are gained only by physically doing something outside the conventional classroom setting. But what sort of experiential learning can help us understand Confucian thought? Perform a ritual at the Rain Dance Altar on the River Yi and sing on the way home? ¹ Work on our filial piety by not remonstrating with parents when they have made their intentions clear? ² In part, this article is an account of what we learned about Confucius by looking for him in the vast collection at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. It turns out that we learned more about East Asian civilization and Confucius by not finding the great sage amid the rows of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The field trip is part of a general education course at the Stockton campus of the University of the Pacific, a private comprehensive university with an enrollment of about 3,800 undergraduates. The course has an average enrollment of about twenty-five; the fall 2013 class was almost all freshmen, and a majority were enrolled in science or preprofessional health science programs. The profile of these students is not what you might expect for a private school. Slightly more than half of this group was from the struggling inland agricultural counties between Sacramento and Modesto. About one-third of our students receive need-based federal aid and/or Pell Grants, a figure that makes Pacific comparable to public institutions in California. What I do with this group of primarily eighteen-year-olds is probably generalizable to a range of age groups and knowledge levels at both public and private institutions. High school students will do well with activities like these, as will advanced undergraduates who have had more training. One of the main recommendations that the literature on field trips has produced is that they can be designed to support both general education and more advanced, critical inquiry. Placing students in an external, content-rich location simply makes the learning more memorable.

Our field trip takes us to the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, the largest museum in the United States focusing on Asian art. It opened in 1966 in Golden Gate Park and moved to the grandiose, former Public Library building across from City Hall in 2003. With vast, high-ceilinged, Classical spaces complete with inscriptions, art collections on three levels, art and musical demonstrations, a learning center, a gift shop, and a fine café, students who experience this vast, world-class collection and space come away impressed and exhausted. What we do at the museum has been designed around their huge permanent collection. Only a few educators will have access to this kind of collection, but the main lesson, I think, is to design field learning experiences around the collections that are available. At a museum with an Asian-themed collection as part of larger holdings, for example, learning might best be organized comparatively. Although actually experiencing a museum in "real time" is the ideal experiential learning experience, students learn much from doing the same assignments I created with some of the outstanding virtual Asia collections that are featured in the two sidebars accompanying this article.

Our day at the museum begins when it opens at 10:00 a.m. and wraps up around 3:30 p.m. We start with a docent-led tour of the collection, after which students complete two learning exercises at their own pace. These exercises are designed with two goals in mind. Learning Exercise 1 is intended to encourage in-depth learning and critical evaluation of an object they choose. Students pick two objects to sketch and describe in detail. Using a rubric, they answer a number of questions based on what they learn from reading captions and infer about the object.³

Learning Exercise One: Rubric for Asian Art Museum

	Some questions to consider	Things found through looking	Findings from further reading
Physical Features What does it look like?	Make a sketch of the object. What color is it? What materials were used? Was it handmade? Other physical features?		
Design Is it well designed?	Describe the features that interest you. Does the form serve a function? How is it decorated? Other design elements?		
Purpose/Function From its physical features and designs, can you guess what the artifact was used for? Explain how you arrived at your conclusion.	For daily use? For use in rituals or ceremonies? For the display of wealth? For blessings? For burial?		
The People Who used it?	Everyday folk? The elite? Royalty?		
Themes Any themes of interest?	Were symbols used? Meaning of the symbols? What is the technology/technique used? Has its initial use changed? If yes, how? Is it valued by collectors? Why? Why is it valued by historians?		
Explore! Your own questions!			

Online Asia Museum Experiential Learning

The museum sites below feature extensive and well-organized Asian collections and are easily navigable.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art: The Metropolitan Museum of Art features an Asian collection of over 53,000 items. The online collection features an option to refine a search by selecting an option from their who, what, where, and when features. Their online collection can be found at <http://tiny.cc/y6r5bx>.

The British Museum: The British Museum features a vast amount of Asia-related items in their online collection. Much like the Metropolitan, the British Museum features an option to explore their collection by culture, place, people, and material. Go to <http://tiny.cc/z7r5bx>, and then scroll down to “Browse objects.”

Asian Art Museum of San Francisco: This museum has an online collection that allows users to search from a collection that is specifically Asian. Users are able to directly search for an item or browse the collection by the specific type of art. The Asian Art Museum’s online collection is located at <http://tiny.cc/s8r5bx>.

The Smithsonian Institution: The Smithsonian has two galleries, the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, which form their museums of Asian art. Their online collection offers over 11,000 viewable items, as it aims to present the best in Asian art while enabling visitors to walk through a vivid timeline of world cultures. To search the collection, go to <http://tiny.cc/c9r5bx>.

e-Museum of the National Museums, Japan: The National Museums of Japan have compiled an e-museum that pertains to all things Japan. Each item has been uploaded in high resolution, which allows extensive inspection of each item, and the entire website is available

in English. The well-organized site makes a virtual Japan museum trip easy. The online collection can be accessed by going to <http://www.emuseum.jp/>.

Art Institute of Chicago: The Art Institute’s Asian collection offers works spanning nearly five millennia. It includes 35,000 objects of archaeological and artistic significance. To view the collection, go to <http://tiny.cc/gas5bx>, and click “View all online works” on the right side to begin your search.

American Museum of Natural History, Division of Anthropology: The AMNH has an online collection of over 55,000 objects and textiles that represent the diverse people of Asia. The collection features an extensive selection from Siberia, China, and the Philippines. To access the online collection, go to <http://anthro.amnh.org/asia>.

The Cleveland Museum of Art: This online collection contains specific sections on Chinese, Indian and Southeast Asian, and Japanese and Korean art. Each section has a significant amount of artifacts, and the collections are easily navigated. To view these collections, go to <http://tiny.cc/dbs5bx>, and select a specific collection to begin.

Philadelphia Museum of Art: The online Asian collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art features nearly 4,000 items in their East Asia Art section and an additional 1,000 items on India and the Himalayas. The online collection also features the option of filtering searches by country and curatorial departments. To view the collection, go to <http://tiny.cc/mcs5bx>.

Questions are organized around categories such as physical features, design, the purpose of the object, the people who used it, and a number of additional questions. Favorite subjects for this exercise include Tang dynasty figures, Shang and Zhou-era bronzes and jades, and a “money tree” from Sichuan. Students finalize the exercise after the field trip by using their textbook and other sources to learn more.

Learning Exercise 2 is a scavenger hunt that encourages exploration and discovery. Its 2013 iteration had twenty-eight objects, including a representation of Confucius (the oldest piece of jade in the collection), an oracle bone, an image or sculpture of a horse, a weapon used by a warrior, a samurai suit of armor, and so forth. Learning Exercise 1 is mainly an independent exercise, whereas Learning Exercise 2 is typically done in groups. Students collaborate and explore the museum to find all of the objects, which takes about an hour.

The experiential component of museum-based learning occurs mainly through the three-dimensional viewing of objects. For example, students are often surprised to see how large certain objects are, such as Japanese haniwa figurines, some of which stand about three feet tall, or some Tang ceramic figures. They remark, too, on what it feels like to be in proximity to jade or bronze objects more than 2,000 years old. Students learn about the politics, technology, and art history of Shang and Zhou dynasty bronze vessels in their readings or in lecture, but until they see a vessel from a few inches away, particularly a large one weighing seventy or eighty pounds or more, the object remains as flat and small as the two-inch black-and-white photograph in the textbook. The perfect museum experience would allow students to observe and even participate in the casting of such vessels. Nevertheless, up-close viewing delivers a good measure of experiential learning, which, combined with the excitement and socializing of a day away from campus in a museum, helps make the total experience more memorable.

When I first organized the field trip, I gave little thought to its purposes, alignment with learning outcomes, or role in the course itself. In my mind, visiting a world-class art museum required little explanation or justification for what it would add to a history of civilization course. It was intrinsically valuable and worthy of the students’ time and attention, and it was also, fun. I later realized that for the field trip to be educationally effective and memorable for all students, more time had to be allocated to preparation and debriefing. The pretrip and posttrip learning were just as important as what we did at the museum. I also started collecting anonymous written feedback after the trip, in part to revise and improve the field trip but also to collect evidence of what students were learning.

The students’ self-assessments, completed during the first class

meeting after the trip, provide strong evidence that the field trip enhances classroom learning. Based on the students’ work in their sketching exercise and on the scavenger hunt, there is evidence they gain greater proficiency with a range of topics within the history of East Asian civilizations, in part through the joy and challenge of discovery. A few examples of scavenger hunt items include an image of a domestic cat or dog, something made of gold, cooking illustrations, Korean porcelain, a horn made from a human thigh bone, and a suit of armor.

When asked to cite an example of how the field trip “reinforced what we have been learning in class,” twenty of twenty-five students (80 percent) in the 2010 group cited Buddhism as a main example of what was enhanced by the field trip. Fourteen of twenty students (70 percent) in the 2013 group wrote that they had learned how images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas changed across regions and cultures. This is an expected outcome because Buddhism is a core part, indeed perhaps the core, of the Asian Art Museum’s collection. In this, the collection is well within the norm. As others have written before in *Education About Asia*, looking at Buddhist figurative art is one of the main entrée points to



Asia for Educators

Online Museum Resources on Asian Art (OMuRAA)

The Online Museum Resources on Asian Art (OMuRAA) is an initiative of the Asia for Educators Program at Columbia University. OMuRAA’s purpose is to make the wealth of visual materials now available on the websites of many museums and arts-related educational institutions better known to teachers and students of Asian studies by cataloguing them in “teacher-friendly” and “student-friendly” ways. With this aim, OMuRAA identifies online visual resources—including collections, databases, digital images, libraries, archived websites of special exhibitions, online presentations of focused collections, and websites for teaching with and about art—and indexes them in ways that are familiar to teachers and students in world history, world literature, and general art courses. The OMuRAA website is available at <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/>.

Learning Exercise Two: Asian Art Museum Scavenger Hunt

Created by the East Asian Civilizations Class, HIST 30, University of the Pacific, Fall 2013

Item	Item number	Comments
The oldest piece of jade in the collection		How old?
A Shang Bronze		What is remarkable about it?
Something that was used by an ordinary person, not a member of the social elite		What is it? How was it used?
An oracle bone		What does it say?
Something from the Han dynasty		What is it?
A haniwa		Comments?
A weapon used by a warrior		Describe it. From what dynasty/country?
Lacquerware from Zhou China		Describe it
A landscape painting that has a couplet written on it		Describe it.
An art piece containing Japanese hiragana or katakana (phonetic syllabary)		Describe it
An image of a domestic dog or domestic cat (a pet)		What is it?
Something made of gold, i.e. not covered in gold leaf		What is it?
An image of a terracotta warrior		Describe it.
A stupa		Describe it.
A flute made of a human thigh bone		Why a human bone?
Something that dates from the Age of Division / Three Kingdoms period		What is it?
Images of cooking in the kitchen		Describe it.
A depiction of Confucius		Describe it.
A depiction of the historical Buddha, Gautama Siddhartha		What is it?
A depiction of a Bodhisattva		What is it?
A depiction from the <i>Tale of Genji</i>		Describe it.
A depiction of Laozi or Zhuangzi		What is it?
A money tree		Describe it.
A drinking cup made of a human skull.		Why a skull?
A painting of Li Bo		Describe it.
A Tang dynasty ceramic camel		Describe it.
A piece of Korean porcelain		Describe it. Is it celadon?
Something from a Korean tomb		Describe it.

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Asian art in both museums and temples. An introduction to motifs in this art—such as characteristic attributes of sculptures of the historical Buddha—provides specific criteria that help students identify the historical Buddha and the best-known Bodhisattvas, making this art more accessible and meaningful.⁴ When the 2013 group was asked for an example of what they learned about Buddhism by looking at art, four of twenty students described three characteristics of the historical Buddha: the *ushnisha* bump on the skull suggesting great wisdom, the central forehead spot suggesting his extended vision, and the pendulous earlobes suggesting his former bejeweled life of an aristocrat. Others wrote of Hellenistic influence found in Central Asian images of the Buddha, of the significance of the meditation pose, or the earth-touching *mudra* symbolizing the moment of enlightenment.

Based on student feedback, especially since 2010, I have narrowed the learning outcomes for the field trip to focus more on Buddhism. For example, during trips in 2007, 2009, and 2011, our docents led students on a broad “highlights of the collection” tour rather than a tour focusing on Buddhist art. These tours were highly reviewed and helped students with the scavenger hunt, too. Yet our experience of “looking for Confucius” as part of the scavenger hunt led me to request a “Buddhist art” tour. Because the collection is so strong in Buddhist paintings and artifacts, aligning the pedagogy of the field trip with the collection itself made sense. In prefield trip class meetings, we focused on the historical origins of Buddhism, its main ideas, and how it spread, with an emphasis on historical and sociological analysis. We considered the construction of the Sökkuram temple in Korea and how it recreated the cave temples of Central Asia and China. Sökkuram is not a cave; it’s a “cut-and-covered” construction rather than an excavated space, illustrating in a very accessible fashion how ideas and practices evolved as Buddhism traveled across the continent. Additionally, I worked with the superb docents of the Asian Art Museum in the weeks before the tour to design a visit that omitted the broad introductory material that we had already covered in class and focused instead on motifs in Buddhist art. This paid off in student mastery of some of these motifs in the work they turned in after the trip. Overall, the main takeaway from the students’ work is that the field experience must be carefully designed around the strengths of the field site. Multiple visits to the site, both with and without students, are helpful to craft and revise learning exercises and outcomes.

Yet what are we to do with Confucius? A few 2013 students reported finding an image of Confucian scholars on a vase in a display case separate from the main galleries, but not an image of the man himself. That Confucius is barely to be found in the collection nearly sparked a revolt in 2010. Students were frustrated and angry about a wild goose chase for none other than Confucius, whose thought is one of the main organizing frameworks of the class. If he was so important, why wasn’t he front and center in the museum galleries? His absence in the collection certainly provoked some critical thinking about museums and the presentations of art and East Asian civilization. Although Confucian thought is a foundational component of East Asian civilization, and we spend about two weeks on it at the beginning of the course, the museum’s collection had only one representation of Confucius himself, in contrast to the many images of the historical Buddha and Bodhisattvas. Students trickled back to our meeting point with grimly quizzical looks on their faces. Our conversations at the museum that day were “teachable moments,” as the students tried to reconcile my assertions of Confucius’ importance with his absence in the visual record presented in the museum. That we arrived at this paradox after a rather taxing search of the three floors and vast galleries of the museum made the moment that much more memorable. We came to the realization together—for 2010 was the first time we had done the scavenger hunt, and I, too, did not know where to find him—that instead of looking for Confucius’ face, we had to look for his ideas. Our conversations took us back to the beginning of class, the very first of the *Analects*, for example, and reviewed that Confucian ideas were conveyed via texts that were memorized and recited. For Confucius, learning and repeating what one has learned is a pleasure. In this way, Confucian ideas were not manifested artistically via representations of the sage himself. Once we got the ball rolling on this understanding of our task of “finding Confucius,” students generated answers quickly. We agreed that one can view calligraphy as evidence of Confucius’ scholarly influence on the tastes and interests of East Asian elites. We found the influence of Confucius in the patriarchal family and ethical systems, such as in representations of women, including the binding of women’s feet in China. Another student then mentioned the reverence for ancestors and grave goods in the museum collection and how these spoke to the patrilineal family system that Confucius influenced.

One can also look for Confucian ideas in landscape paintings, as Shelley Drake Hawks suggested in this magazine in the spring *EAA* 2013 issue.⁵

Yet, when I took students back to the Asian Art Museum in 2011, I removed the “image of Confucius” from the scavenger hunt. It seemed unfair to make them look for a single piece of art in a display case off the beaten path, a vase that looked more or less like the other vases in the case and had an image of scholars just inches high. The scavenger hunt went just fine, with some students finding all the objects without too much trouble. The best-organized students divided up the list and made quick work of the hunt, dutifully recording where they found: a Korean garment or an oracle bone, both of which reinforced classroom learning. But without the drama, the heightened focus on the missing sage, the scavenger hunt had lost a bit of its punch and, I think, some of its effectiveness. One of the main reasons to take students on a field trip is that the experience is more memorable than an ordinary class meeting. Survey data support the general observation that field trips are memorable experiences: “. . . museum field trips—regardless of type, subject matter, or nature of the lessons presented—result in highly salient and indelible memories. These memories represented evidence of learning across a wide array of diverse topics.”⁶

In the case of my East Asian civilizations class, one hopes for a similarly durable learning experience. One student reported, for example, “Thanks for the opportunity; I really enjoyed the exhibits and the tours. Honestly, I don’t think I would have ever gone in my life, but now I think I might go back someday in the future.” Looking for Confucius and not finding him led us to broader, critical insights that also, I think, made the experience more memorable. In fall 2013, I put Confucius back into the scavenger hunt and organized our postfield trip class meeting around explaining his absence. Students wrote about what they learned from the museum collection, but our conversation turned to what museum collections are, how they themselves are part of history, and how they are interpretive. Our consideration of these questions was well supported by the museum’s web page, which has a historical description of Avery Brundage, the collection’s main benefactor, a section we had not read as a class up to that point. We hopped online and did a quick search for more information about Brundage and found, courtesy of Wikipedia, that he had had a career in construction in Chicago and as the somewhat-controversial chair of the International Olympic Committee from 1952 to 1972.

In that moment, we all gained a clear sense of the “historical constructedness” of the museum’s collection. An individual collector with his own tastes and interests, who was also involved in the international politics of sport, helped shape what we observed in the museum as a representation of East Asian civilization. As in our search for Confucius, this insight was not planned but can also be effectively included in future versions of the field trip. We see that there are different learning outcomes and different levels of proficiency to be gained with each part of the experience, too. Training students to become proficient in identifying motifs in art is one such outcome. Critical learning can also be achieved in students’ understanding of how the museum’s collection is interpretive and can be analyzed as an interpretation in both the context of our course and East Asian history. Overall, well-planned experiential learning exercises—with pretrip and posttrip phases included as intrinsic parts of the whole experience—can thus support both general education and more advanced critical learning. ■

NOTES

1. See 11:26 in *Confucius, The Essential Analects*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006), 32-33.
2. *Ibid.*, 4:18, 12.
3. The rubric is based on one developed by the Singapore Asian Civilizations Museum.
4. Douglas P. Sjoquist, “Identifying Buddhist Images in Japanese Painting and Sculpture,” *Education About Asia* 4, no. 3 (1999): 27-36; Frank L. Chance, “Which Buddha Is This Anyway? Notes on Identifying the Enlightened Ones,” *Education About Asia* 17, no. 1 (2012): 17-19.
5. Shelley Drake Hawks, “An Environmental Ethic in Chinese Landscape Painting,” *Education About Asia* 18, no.1 (2013): 13-18
6. J.H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierkling, “School Field Trips: Assessing Their Long-Term Impact,” *Curator* issue no. 40 (1997): 211.

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