

LESSONS

Religious Ideas and Arts: Middle School Lessons

By Anne Murphy and Frederic Wong

Educators within the museum setting have a unique opportunity to introduce new experiences and content to students from a variety of schools and backgrounds. In Seattle, the opening of the Seattle Asian Art Museum (SAAM) as a part of Seattle Art Museum in 1994 has provided an environment for educators in Washington State to explore Asian art as a part of the curriculum. How can a museum reach out to the educational community most effectively? Seattle Art Museum has answered this question through an active school program, which provides teachers and students with a wide variety of ways to interact with the Museum's collections. Each program is designed to give teachers a way to bring art to the classroom and bring the classroom to the Museum.

The following sample lessons and accompanying images from the Seattle program are designed for middle school teachers and students. It is possible to teach these lessons using the images included with the lesson plans, or to visit local museum collections to find similar objects in local collections. One does not need to visit a museum, however, to bring art into the curriculum. Magazine pictures, pages from old art books, and other images can be utilized to enrich every curriculum and bring the arts of Asia alive in the classroom.



Information on photos used in this lesson

Photo 1, Lesson 1, Part One
BUDDHA
 Pakistan or Afghanistan, Gandhara region,
 Kusana period c. 2nd-3rd century
 Dark gray schist
 Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection
 Seattle Art Museum Collection



Photo 2, Lesson 1, Part Two
FIGURE OF BUDDHA
 Thailand, early Mon period, 7th-8th c.
 Limestone
 Thomas D. Stimson Memorial Collection
 and gift of Hagap Kevorkian
 Seattle Art Museum Collection



Photo 3, Lesson 2
**THOUSAND-ARMED, ELEVEN-HEADED
 GUAN-YIN**
 China, Ming Dynasty, 16th century
 Gilt Bronze
 Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection,
 Seattle Art Museum Collection
 Photos courtesy of Seattle Art Museum

LESSON ONE: IMAGES OF THE BUDDHA FROM SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will carefully observe and describe art objects
- Students will note differences and similarities between the objects
- Students will draw conclusions from their analysis of the art objects
- Students will understand the way cultures influence each other across great distances and time periods
- Students will identify symbolic elements in art
- Students will identify relationships between religious narrative, belief, and art

PART ONE

What are some of the symbolic features that are evident in this sculpture of the Buddha?

STRATEGIES

art history/history of Buddhism
 symbolic analysis
 storytelling
 map reading

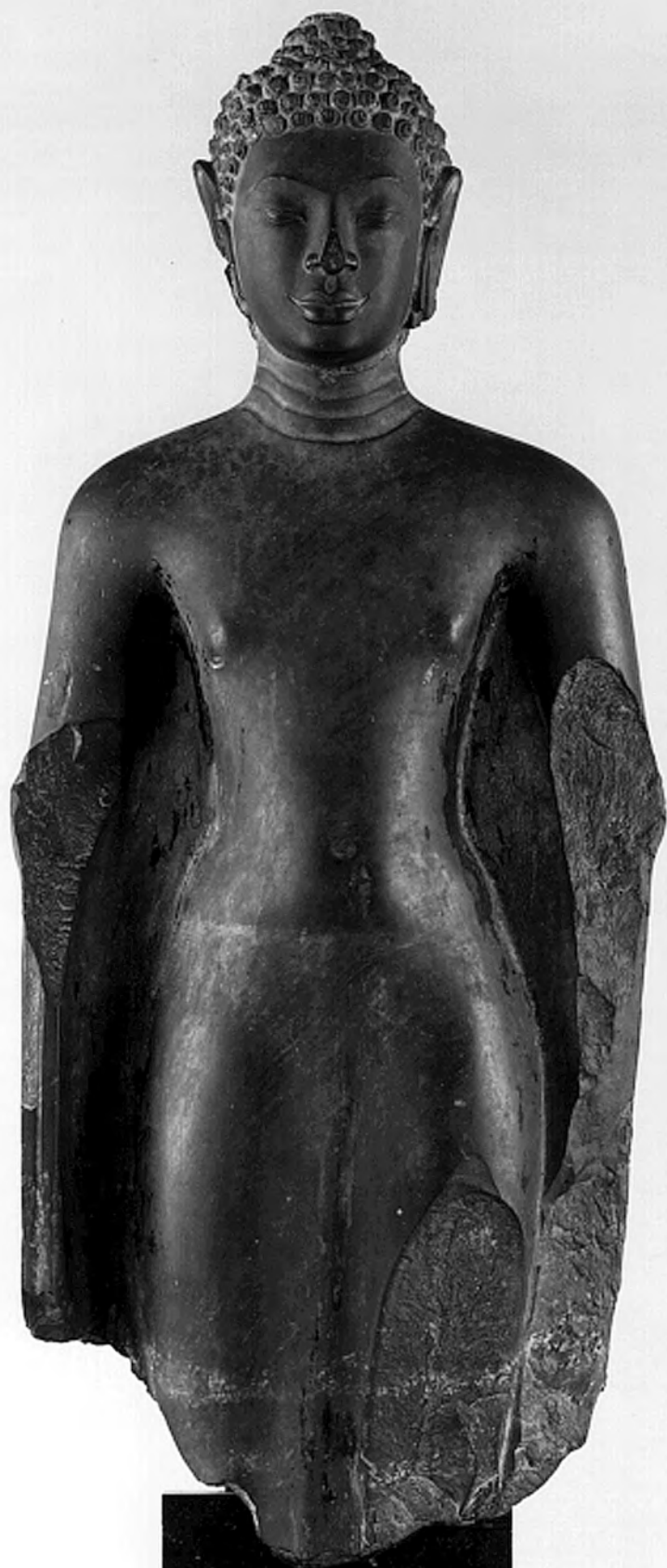
- Show the location of Pakistan and Afghanistan on a world map (one which highlights Asia). Note that today the majority of people in both Pakistan and Afghanistan are not Buddhist, but follow Islam. This part of the world was Buddhist 1500 years ago, before Islam came to this part of the world.
- Show the figure of the Buddha from Pakistan/Afghanistan.

What can you tell about this person from looking at him?

- Is he rich? poor?
- Is he angry or sad?
- What is he doing?
- What kind of personality do you think he has?

- Does anyone recognize who this is? This is the Buddha. Who was the Buddha?

The word "Buddha" means "one who has woken up." This term is used to describe a man named Siddhārtha Gautama, who lived in Nepal and North India approximately 2500 years ago. Siddhārtha (whose name means "one whose aim or purpose is wisdom") was a prince. When he was born, a prophecy was told to his father that Siddhārtha would either be a great king or a great religious leader. The father, hoping that his son would follow him as king, kept Siddhārtha within the confines of his palace. He believed that if he caused his son to believe that the entire world was filled with the kinds of happiness and delight available in the palace, he would not abandon his life as a prince and future king to pursue a religious life. One day, Siddhārtha became filled with curiosity about the world around him. He convinced his charioteer to bring him outside the walls of his father's palace. He saw four things while outside the palace: an old person, a



LESSONS

person suffering from disease, a corpse, and a wandering monk in a state of repose. Having seen the great suffering that exists in the world, Siddhārtha left his family and riches behind to find an answer to the questions: why is there suffering in the world, and how can it be stopped? Siddhārtha became an ascetic. Ascetics deny themselves comforts. His goal was to detach himself from the world and the suffering within it and find truth outside of it. After many years of following this path, Siddhārtha decided that this was not the way to find ultimate truth about existence. He began to eat food, something he had denied himself for many years, and went to sit under a *bodhi* tree. He began to meditate, and achieved absolute understanding, or nirvana. That is why he is called “Buddha”—one who has woken up to the truth. The Buddha taught that it was important to follow the “middle” way, which requires that one neither become an ascetic nor live a life of luxury. After achieving insight into the nature of the world, the Buddha became a great teacher, and the teachings he gave the world have spread throughout the world—to many countries in Asia, such as China, Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam, and to countries in Europe and to the United States as well.

- There are elements of this sculpture which are like a kind of “secret code” that tell about the Buddha. Certain features describe this person as the Buddha and no one else. The Buddha had thirty-two marks (called *lakṣanas*) on his body that revealed that he was destined to be either a great ruler or a great religious leader. Two of them are:

uṣṇīṣa —the bump on the top of the head
ūrṇā —the tuft of hair between the eyes

Can students identify these markers? Why was it important to have specific signs of the Buddha’s importance? Do we use signs to describe people’s status and identity? Discuss the use of symbols and signs in dress and uniforms to make the concept clear to students. It is helpful to present photographs which contain images of people with symbolic markers.

- Can students identify anything on the sculpture that might tell us about this person? What else helps us to draw conclusions about this person?

THE POSITION HE SITS IN — the *padmāsana*, or lotus position—and his downcast eyes tell us that he is meditating.

THE LENGTH OF HIS EARLOBES tell us he **was** a prince—and therefore his ears were stretched down by the weight of his earrings—but the fact that they are empty tells us that he has given up his worldly possessions.

THE SIMPLE CLOTHING HE WEARS AND THE LACK OF ADORNMENT on his body tell us that he is not attached to worldly possessions.

THE DESIGN OF THE SCULPTURE, with persons at the bottom paying respect to the smaller figures of the Buddha, tells us that he was a respected man.

THE EXPRESSION ON HIS FACE tells us that he was at peace, not angry or sad. His eyes are half-closed in meditation.

PART TWO

How do these sculptures reflect similar and different cultures and ideas?

STRATEGIES

aesthetic analysis
 art history
 comparison/contrast
 history of Buddhism and cross-cultural contact across Asia
 map reading

- Find Thailand on a map of Asia. Compare it to where India is, and where Pakistan and Afghanistan are. Hypothesize on possible routes between India and Pakistan, and India and Thailand.

Give students a copy of the second image of the Buddha. This second image is from Thailand, and was made several hundred years after the sculpture from Pakistan/Afghanistan. Buddhism spread to Thailand from India long after the Buddha lived. How did ideas about the image of the Buddha transfer across time and culture? Some elements remained consistent, while others changed quite dramatically. This is true with many aspects of Buddhist culture and beliefs. At the same time, a core set of beliefs and iconography remained intact.

- Examine the two sculptures and compare them. Outline the similarities and differences on a chart:

Similarities	Differences
both wear robes	stone used to make each looks different

- Identify with students the elements of iconography that remained consistent across the transfer of Buddhism between cultures.
- Drawing exercise: Students can sketch the two pieces to gain a clearer sense of the aesthetic choices being made by the artists—in the Thai sculpture, the artist created a longer and leaner body, while the Gandharan piece emphasizes a fuller body. This can be tied into a general study of the figure across cultures. Include images from Ancient Egypt, China, the Americas, and Europe. How does each culture treat the figure aesthetically? Create a chart describing differences and similarities. This can then be expanded into a drawing exercise for the children. Students can create their own figure drawings and critique the aesthetic concerns informing their own work.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- (1) Examine images of the Buddha from a variety of cultures—what do the images have in common, and what is different? What are the aesthetic changes that take place in the portrayal of the Buddha?
- (2) Trace the spread of Buddhism from India on a world map. Discuss the importance of the Silk Road in the transmission of Buddhism, as well as other economic, cultural, and social customs, across Asia and Europe.



LESSONS

Lesson Two: Buddhist art from China

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will carefully describe an art object
- Students will identify symbolic elements in a sculpture and in their own creations
- Students will understand the various meanings of symbols
- Students will analyze the symbols in Chinese Buddhist art and determine their meaning
- Students will create symbols to express (1) concepts of their choice, and/or (2) themselves
- Students will use symbols to express ideas and convey information
- Students will understand how symbols are commonly used in American society
- Students will identify the technologies necessary to create art and other objects

PART ONE

Understanding symbolic elements of a sculpture

STRATEGIES

careful and guided looking
 aesthetic and symbolic analysis
 creating hypotheses and drawing conclusions
 understanding a visual language

- Present several objects or images and have the students describe them orally, as a group. Then present the image of Guan-yin and have students write a careful description of the object. Encourage them to include comments about the material used to create the object, the figure's expression and posture, the objects in the hands. What is it made of? What color is it? How old is it? Collect student responses and mount with the picture.
- Ask students to imagine what the figure is doing. Pair students to write a story about how he got so many heads and arms, or about how he uses the heads and arms. Students can present their ideas to the rest of the class.
- Some of the objects he is holding are:
 sun, moon, bell, conch shell, jewel, trident,
 lotus, wheel, begging bowl, *stupa*, rosary.

Imagine what these objects are for.

What would you name this person?

What is the meaning of the name?

PART TWO

How does a visual language express an idea?

STRATEGIES

art production
 aesthetics

- Ask students: How would you show the following ideas or feelings visually (with drawing, painting, or sculpture):
 compassion for the world (philosophy)
 celebrating difference (social studies)
 saving the natural world (science)
 caring for all living things
 unity of all things
 pain
 anger
 love

- Draw or paint one symbol you could use, or use clay or another material for a 3-D project.

Think about how you would do this if the subject of your work is a person: what can you add to the body that will show the qualities you want to express, for example: arms, legs, heads, bodies, postures, hand signals, expressions, objects.

Why? What would the expressions or objects stand for?

- Each student should explain his creation to another student, and then each should present the other's ideas to the class. Are there any commonalities? How are the students' ideas about symbols similar/different?

PART THREE

The Story of Guan-yin

STRATEGIES

art history
 art criticism
 world religion
 social studies
 storytelling

VOCABULARY

Bodhisattva: A *bodhisattva*, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, is a being who has achieved the knowledge and spiritual experience associated with nirvana, but has chosen to remain in the world in order to help other beings achieve enlightenment. Such beings are usually easily identifiable, as opposed to images of the Buddha, by their ornate dress and regal stature, which signify that they have not completely abandoned their involvement in the world and are like royalty in their status and importance.

- Relate the following version of the story of the Bodhisattva Guan-yin (Chinese) or Avalokiteśvara (Sanskrit) to the students.

Guan-yin means to see the sound, and therefore the condition, of the world. Guan-yin sits on a lotus throne and in a meditation position. The lotus symbolizes the enlightened mind. As the lotus grows from the muddy bottom of a lake, it emerges pure white, transcending the unclean mud. Guan-yin embodies active compassion. He has a thousand arms and eleven heads. His arms represent his efforts to reach out to the world and to identify with all living things, to share their suffering. Because of sharing, the world has less suffering. On each hand, one can find a slit that is actually an eye. With the thousand arms, and thousand eyes, Guan-yin symbolically sees into everyone's heart. The objects that he holds are symbolic Buddhist instruments, such as the sun and the moon, lighting the way out of the darkness of ignorance and fear.

The many heads express Guan-yin feeling the suffering of the world. Without seeing the details of the sculpture, it is difficult to know what is on each tier. There are three main heads: one is in a half smile (desire); one is in a frown (rejection, anger); the mid-



LESSONS

dle one is neither. They teach the believer to adopt the Buddha's middle path and to see the world without the distortion of passions.

One story that explains Guan-yin's many heads is the following:

When he saw the world filled with ignorance and suffering, he was filled with such anguish that his head broke. Amitabha, the Buddha of Endless Light, tried to restore his spiritual son's head. After several failures, he managed to endow him with eleven heads, the last in his own image. That is why the top head is actually a seated Buddha, held up by two arms.

■ Now that students are familiar with the story associated with the sculpture, ask them to "read" the sculpture in a new way.

■ Probe with the following questions:

After hearing the story of Guan-yin, do you think the sculpture is effective?

In other words, looking at the sculpture, do you get a sense of who Guan-yin is?

Compare what you thought of Guan-yin in Part 1 of this lesson with what you think about the sculpture after hearing the story associated with it.

EXTENSION

Teach about this object in conjunction with the images from Thailand and Pakistan/Afghanistan. Compare and contrast the objects. Guan-yin was a heavenly figure, whom people could call on for help in the world. In contrast, the Buddha was a historical person. Guan-yin is portrayed with elaborate decorations and adornment, while the Buddha is portrayed in simple dress.

PART FOUR

Symbols across cultures

STRATEGIES

social studies
art history
aesthetics

■ Discuss with the students: What are symbols? Symbols have the power to tell stories, and to condense information into a small space. Listening to the story of Guan-yin, we understand what the symbols represent.

■ As a review, have the class fill out the following chart in analysis of the Guan-yin sculpture:

SYMBOL	MEANING
lotus	
body position	
thousand arms	
eleven heads	
sun and moon	

■ Symbols are all around us in every culture. Ask students if they know of any symbols common in their own culture(s).

Write down the following categories on the board and ask for symbols that belong to each category. Here are some examples:

CATEGORIES	EXAMPLES
religion	cross, Star of David, lotus
business	Nike swoosh, McDonald's golden arches
math	plus, minus, times, equals, the unknown x, greater than
science	chemical elements
society	male, female, disabled, traffic signs, gestures
politics	flag, national anthem
sports	Olympic signs

Make up more categories.

■ While writing about the symbols on the chart, find out where and how often we encounter these symbols, and how people use these symbols. For example, to sell products, to help people, travel in the city, to establish religious or cultural identity.

■ Hands-on art activity: Create, by drawing or cutting paper, a symbol (incorporating animals, plants, etc.) to tell a story about yourself, about the special qualities that you have. Write a narrative to accompany the symbol. Compare with others in the class and look for contrasts and similarities.

ANNE MURPHY is former Museum Educator for Schools at Seattle Art Museum. She is currently a doctoral student at Columbia University and continues to work in the field of art and culture education.

FREDERIC WONG is an artist in traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy. At the Seattle Asian Art Museum, he guides children in exploring the art collection. He also trains the ArtStars Teen Docents to give public tours.