

Exploring Visual Narratives through *Thangkas*

Subjects: visual arts; social studies

Grade level: sixth grade and up

Time needed: two forty-five-minute class periods

Goal

Students will apply the composition, storytelling, and symbolism found in Tibetan Buddhist art to their own *thangkas*, expressing personal perspectives and visual narratives.

Essential Questions

What are *thangkas* and how do Tibetan Buddhists use them?

What are typical features of a *thangka*?

How can visual art forms like *thangkas* tell stories?

How can visual language express meaning?

How can a *thangka* illustrate one's own life?

Vocabulary

Avalokiteshvara: literally, “the Lord who Looks Down [from on high]”; the widely worshipped bodhisattva of compassion, who protects and saves all beings

bodhisattva: literally “enlightenment being”; a person who, inspired by compassion, vows to become a buddha for the benefit of all sentient beings

buddha: literally, “awakened one”; a being who has awakened to the true reality of existence and is thereby liberated from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. A buddha teaches others the path to enlightenment.

hierarchic composition: arrangement of figures on a picture plane to signify importance

hierarchic scale: visual use of proportion to signify importance

iconography: the science of identifying and interpreting symbols, themes, and subject matter in the visual arts; an artist's use of this imagery

icons: consecrated images of deities that have the power to confer spiritual blessings and communicate religious concepts

mandala: literally, “circle”; a palace visualized in meditation or drawn as a two-dimensional,

blueprint-like representation. The palace belongs to the deity residing at its center, the structure's apex. "Mandala" also refers to a cosmic diagram representing the entire universe.

thangka: a Tibetan-style painted or textile image, traditionally mounted in brocade, that conveys Buddhist concepts

visual narrative (also visual storytelling): a story told primarily through painting, photography, or other visual media

National Standards

National Core Arts Standards

Anchor Standard # 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard # 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard # 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

VA:Cr1.1.8a: Document early stages of the creative process visually and/or verbally in traditional or new media.

VA:Re.7.1.6a: Identify and interpret works of art or design that reveal how people live around the world and what they value.

VA:Re.7.2.6a: Analyze ways that visual components and cultural associations suggested by images influence ideas, emotions, and actions.

VA:Cn10.1.6a: Generate a collection of ideas reflecting current interests and concerns that could be investigated in art-making.

Common Core

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Background Information

Buddhism first arrived in Tibet during the seventh century CE. The distinctive form of the religion that developed there is still widely practiced on the Tibetan plateau and throughout the Himalayas and Central Asia. Tibetan Buddhists frequently use artworks during their religious practices: for example, they worship the figures depicted and learn from the stories told in paintings and sculptures. Tibetan artworks can portray Buddhist deities and important teachers from India and Tibet. They also can depict places in the Himalayas, such as important temples, as well as the elaborate palaces in which buddhas and other deities are understood to dwell.

Thangkas are Tibetan-style hanging paintings or textiles. Four parts comprise a complete *thangka*: the image; a textile frame, including a "door" at the bottom through which the viewer symbolically enters the image; a fabric overlay; and at the base, a dowel used to roll up the painting. The four-part construction allows *thangkas* to be easily transported and stored, as not all images are meant to be continuously displayed. Some *thangkas* are displayed only during special festivals or to help with specific teachings. *Thangkas* are hung in home shrines, temples, and monasteries.

Context

What is a life story or autobiography?

What are some ways in which one can tell his/her life story?

What are some examples of life stories that you have read, watched, or listened to?

Why is it important to share our life stories with others?

Discussion

Through group discussion, students will define and identify life stories. They will discuss possible mediums to document a life story, define the elements of a life story, and cite reasons why life stories should be communicated.

Instruction (Day One)

Present a digital or print image of Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara in the Sackler Gallery collection (search “Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara” at open.asia.si.edu). Discuss the following questions:

Describe

What do you notice in this artwork? What do you recognize?

What kinds of body positions, hand gestures, and facial expressions do you see?

Analyze

Who is the most important figure in this artwork? What makes you say that?

What emotions or personality traits are the figures expressing with their bodies?

How can you tell?

Interpret

Who do you think each of these figures is? What makes you say that?

How are the other figures connected to the central figure? What makes you say that?

Why do you think the central figure has multiple arms? What do the objects he holds tell us about who he is?

What does this artwork make you wonder?

Practice (Day One)

Invite students to brainstorm lists of important people in their lives in each of the following categories:

helpers/protectors

friends/family

teachers/role models

Have students select two or three people in each category. Ask the students: If you were to draw a symbol for each person listed, what would you draw and why? Ask the students to list their ideas or draw the symbols.

Then, ask the students: If each person you selected performed an action to represent him/herself, what would he or she do? What kind of body language—hand gestures, postures, facial expressions—

would express his or her personality? Ask students to list their ideas or draw the actions. The worksheets that follow this page may be utilized to assist the students with the brainstorm.

Next, invite the students to brainstorm about themselves. Ask the students: What symbols would you choose to represent yourself—your interests, hobbies, favorite things, etc.? If you performed an action to represent yourself, what would you do? What kind of body language—hand gestures, postures, facial expressions—would tell others about your personality? What are the reasons behind your choices? Ask the students to list their ideas or draw themselves. The worksheets that follow this page may be utilized to assist the students with the brainstorm.

Finally, have the students brainstorm their favorite places to visit. Ask the students: Why do these places have special meaning to you? The worksheets that follow this page may be utilized to assist the students with the brainstorm.

Application (Day Two)

As a final project, students will create visual narratives of their lives in the form of *thangkas*. A self-portrait bearing the symbols and bodily expressions (iconographic attributes) discussed above should be drawn largest and placed in the center of the composition. Friends/family should be drawn smaller and placed on either side of the central figure. Helpers/protectors should be placed at the bottom of the composition. Teachers/role models should be drawn smallest and placed at the top of the composition. All figures should feature their associated symbols and bodily expressions. A favorite place to visit or a favorite landscape should serve as the backdrop.

Students should be able to explain:

- how hierarchic scale communicates meaning
- how hierarchic composition communicates meaning
- how symbols communicate meaning
- how bodily expressions communicate meaning

Additional Resources

Books:

Blau, Tatjana and Mirabai. *Buddhist Symbols*. New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 2003.

Diamond, Debra, et al. *Paths to Perfection: Buddhist Art at the Freer|Sackler*. London: Giles Ltd., 2017.

Websites:

Rubin Museum of Art. "Educational Interactive Library: Explore Composition and Structure." Accessed October 20, 2017. http://interactive.rma2.org/interactives/explore-composition-and-structure/#main_slide.

Rubin Museum of Art. "Looking Guide." Accessed October 20, 2017. http://rubinmuseum.org/images/content/2014_Looking_Guide4.pdf.

Brainstorm One

Brainstorm a list of two or three important people in your life for each of the following categories. For each person, think of a representative symbol and body language/action. Write or draw your ideas in the spaces provided.

**List 2–3 People
Per Category**

**Symbol to Represent
Each Person**

**Body Language And/Or Action
to Represent Each Person**

Helpers/Protectors

Friends/Family

Teachers/Role Models

Brainstorm Two

What symbols would you choose to represent yourself—your interests, hobbies, favorite things, etc.? If you performed an action to represent yourself, what would you do? What kind of body language—hand gestures, postures, facial expressions—would tell others about your personality? What are the reasons behind your choices? Write or draw your ideas below:

Brainstorm your favorite places to visit. Why do these places have special meaning to you? Write or draw your ideas below:



Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara, from a four-part set of *thangkas*

Central Tibet, Lhasa, late 19th century

Mineral pigments on sized cotton; Chinese Qing brocade frame,
silk dustcover and ribbons; chased silver caps

H × W (overall): 26 × 50 in; (painting): 15 × 24 in

The Alice S. Kandell Collection, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery S2013.29.3