

LESSON PLAN

Ancestor Portraits: Family Legacy through Art



Subjects: Visual Arts, Social Studies

Grade Level: Middle School/Junior High, High School

Duration: One to three 45-minute sessions with extension activities

Dynasty: Qing (1644–1911)

Object Type: Painting

Themes: Power and Privilege; Daily Life and Folkways; Traditions and Belief Systems

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Portraits of Shi Wenying and Lady Guan

China

Qing dynasty, 18th century or later

Hanging scroll, ink, and colors on silk

83 1/16 x 44 3/4 in; 83 3/8 x 44 13/16 in

Purchase—Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program and partial gift of Richard G. Pritzlaff. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, S1991.120 and S1991.121

Objective

Students will be able to investigate and explain how portraiture communicates a person's legacy.

Essential Questions

- What are portraits and why are they made?
- How are symbols used to express personal qualities in a portrait?
- How do artworks express family relationships and memories?
- How do families use images to feel connected to past generations?
- How do artistic choices affect the message of an artwork?

Background Information

In China, a form of ancestor worship dates back at least to the Shang dynasty (1600–1050 BCE). There is ample evidence of Shang religious ceremonies in which kings made offerings and sacrifices to royal ancestors and also appealed to them for guidance about the future. Over time, this tradition evolved and became widespread in Chinese culture. Most traditional ancestor portraits were intended for family veneration as a way to honor and pay respect to a family member who passed away. Creating a portrait of the deceased and placing it on an altar in the home lets mourners see an image of the loved one. In the past, wealthy families and members of the imperial court commissioned elaborate commemorative portraits. In modern times, a photograph is a common replacement for an expensive commemorative portrait. Ancestor portraits are often made as a pair with a husband and wife portrayed individually. They are typically displayed during domestic ritual ceremonies, especially during the Chinese Lunar New Year. Some families also hang ancestor portraits on occasions when they want to report good news, such as introducing a new bride to deceased parents. Baskets of fruit, offerings of food, wine, money, and clothing, and sticks of incense might be placed in front of the ancestor portraits on a home altar.

This pair of paintings are ancestor portraits, formal portraits of deceased ancestors for family worship. The paintings depict a couple who were members of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) imperial court: Shi Wenying, a lieutenant-general appointed by Emperor Kangxi (reigned 1661–1722), and his wife Lady Guan. They each sit in a round-backed chair in a frontal and symmetrical pose. Matching chairs and carpets visually connect the portraits. The settings are otherwise blank, drawing our attention to the sitters. Lady Guan wears full court dress, as we can tell from the highly decorated *chaofu*, hat, robes, and a set of court jewelry. She wears three earrings in each earlobe, suggesting she is a Manchu woman (Chinese women generally wore a single pair of earrings). She also holds Buddhist prayer beads in her left hand, providing us with a hint of her religious beliefs. General Shi wears a thick fur coat and a very noticeable “two-eyed” peacock feather on his hat. The number of eyes indicates status. They are imperial rewards that reveal Shi’s high rank. Both paintings have inscriptions that record honors the couple received from the court.

An ancestor portrait is traditionally mounted as a hanging scroll and depicts a full body image. The face is painted as accurately as possible but almost equally important is a detailed depiction of the clothing, which signifies the sitter’s social standing and brings glory to the family. Lady Guan’s face is, however, more masklike compared to her husband’s. This responds to a practice of secluding women from unrelated men, including professional artists. The painter has to rely on her relatives’ descriptions of her facial features to achieve some personal likeness, such as the sharp chin and narrow eyes of Lady Guan. While physical likeness is crucial when depicting the face, artists always avoid making the setting appear realistic because the ancestor is not supposed to be present in the physical world. For example, the carpets in these portraits are painted parallel to the picture plane, similar to a panel of wallpaper.

Vocabulary

ancestor: someone from whom you are descended. In Western thought, it is usually more distant than a grandparent; however, in Chinese culture, deceased parents and grandparents are considered ancestors.

candid portrait: an image of a person or a group of people behaving naturally or spontaneously without being posed.

chaofu: literally, “audience robe”; a dress that the emperor, nobility, or court officials wore for formal occasions. Design and decoration of *chaofu* depended on the rank of the person who wore it.

composition: the arrangement of elements in an artwork.

environmental portrait: an image of subjects depicted in their usual surroundings, such as a home or workplace.

full body portrait: an image of a person that shows their entire figure.

Lunar New Year: a festival celebrated in China and other Asian countries that begins with the first new moon of a lunar calendar.

Manchu: ethnic group that lived for centuries in the northeast of modern-day China. In the seventeenth century, Manchu people conquered China and ruled there for more than 250 years.

portrait: an image of a person usually focused on their face and shoulders.

symbol: a shape or design that is recognizable and has a meaning associated with it.

Procedure

1. Set up a gallery walk in your classroom consisting of a display of various portraits. A sample set is provided here: <http://learninglab.si.edu/q/II-c/mo8fYFK51aq7Em46>
2. Have students view the portraits and direct them to think about what they know about each person based on the visual details in the portrait.
3. Have students share their observations about the portraits and discuss what they learned about the person from their portrait.
4. Display the Portraits of [Shi Wenying](#) and [Lady Guan](#) and give students 1–2 minutes to observe the portraits and complete the Decoding Portraits graphic organizer.
5. Using the graphic organizer and the images, lead a discussion using the questions below.

Discussion Questions

Describe

- What colors, objects, and symbols do you see?
- What do you notice about the figures?
- What do you notice about the composition of this portrait?

Analyze

- What do the color and symbol combinations suggest about the figure?
- What significance does the composition have? Why is the full figure shown?
- How does their expression (or lack thereof) affect the meaning of these portraits?

Interpret

- Why would it be important for families to commission ancestor portraits?
- What do you think these portraits were used for?
- What do you know about Shi Wenying and Lady Guan from their portraits?

Inquire

- How has the role and function of portraits changed over time?
- How does your family preserve memories and stories of ancestors?
- Why is it important to preserve a person's legacy?

Extensions

Visual Arts

Create a portrait of a family member to preserve their legacy.

- Think about one of your ancestors or relatives.
- How can you use color, symbols, and composition to illustrate aspects of their identity and accomplishments?
- Create a portrait in the medium of your choice that communicates three important characteristics of your family member.

Create a self-portrait in the style of Chinese ancestor portraits that communicates what you want your legacy to be.

- Think about what is most important to you: your accomplishments, goals, and personal characteristics.
- Plan how you can use Chinese symbols/imagery to illustrate your legacy.
- Think about how the composition of your portrait can emphasize your message.
- Draw or paint a self-portrait that incorporates Chinese symbols to represent your legacy.

English Language Arts

Suggested Writing Prompts

- How did Chinese portraits communicate important aspects of their subjects?
- What role do objects/artworks have in celebrating and commemorating our ancestors?

Social Studies

- Research further how Chinese families honored their ancestors.
- Write an essay or create a presentation about how Chinese families' traditions of honoring and remembering their ancestors compares with traditions in your family.

Resources

The Art and Archeology of Ancient China. A Teacher's Guide. Smithsonian Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2003, pp. 46–50, 60. <https://asia.si.edu/visit/resources/china.asp>

Confucian Teaching: Filial Piety and Ancestor Worship, in Asian Topics: An Online Resource for Asian History and Culture, Columbia University. http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/at/conf_teaching/ct03.html

Stuart, Jan, and Evelyn Sakakida Rawski. *Worshipping the Ancestors: Chinese Commemorative Portraits.* Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, 2001. <https://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/worshippingancest00stua>

A festive Dragon Robe for winter (The Victoria and Albert Museum).
<https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/influence-and-longevity-victoria-and-albert-museum/jQISV8UjaQfyKg?hl=en>

View these objects online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/S1991.120/> and <https://asia.si.edu/object/S1991.121/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>

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皇帝制曰鑄閣副勅首重統我
之寄龍牙建儲九寶上將之
材既專制乎一軍宜申錫以
三命爾都統加二級石文兵
討賊經遠馳驅越虜風裕韜
鈴載協丈人之吉勤抒寡宗
克彰元老之猷勤部曲以嚴
明威掃禁旅素旌尾而整暇
望峻中權惟居重以叙輕爰
推恩而錫福欣逢慶典用尹
光榮茲以覃恩特授爾階光
祿大夫錫之誥命於殿疏曾
報功天語特宣夫鳳詔揚休
拜命臣心益勵夫鷹揚崇獎
欽承嘉猷勿替
初任三等侍衛二任都統三
任加一級四任今職
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二歲像
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康熙歲次丙申閏三月初日
敬書



奉

天承運

皇帝制曰臣能毅心忠懇乎
室家婦克相夫寵自遜予綸
綍既壹儀之濟美宜朝命之
均需爾都統加二級石文英
繼妻聞氏有美能舍無傲自
遂教修內政四德信其能無
踰履前徽百標宜其式荷茲
以覃恩封爾為一品夫人於
戲蟾龍文於戲諸武揚貞順
之風淑翟羽於文蘭蓋著崇
嘉之則尚勳女誠用任官方
康熙三十六年七月十九日
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康熙歲次丙申閏三月朔日
敬書

