

LESSON PLAN

Illusion, Allegories, and Artwork: *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon*



Subjects: Language Arts, Visual Arts

Grade Level: Elementary, Middle School/Junior High

Duration: 45 minutes

Dynasty: Modern period (1912–present)

Object Type: Sculpture

Themes: Language and Stories; Animals and Nature; Cultural Interactions

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Monkeys Grasp for the Moon

Xu Bing (Chinese, born 1955; active United States)
2001–04

Lacquer on Baltic birch wood
1020 1/8 x 30 11/16 x 1 5/8 in

Purchase—funds provided by the family of Madame Chiang Kai-shek (Chiang Soong Mayling 1898–2003).
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, S2004.2.1-21

Objectives

Students will describe the visual qualities and content of works of art as well as the meanings communicated and feelings evoked by works of art. They will compare and contrast different forms, techniques, and meanings in artwork. Additionally, they will analyze the concept of allegory in storytelling and art as they recount stories from diverse cultures and determine the central message, lesson, or moral using key details in the text.

Essential Questions

- How does art tell stories?
- How do we understand both the literal and underlying meanings of a story or work of art?
- How do illusion and allegory deepen the meanings of stories and art?
- How do different cultures use stories to teach about life?
- How does language bring us together, and how does it separate us?



Background Information

Monkeys Grasp for the Moon is a suspended sculpture designed specifically for the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery by Chinese artist Xu Bing, who was born in 1955 and grew up during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). The sculpture is composed of twenty-one laminated wood pieces, each of which forms the word “monkey” in one of twenty-one languages and writing systems, including English, Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, Thai, Hebrew, and Braille. The linked forms hang from the sky-lit atrium through the gallery’s stairwell down to the reflecting pool on the bottom level. The work is based on a Buddhist folktale in which a group of monkeys attempt to capture the moon in a well. Linking arms and tails, they form a chain from a branch of a tree to the moon, only to discover that it is a shimmering reflection on the surface of a well lying beneath them.

When Xu Bing designed pieces shaped like the word “monkey” in different languages with each word forming a link on the chain, he communicated the importance of working together in an age and world as interconnected as ours. One possible interpretation is that various countries, cultures, religions, and ethnicities—represented in the artwork by different languages—must work together to achieve common goals. The piece could also be read more pessimistically: that working together lets us achieve our dreams but also that our dreams may be nothing more than illusions.

Monkeys Grasp for the Moon and *The Living Word*, like Xu’s other works, are inspired by the relationship between meaning and words. The result is a body of work in which the artist explores worldly issues and culture, and manipulates language to subvert meaning, to turn expectations on their head, and to change human perception. In *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon*, his use of words as sculptural forms challenges the viewer to delve deeper for meaning, to analyze and to not accept the fable at face value. When this happens, each “monkey” becomes a microcosm of a culture, and the chain becomes symbolic of an ideal world.

Vocabulary

allegory: a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one.

illusion: a thing that has a deceptive appearance and is, or could be, wrongly interpreted by the senses.

Procedure

1. Reveal the artwork to students in three “acts.”
2. **Act 1:** Show Views 1–3 of the artwork (single sections/links of the piece). Spread out different sections among small groups or give each group a full set to examine.
3. Initiate a discussion using the **Describe** and **Analyze** questions.
4. **Act 2:** Show Views 4 and 5 of the artwork (views of the installed artwork). Reveal the name of the piece: *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon*.
5. Continue the discussion with the **Interpret** questions.
6. **Act 3:** Share the Chinese folktale that inspired *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon* (see story sheet or video resources). Tell them about the artist, Xu Bing, and offer further information about the sculpture, such as the languages and materials he used.
7. Have students revisit their observations using the **Inquire** questions.
8. Have students complete one or more of the attached worksheets on illusions and allegories, which will guide them through thinking about the literal and figurative meanings of *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon* and the story that inspired it.

Discussion Questions

Describe

- What do you see?

Analyze

- Why might what you see be important?
- Why might the artist have made that choice?
- What are other choices they could have made?
- Why do you think they didn't make those choices?

Interpret

- What new information is revealed once you can see the entire artwork?
- What new information does the title add to your understanding?
- What messages are you receiving from the artwork? What story is it telling you?
- What are you reminded of when you see the artwork?

Inquire

- What new information does the story add to your understanding of the artwork?
- How did Xu Bing relate the shape of the sculpture to the monkeys in the story?
- What languages and/or scripts does Xu Bing choose? Which has he omitted? Why do you think he made the choices he did? What is their effect?
- An illusion is something that has a deceptive or tricky appearance. How did Xu Bing use the concept of illusion to create this artwork?

Extensions

Visual Arts

- Explore the way in which Xu Bing manipulates letters and characters to look like something else. What other animal words can be drawn into their animal forms? Make a class “zoo” of favorite animals created from the letters or characters that represent them.
- The story “The Monkeys and the Moon” includes a description of an illusion—the monkeys think they are close to reaching the moon, but it is only a reflection in the water. Artists often purposely create optical illusions that fool the eye, creating the illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface. Explore methods of creating your own optical illusion drawings. Examples and tutorials can be found online (see Resources).
- *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon* is a good example of the concepts of unity and variety in art. Unity is when similar components are arranged together in a harmonious way. Variety is when different components are arranged together to create contrasts. The unity in this piece comes from the common size, color, and materials of the different components and the way the components are interconnected, while the variety comes from the different languages included. Many different languages shape the “monkeys” in this artwork, and they are literally hanging from one another to create the piece. Create a piece of artwork in which components that appear different work together to become a visual whole. Try contrasting shapes, colors, or textures.

English Language Arts

- Compare and contrast the folktale “The Monkeys and the Moon” to other popular allegories such as Aesop’s Fables, Anansi stories, Brer Rabbit tales, *The Giving Tree*, or a class book like *The Giver* or *Animal Farm*.
 - What is the surface story?
 - What is the underlying message or moral and how is it represented by symbolic characters and/or actions?
 - Is the story an effective messenger for the moral? Why or why not?
- Write your own allegory using symbolic characters and actions to represent an underlying, hidden message or moral.
- Write an essay comparing and contrasting *Monkeys Grasp the Moon* with another Xu Bing artwork such as *Book from the Sky* or *The Living Word*. How does Xu Bing’s work express his ideas about language and words? (See worksheet provided.)

Social Studies

- Xu Bing often discusses how changes in the Chinese language during the Cultural Revolution impacted his understanding of written and spoken words and, subsequently, his artwork. Conduct research and make a timeline of the changes Chairman Mao Zedong (1893–1976) made to the Chinese writing system and Chinese culture during his tenure as leader.
- Research other artists whose work is influenced by their experiences during the Cultural Revolution. These might include Wang Guangyi, Ai Weiwei, Yue Minjun and others. Create and share a podcast or website discussing how modern artists might help us understand historical events.

Resources

Xu Bing artist website. <http://www.xubing.com/>

Freer and Sackler blog post on *Monkeys Grasp for the Moon*. <https://asia.si.edu/word-play/>

Xu Bing exhibition at the Freer and Sackler Galleries <http://archive.asia.si.edu/exhibitions/online/xubing/default.html>

The Monkeys and the Moon (English cartoon). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hSqgrVaiizs>

Monkeys Catch the Moon (Chinese cartoon). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRXdwybIV_U

Optical illusion tutorials.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4v8605UpmbI&feature=youtu.be&list=PLnifj-hFGWC8akbt7gn-vlc3E4Vuw213A>

Optical illusion tutorials.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRj2aYT6Ugw&list=PLstpeGRxW-OV7nzfC7xWN56Eej2mI3S_0&index=2

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/S2004.2.1-21/>

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

The Monkeys and the Moon

A Chinese folktale (original story is recorded in a seventh-century Buddhist encyclopedia “Fayuan Zhulin,” *The Forest of Pearls from the Dharma Garden*)

A family of monkeys once lived together high in the mountains. One clear and beautiful night, they were playing in the trees above a glassy pond when one of the younger monkeys looked down into water and saw the moon floating on top.

Frightened, the young monkey called his friends to come and see that the moon had fallen from its rightful place in the sky into the water below. Immediately, the other monkeys rushed over and began howling in dismay. “Calm down!” commanded one of the older monkeys. “We cannot just sit here and cry over the moon. We must do something. The moon must be returned to the sky!”

“What shall we do?” they all asked each other. The older monkey looked around and saw a bucket left by one of the local villagers.

“Let us take this bucket, join together, and scoop the moon up so that we can put it back,” said the older monkey, climbing down to get the container.

The older monkey scaled the tree once again and hung on upside down, with his feet and tail gripping a branch that reached over the water. The next monkey leapt and the older monkey grabbed him by the tail so that he also hung upside down. All the other monkeys followed suit and soon they formed a long chain that reached down to the water.

Just as the last monkey reached down to scoop the moon into the bucket, the one at the top felt his grip begin to slip. Suddenly, all of the monkeys tumbled into the water and the bucket flew into the air.

As they floated in the pond, the monkeys looked up and saw the moon back in its rightful place. “Great job!” they congratulated each other. “We have put the moon back where it belongs.”



Indonesian



Russian



Braille



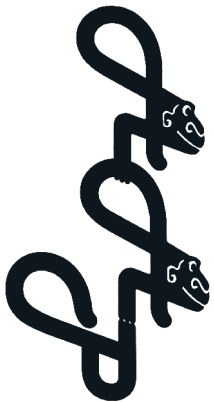
Italian



Hindi



Afrikaans



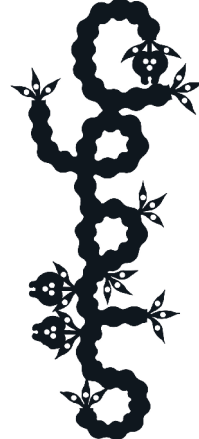
Chinese



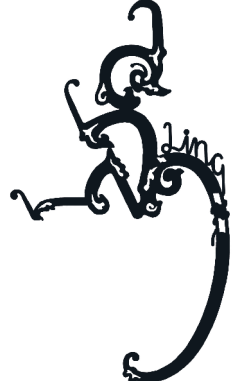
Korean



Persian



Lao



Urdu



Thai



Turkish



Japanese



German



Spanish



French



English



Swahili



Hebrew



Arabic

