

LESSON PLAN

Diving Deeper into Buddhism: Mapping the Buddhist Cosmos



Subjects: Social Studies

Grade Level: Middle School/Junior High, High School

Duration: 90 minutes

Dynasty: Period of Division (220–589)

Object Type: Sculpture, Stone

Themes: Language and Stories; Animals and Nature; Traditions and Belief Systems; Technology and Production

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Buddha draped in robes portraying the Realms of Existence

China

Northern Qi dynasty, 550–577

Limestone

59 9/16 x 24 3/4 x 12 5/16 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1923.15

Objective

Students already familiar with Siddhartha Gautama, or Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha, will deepen their understanding of Buddhist beliefs and artwork. They will analyze and interpret works of art that reveal how people live around the world and what they value. They will identify how works of art reflect times, places, cultures, and beliefs.

Essential Questions

- What other stories are told in Buddhism beyond Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha?
- How were Buddhist beliefs transmitted between teachers and students?
- How do works of art capture and communicate the development of Buddhist beliefs in China?
- How has art inspired Buddhist believers and scholars throughout history?
- Why did Buddhists create a symbolic map of the world, or cosmology?

Background Information

This limestone sculpture started its life in China during the Northern Qi dynasty (550–77), most likely carved by a team of craftsmen. From that point forward, little is known about the Cosmic Buddha's history until it appeared on the art market in Beijing more than a millennium later in 1923. Freer Gallery of Art curator Carl Whiting Bishop (1881–1942) spotted the sculpture and bought it for the museum.

Covering the sculpture, which is formally titled Buddha draped in robes portraying the Realms of Existence, are detailed narrative scenes representing moments in the life of Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha. Scenes of the Realms of Existence, a symbolic map of the Buddhist world, are also carved into the sculpture's robe. Together, the sculpture's many images provide a rare glimpse into early Chinese symbolic visions of the Buddhist cosmos.

Scholars have identified the headless figure as Vairochana, the Cosmic Buddha (Pulushena in Chinese). In Buddhist texts, Vairochana is described as the generative force behind all phenomena in the universe. He is also a central figure in the Chinese Buddhist schools of Tiantai and Huayan. The narrative scenes are spiritual emanations rising from the Buddha himself and illustrate fundamental Buddhist teachings. These scenes originally would have been painted.

Until recently, the only way to capture the Cosmic Buddha's rich content was through photographs or rubbings (impressions in black ink on white paper made directly on the sculpture's surface). Today, anyone with a computer can zoom in on its intricate details. With help from the Smithsonian's Digitization Program Office, the Cosmic Buddha now exists as a [three-dimensional model](#), enabling scholars to study the work as never before and providing worldwide access to this masterpiece of Buddhist sculpture. The scans' clarity makes it easier than ever to map the surface and more clearly identify the borders of scenes and the figures they contain. Spatial depth in the narrative units is created through diagonals, vanishing points, and layered landscapes. By looking at 3-D prints, scholars can now study these scenes for their artistic merit in a manner similar to paintings. The prints might help elucidate early Chinese narrative illustration and provide vital insight into the visual culture of sixth-century China.

Vocabulary

Ashoka: an Indian emperor from the Maurya dynasty who ruled from 268 to 232 BCE. He was a great patron of Buddhism.

bodhisattva: an enlightened being who chooses not to proceed to Nirvana but instead remains on earth to guide others in their paths toward Enlightenment.

Brahman: the highest caste among four social classes in Hindu India.

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.

deva: literally, "divinity," "heavenly being"; the most pleasure-filled among five rebirth destinies. Rebirth as a deva is granted for good deeds performed during the previous lifetime.

Dipankara: literally, "Maker of Light"; Buddha of the Distant Past, who preceded Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha.

Enlightenment: a moment of great wisdom and understanding; the highest level of consciousness, believed to be achieved through meditation and adhering to the basic moral teaching of Buddhism.

Huayan: literally, "flower garland"; one of the Chinese Buddhist schools.

Jatakas: collection of anecdotes about the Historical Buddha's former births.

Maitreya: literally, "the Benevolent One"; the bodhisattva currently waiting to descend to the earth and become the next Buddha. He is also known as Buddha of the Future.

mudra: a hand gesture with a consistent meaning, made during Buddhist ritual practice or depicted in Buddhist images.

Pratyekabuddha: literally, "solitary Buddha"; one who attained enlightenment by his own effort but cannot enlighten others.

Shakyamuni: literally, “Sage of the Shakya Clan”; the Historical Buddha. His given name was Siddhartha Gautama. He lived in northeastern India sometime after the fifth century BCE.

Shariputra: one of the major disciples of Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha.

sutra: a Buddhist holy writing or text.

Theravada: one of the two major forms of Buddhism; currently practiced in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Another major form of Buddhism is Mahayana.

Tiantai: literally, “Terrace of Heaven”; a Buddhist school founded in sixth-century China that focuses on the Lotus Sutra, which contains words and teachings of Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha.

Vairochana: literally, “Resplendent”; one of the five primary Buddhas, considered in some traditions to be the cosmic Buddha. Shakyamuni, the Historical Buddha, is understood to be Vairochana’s earthly emanation.

Vimalakirti nirdesha: literally, “Advice of Vimalakirti”; name of a sutra describing a discussion of primary Buddhist concepts between Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, and a wise Buddhist layman called Vimalakirti.

Procedure

1. Show students this video of the [Cosmic Buddha 3-D scan](#).
As they watch, ask students to take notes that describe the artwork using the **Describe** questions below.
2. Once the video is done, play it again and ask the **Analyze** questions to generate a group discussion.
3. Break students into four groups to complete a Jigsaw cooperative learning activity. Each group will take a different [3-D tour of the Cosmic Buddha](#), taking notes on what they learn about the sculpture. (Note: Click on the globe icon on the top left to access the interactive tours.) They should be sure to read the text of the tour, as well as linked articles and the pins and annotations on the scan. We recommend choosing between:
 - a. Tour 1: Buddhas on the Buddha
 - b. Tour 3: Vimalakirti nirdesha
 - c. Tour 4: Missing Features and Absent Mudras
 - d. Tour 6: Carving and Painting the Cosmic Buddha
 - e. Tour 7: The Stone of the Cosmic Buddha
4. When everyone is finished taking notes, reconfigure the class into new groups that have at least one member from each tour group. Have students take turns sharing what they have learned so that all students understand the information from the four tours. Alternatively, taking the tour and creating notes could be done individually as homework in a flipped classroom model to prepare for group sharing the next day.
5. As an assessment, have students complete the **Interpret** questions, as well as generate their own questions for further inquiry.

Discussion Questions

Describe

- What type of artwork is this?
- What colors, shapes, lines, or human and animal figures do you see?
- What details or parts of the sculpture stand out to you?
- What do you think this sculpture would feel like if you touched it? What makes you think that?

Analyze

- What identifies this artwork as Buddhist?
- What do you recognize in this sculpture? What is new?
- What processes do you think were used to craft this piece?
- Why do you think the sculpture has broken and missing parts?

Interpret

- What is the significance of Dipankara (Buddha of the Distant Past), Shakyamuni (the Historical Buddha), and the bodhisattva Maitreya (Buddha of the Future) appearing together on the figure?
- What other images and stories depicted on the surface of the sculpture do you think are especially important?
- How does the way the sculpture was made and the materials it is made of contribute to the meaning of the statue?
- How do you think this statue was meant to be viewed or used?

Inquire

- What do the images on the Cosmic Buddha reveal about Chinese Buddhist beliefs?
- Why do you think the artist (or artists) chose to depict these particular stories and images on the statue?
- Why are some aspects of the Cosmic Buddha a mystery to art historians and conservators?
- What conservation practices were helpful in preserving this piece for so many centuries? What practices were unhelpful?

Extensions

Visual Arts

- Print your own 3-D Cosmic Buddhas using the plans available at <https://3d.si.edu/object/3d/buddha-draped-ropes-portraying-realms-existence:d8c62be8-4ebc-11ea-b77f-2e728ce88125>
- The images on the Cosmic Buddha are carved in low relief, meaning that the sculpted imagery rises slightly from the smooth body of the Buddha figure. Create your own scenes featuring the Buddha in relief, for example by carving away part of a clay slab, Styrofoam, or linoleum sheet to leave raised elements.

English Language Arts

- Many of the scenes on the Cosmic Buddha are of Jatakas, or Buddhist parables, and of other important Buddhist texts. Research and analyze Jataka stories and discuss your findings with the class.

Social Studies

- Explore what was happening in China in the sixth century CE when this sculpture was created. Research what developments were taking place in religion, art, technology, and government at that time.

Resources

The Cosmic Buddha's New Dimensions, Freer and Sackler Blog Post. <https://www.freersackler.si.edu/cosmic-buddha/>

"The Cosmic Buddha," Freer and Sackler Curatorial Research. <https://asia.si.edu/research/cosmic-buddha/>

Smithsonian Digitization 3-D, Cosmic Buddha Laser Scan. (Note: Click on the globe icon on the top left to access the interactive tours.) <https://3d.si.edu/object/3d/buddha-draped-ropes-portraying-realms-existence:d8c62be8-4ebc-11ea-b77f-2e728ce88125>

Overview video of the Cosmic Buddha from the Freer and Sackler. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pl2oAfaSIPg>

Background Information on the Jigsaw teaching technique.

<http://circlesofinnovation.valenciacollege.edu/2013/09/10/the-jigsaw-assignment/>

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1923.15/>

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





