

LESSON PLAN

## Ways of Seeing: Poetry and Painting



**Subjects:** Visual Arts, English Language Arts, Social Studies

**Grade Level:** Middle School/Junior High, High School

**Duration:** 90 minutes

**Dynasty:** Ming (1368–1644)

**Object Type:** Painting

**Theme:** Language and Stories

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### Journey to Shu (detail)

Traditionally attributed to Qiu Ying 仇英 (ca. 1494–1552);

Calligrapher: Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470–1559)

China

Ming dynasty, 16th–17th century

Ink and color on silk

21 5/8 x 72 1/8 in

Purchase—funds provided by the B. Y. Lam Foundation Fund. Freer Gallery of Art, F1993.4

## Objective

Students will analyze and interpret works of art according to events, places, cultures, and historical periods. They will evaluate how social, cultural, and historical context contribute meaning in works of art and examine narratives in artwork and poetry.

## Essential Questions

- How does one read a traditional Chinese scroll? What elements does a scroll contain?
- What are important features of Chinese landscape paintings?
- How are historical narratives recorded and passed on to future generations?
- How might poetry and art help us “see” the world in a new way?

## Background Information

For centuries Chinese painting had three major formats: hand scrolls, hanging scrolls, and album leaves. A hand scroll is a continuous roll of paper or silk bearing passages of calligraphy and painting. It is opened, or unrolled, only when someone wants to view it. One would unroll it from right to left on a table and pause to appreciate it, one section at a time. Important hand scrolls are stored in special boxes and are carefully unrolled one portion at a time for viewing by only a few people. Looking at the poetry, painting, and calligraphy on a scroll is like reading chapters in a book. A Chinese hand scroll is “read” from right to left, the same way classical Chinese writing is read. One multitalented artist could work on a hand scroll alone, or several artists could collaborate, with one person painting the landscape scene, another composing the poetry, and a third writing in beautiful calligraphy.

*Journey to Shu* is one of several paintings that depict scenes from the famous love story of the emperor Ming Huang (685–762) and his concubine Yang Guifei. It is traditionally attributed to the artist Qiu Ying (ca. 1494–1552). The painting depicts four groups of travelers negotiating a mountainous track. Starting from the right, several women riders, each wearing a piece of red clothing, emerge from the mountains, accompanied by several men in front and at the rear. Proceeding left from the bridge, traveling merchants rest among trees. One of their horses rolls happily in the grass. The third group of travelers appear exhausted from the journey. Feeling concerned, the man riding in front looks back at his companions. At left, the fourth group is making their way up the mountain path, which leads to hanging roadways off dangerous cliffs. All figures, horses, and camels are vividly depicted. Trees and flowers are blooming, suggesting it is springtime. Tall, steep green and blue mountains dominate the scene with white clouds floating near the peak.

The composition of this painting is carefully designed so that whenever viewers open a section of the scroll, they encounter a group of travelers amongst high peaks of mountains. A postscript appears in the colophon at the end of the scroll and cites a poem on the hardship of the road to Shu. This serves as a commentary on the image. The painting also has seals from a few collectors and viewers that convey pride of ownership. These common elements of a hand scroll work together to make this painting, or any ancient Chinese painting, a documentary history that connects past and present.

Painted in lavish colors of blue, green, and brownish-yellow, this painting is a typical “blue-and-green” landscape, a style originated during the Tang dynasty (618–907) when trade between China and regions further west flourished. Mineral blue and green pigments were among the western goods that entered China along trade routes. Blue-and-green landscape painting thus became possible and popular during that time. This style was often employed in later periods—the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) in this case—to evoke an era of peace and prosperity.

The current painting is modeled on a well-known landscape *Emperor Ming Huang’s Journey to Shu* from the collection of National Palace Museum in Taipei. It was traditionally believed to represent the flight of Emperor Ming Huang to Shu (Sichuan) in summer 756 during the rebellion led by An Lushan. However, its composition differs from its model in many ways, including the addition of an entire section of landscape and the conflict of season. It may be best if we simply appreciate the painting as a depiction of springtime travelers.

## Vocabulary

**An Lushan (703–757):** Chinese general and leader of a rebellion that began in 755, unsuccessfully attempting to overthrow Tang dynasty ruler Xuanzong and declare himself an emperor.

**Chang'an:** capital of the Tang empire, modern-day Xi'an (Shaanxi province).

**colophon:** in Chinese, *tiba*; an inscription written on an additional piece of silk or paper that is attached to the scroll after the image. Colophons can include a poem, an essay, or words of appreciation for the artist or painting.

**frontispiece:** in Chinese, *yinshou*; a piece of silk or paper that is attached to the beginning of the hand scroll and consists of characters with the name of the painting or poetic phrase.

**Ming Huang:** Emperor Xuanzong (reigned 712–756).

**Shu:** a region in southwest China, modern-day Sichuan province.

**Yang Guifei (719–756):** literally, “Imperial Consort Yang”; beloved consort of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang dynasty.

## Procedure

1. Allow students to view the artwork closely. Use the Discussion Questions to guide them through a close and slow-looking exercise.
2. Have students read the story “Emperor Ming Huang’s Flight from Xi’an.”
3. Have students revisit the painting. Now that they know the story that inspired this painting, what more do they notice? What new thoughts are inspired? What new questions are raised?
4. Tell students that the story of Ming Huang was recorded in poetry as well. A portion of one famous poem appears at the end of the story. Often poems appear on scroll paintings. They give context and add to the scholarly nature of the artwork.
5. Assign students the task of writing a poem that could accompany *Journey to Shu*, and offer more context about why Ming Huang was fleeing.
6. Have students use the Poetry Brainstorming sheet to capture ideas from the story and the painting that they will incorporate into their own poem.
7. Once they have brainstormed enough ideas, they can draft, revise, and edit their final poem.

## Discussion Questions

### Describe

Begin at the right side of the painting. Form and composition are very important in Chinese painting. Color is used carefully and intentionally.

- What shapes and forms do you see?
- How are they arranged? What stands out? What is hard to see? What is small? What is large?
- How would you describe the colors that are used?

Brush strokes are very important in Chinese landscape painting.

- Where do you see evidence of brush strokes?
- How would you describe them?
- What do you imagine the brushes looked like?

## Analyze

- How do the artist's choices about lines, forms, composition, and color communicate tone? What mood or feelings do you perceive?
- Are there any figures? What do they look like? What are they doing?
- What do you imagine they are saying? What conversations might we hear if we could step into this painting?
- What seems to be happening?

## Interpret

- It was important for the artist to infuse the painting with movement and life. Where do you see evidence of movement and life? How was it achieved?
- What do you think was the artist's motivation for creating this painting?
- What do you think was the artist's process for creating this painting?

## Inquire

- Why do you think scrolls were a popular format for these types of paintings?
- What do you think would have been the most challenging part of making this painting?
- The journey to Shu was described as difficult. What looks difficult about the journey to you?
- Have you ever taken a difficult journey? What was it like?

# Extensions

## Visual Arts

- Create a painting depicting a journey using a limited selection of colors in a horizontal format, similar to a Chinese scroll painting.
- Research the landscape painting tradition in China and compare it to European landscape painting traditions. For example, while some Chinese landscape painters used blue and green, atmospheric perspective in European Renaissance painting was a technique in which changes in color (largely blue, green, and brown) were used to show distance.

## English Language Arts

- Read out loud or perform the poem you wrote about the painting *Journey to Shu*. Choose to act out part of the poem or add music to help convey the meaning.

## Social Studies

- The painting *Journey to Shu* was created during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) but depicts events that supposedly took place during the Tang dynasty (618–907). Compare China during these two dynasties in terms of their rulers, technology, and territorial borders.
- Research how Chinese artists have depicted stories from the distant past. Why do you think it was important to artists and rulers during the Ming dynasty to depict stories and events from centuries earlier? What role did history play at the Chinese court?

## Resources

“How to Read Chinese Scrolls,” Educator Resource on Chinese Scrolls from the Freer and Sackler Galleries.

<https://asia.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/chinese-scroll-lesson.pdf>

Tang dynasty painting *Emperor Ming Huang’s Journey to Shu*, National Palace Museum (Taipei).

<http://painting.npm.gov.tw/getCollectionImage.aspx?ImageId=474005&r=55593749214>

Video about *Emperor Ming Huang’s Journey to Shu*, National Palace Museum (Taipei).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1gzW0B7ROY>

“What is Atmospheric Perspective?” Smarthistory. Khan Academy.

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/start-here-apah/language-of-art-history-apah/v/what-is-atmospheric-perspective>

Giles, Herbert Allen. *A History of Chinese Literature*. London: W. Heinemann, 1901. Pp. 169–75.

<https://archive.org/details/historyofchinese00gileiala/page/168>

*Masterpieces of Chinese Painting 700–1900*. Edited by Zhang Hongxing. London: V & A Publishing, 2013. Pp. 19–22, 53–63.

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1993.4/>

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

## Emperor Ming Huang's Flight from Xi'an

During the Tang dynasty, there was a particular emperor named Ming Huang, or Xuanzong, who loved literature, music, and women. He ruled from 712–756 CE. Over the years he had taken several wives and entertained many concubines. Eventually he fell in love with a young woman named Yang Guifei, who just happened to be married to his son. The poet Bai Juyi (772–846) wrote an epic poem about them entitled, “The Song of Everlasting Regret.” He said that her beauty “shamed flowers to close their petals and the moon to hide behind clouds; fish to sink to the bottom and swans to plunge down from the sky.”

Ming Huang, like everyone else, was absolutely smitten by Yang Guifei and in enjoying her company he began to neglect his empire. Her cousin became the Prime Minister and all important decisions were left in his inept hands. Official positions were appointed unfairly, many to her family. Warlords did what they wanted. People began to starve and suffer from disease. Everyone became angry and began to think of Ming Huang as a bad ruler. Little did they know that a rebellious former general named An Lushan was planning to overthrow Ming Huang and the capital, Chang'an, which we now call Xi'an. He was especially motivated because, once, he too had been in love with Yang Guifei.

Ming Huang was watching Yang Guifei dance one evening when his most trusted advisor rushed in to tell him that An Lushan was at the very gates of the city with thousands of chariots and horses. He had been in the mountains amassing this army and had already overtaken dozens of cities on his way to the capital. The emperor told his court to run for their lives. With a small group of soldiers, advisors, and court attendants, Ming Huang fled into the mountains and headed towards Shu, now known as Sichuan.

On the run, the soldiers became restless and upset. They blamed Yang Guifei for their predicament. Ming Huang's men began to plot and plan. They were on the verge of an uprising when they demanded that Yang Guifei and her family be turned over to them. The emperor cried and pleaded, but ultimately he was helpless to save both his love and his power. The soldiers violently killed her right in front of him. With a broken heart, the emperor pressed on with his caravan to Sichuan. He was haunted by Yang Guifei and what he had allowed to happen.

*Dark the Szechuan waters,  
dark the Szechuan hills.  
Daily and nightly his Majesty  
was consumed by bitter grief.  
Traveling along, the very brightness  
of the moon saddened his heart,  
And the sound of a bell through the evening rain  
severed his viscera in twain.*

Bai Juyi (translated by Herbert A. Giles)

# 蜀川佳丽



嗟乎蜀子  
 高亦易道之  
 難於乎人  
 說愛父莫  
 聞國何忘  
 海羅奈自  
 魚可以轉  
 石順地第  
 子死後天  
 佛在後天  
 牛一者日  
 高標下首  
 過折之田  
 避之飛鳥  
 遇深林欲  
 恐發得者  
 何型百先  
 擊羅羅羽  
 手無肩王  
 同名各何  
 畏運危不  
 攀召見危  
 言辭飛唯  
 魏林間文  
 魏夜月慈  
 命生之類  
 昔人及後  
 參羅建春  
 不直信似  
 侍統得飛  
 氣年經恩  
 轉及瑞際  
 陰也此漢  
 道之領為  
 未就領呼  
 古宮區王  
 關篇文美  
 武我畫化  
 樂美新開  
 摩身過長  
 身死愛人  
 麟城推三  
 不名運宮  
 道之類於  
 大爾身心  
 皆嘆  
 嘉禧歲十  
 月維序書  
 六一  
 微明







