

LESSON PLAN

# Portrait of the Qianlong Emperor



**Subjects:** Social Studies, Visual Arts

**Grade Level:** High School

**Duration:** 90 minutes

**Dynasty:** Qing (1644–1911)

**Object Type:** Painting

**Themes:** Power and Privilege; Traditions and Belief Systems; Cultural Interactions

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## The Qianlong Emperor as Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom

Imperial workshop, Emperor's face painted by Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining)

China, Qing dynasty, Qianlong reign, mid-18th century

Ink, color, and gold on silk

44 3/4 x 25 5/16 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment and funds provided by an anonymous donor. Freer Gallery of Art, F2000.4

## Objectives

Students will analyze a portrait of Emperor Qianlong. They will look closely at the elements of the painting to see how Buddhism, the Mandate of Heaven, and foreign interactions contribute meaning to art.

## Essential Questions

- How and why is art used in politics?
- How did the Qianlong Emperor maintain order and structure during his reign?
- What features and values of a society can a portrait portray?

## Background Information

Beginning in the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1050–221 BCE), the concept of the Mandate of Heaven was used to validate rulers in China. As the Son of Heaven, emperors identified as the mediators of the social order, linking the earthly world to the heavens. The successes and failures of a ruler or dynasty corresponded with the cosmic order and the will of heaven. The Qing dynasty (1644–1911) embraced the Mandate of Heaven by acknowledging the legitimacy of the preceding Ming dynasty (1368–1644) in order to portray a natural transfer of power from one dynasty to the next.

Emperor Qianlong (born 1711–1799, reigned 1735–1796) of the Qing dynasty, like the early Qing emperors, welcomed foreign influences, which can be attributed to their identities as Manchus rather than ethnic Han. Their rule expanded into the areas of Mongolia, Tibet, and central China, and as such, Buddhism was a prominent religion for political reasons. In this portrait, Qianlong is depicted as Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom. With the emperor's right hand, he expresses a gesture of debate or teaching, while in his left hand, he holds the wheel of the law. The lotus blossoms on either side of him hold a sutra and a sword, which are objects generally related to representations of Manjushri. Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining, 1688–1766), an Italian painter serving at the Qianlong court, painted this portrait on silk with rich colors, suggesting this portrait was intended for imperial use. Some critics claim that Qianlong's own fascination with material culture and objects conflicted with the asceticism of Buddhism.

## Vocabulary

**asceticism:** resisting unnecessary luxury and indulgences.

**bodhisattva:** an enlightened being who chooses not to proceed to nirvana but instead remains on earth to guide others in their path toward enlightenment.

**Buddhism:** a widespread Asian religion or philosophy founded by Siddhartha Gautama in northeastern India in the fifth century BCE.

**Manchu:** a minority ethnic group primarily from northeastern China.

**Mandate of Heaven:** a belief that a ruler is bestowed a right to rule by divine powers.

**sutra:** a holy Buddhist writing or text.

## Procedure

1. Introduction/Hook: Begin by having students analyze a modern political poster. Examples of political posters can be found in the [Smithsonian Learning Lab](#). Have students practice observation and interpretation skills by using the **Discussion Questions**.
2. Display *The Qianlong Emperor as Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom* (F2000.4). As before, have students practice observation and interpretation skills by using the **Discussion Questions**.
3. Distribute the **Background Information** reading.
4. Have students revisit their initial observations and make connections to any information from the reading.
5. Divide students into groups of three or four and have them work in their small groups to fill out the graphic organizer.
6. Have students discuss the ideas they wrote on their graphic organizers, guided by the **Discussion Questions**.
7. Choose an extension activity to extend learning or to assess students' understanding.

# Discussion Questions

## Describe

- What colors did the artist use?
- What is depicted in the painting?
- How is the work of art arranged? What stands out? What is small? What is large?

## Analyze

- What can you infer about the painting based on the colors used?
- What does the figure/do the figures seem to be doing?
- What mood does this portrait convey?

## Interpret

- What was important to the Qianlong Emperor? What in the painting supports your interpretation?
- Why do you think this art was created?
- How do the ideas in Qing dynasty life and governance (i.e., Buddhism, the Mandate of Heaven, foreign interactions, etc.) contribute meaning to this portrait?

## Inquire

- What is the role of art in politics? How is it used and what does it have the power to do?

# Extensions

## Visual Arts

- Have students create a political portrait for a ruler that incorporates their values.
- Design a reimagining of the Emperor Qianlong portrait that incorporates the same features (i.e., Buddhism, the Mandate of Heaven, foreign interactions, etc.) in students' own artistic style.

## English Language Arts

- Research Emperor Qianlong and his legacy. Write a story about Emperor Qianlong that incorporates the information you attained, focusing on what might have manifested in this painting.
- Using this portrait and others as examples, write an essay explaining how and why art is used in politics and what features and values of a society a portrait can portray.

## Social Studies

- Choose another portrait of a ruler. You may choose a ruler who was a contemporary of Qianlong (eighteenth century) or a ruler from another historical period. Compare the two portraits: what is similar? What is different? What values do each portray?

## Resources

Thangka Painting: <https://asia.si.edu/learn/for-educators/teaching-china-with-the-smithsonian/videos/thangka-painting/>.

“The Emperor in the Cosmic Order”: <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/cosmos/irc/emperor.htm>.

Hearn, M.K. “The Qing Dynasty (1644–1911): Painting,” 2003. [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/qing\\_1/hd\\_qing\\_1.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/qing_1/hd_qing_1.htm).

Berger, Patricia. *Empire of Emptiness: Buddhist Art and Political Authority in Qing China*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003.

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F2000.4/>.

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

