

The Sound of One Hand: Paintings and Calligraphy by Zen Master Hakuin

Discussion Topics

How can I use these discussion topics in my classroom?

The goal of the following materials is to assist educators in facilitating open-ended dialogues with students about works of art and in a larger sense, ultimately, the world around them. This guide can be used as a framework and adapted for use with levels pre-K through 12th grade. Please adjust vocabulary as needed.

How will these discussion topics benefit my students?

Through inquiry-based learning, students build skills across the curriculum, including those valuable to literacy such as the ability to think critically, use descriptive language, observe closely and form hypotheses.¹

Additionally, inquiry-based learning can provide entry points into exploring a broad range of topics and can be adapted to any subject, including culture-specific information, artistic techniques, aesthetics, and art-historical and historical concepts.

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO USING INQUIRY

Select an image which corresponds with one of the discussion topics provided below. Titles preceding each image credit refer to sections of the exhibition.

Choose an image and project onto a screen or classroom wall. Begin the discussion simply by asking the students to look closely. Give them a few minutes to observe and reflect.

Create a relaxed environment by explaining that special knowledge is not needed to experience or understand the images you are presenting. Refrain from mentioning the title of the work or the media until the students have had a chance to consider the works for themselves. This method encourages the students to focus on what they can see rather than what they think they should see/perceive, to trust their senses and to form a relationship and understanding of the work as a basis for inquiry.

Encourage the students to comment on formal aspects such as shape, size, scale, color and texture and to use descriptive language. Once they have had time to discuss, move to a discussion of concepts such as mood or presence. Draw students out by asking them to support and elaborate on their observations and comments.

By presenting context-building information later in the discussion rather than at the start, you leave room for individual interpretations and discovery. Introduce information about media, techniques, artist's bio and history as is relevant to support and enrich understanding. Strive to honor the independent communicative powers of works of art and impact that collective statements and questions can have on students primed to be receptive viewer/thinkers. By honing the visual analytical and critical thinking skills of your students, you prepare them to become observant not only in exhibition settings but also in their daily lives.

What are some ways that I can create an optimal environment for open-ended discussion?

Ask questions that have a broad range of possible answers. Avoid yes/no questions. Repeat comments and provide a bridge linking other's comments and differing ideas to spur debate and to encourage students to support their assertions.

Accept comments neutrally and without judgment. If a comment seems inappropriate or off-topic redirect focus to the image and ask the student to relate their comments to something evidenced in the artwork.

If you are asked a question you cannot answer, inform the student that you don't know. Discuss the best way to find the answer and agree to return to the question after you both have researched it.

Life in Art, Art in Life

Hakuin Ekaku, 1685–1768, *Otafuku Making Dango*. Ink on paper, 21.5 × 14.1 in. Shinwa-an Collection.

Click on the **Image Gallery**, select *Otafuku Making Dango* and project it for the class to see.

INQUIRY

Identify what is happening in the scene.

- Name the objects you see.
- What is Otafuku doing?
- Describe her facial expression.
- What kind of personality do you think she has?

Notice the range of the ink's tonality in the drawing.

- Why do you think Hakuin made the cooking pot and Otafuku's *obi* (sash) darkest black?
- How are the drawing and the calligraphy treated stylistically?
- Do they look like the same person drew them?
- Are there any places that the calligraphy and drawing's brushwork look alike?
- Can you find the character for "skewer"?
- The inscription reads:
The *dango* skewers are ready.
At night I wait, but he doesn't come—
Poor man, his throat is closed.
- Why might a closed throat be a problem for Otafuku's guest?
- Here, the term a "closed throat" is a metaphor for a closed mind.
- In the context of Buddhist wisdom what do you think the message of the drawing might be? (What might Otafuku symbolize?)

Possible interpretation: A close-minded person doesn't appreciate wisdom just as a person with a closed throat cannot enjoy dumplings.

INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

Dango are dumplings.

Otafuku is considered to be a reincarnation of the Shinto (Japanese indigenous religion) deity Uzume Mikoto, who helped lure the mythological sun goddess, Amaterasu, out of a cave to return light to the world.

In Hakuin's time there was a festival in Edo (modern-day Tokyo) in which people celebrated Otafuku. Her image was carried on bamboo rakes and people purchased them to attract good luck during the coming year. These rakes are still sold in Tokyo today. Otafuku, with her plump cheeks and gentle expression, is often depicted as a representative of ideal feminine beauty in Japanese art. Here she is chiefly a symbol of compassion.

Hakuin painted many images of compassionate prostitutes, generally in the guise of Otafuku. He compared women sold into prostitution as a means of helping to support their families to Bodhisattvas (enlightened beings who remain in earth to help others on their spiritual path)

Confucian Themes

Hakuin Ekaku, 1685–1768, *Kotobuki*. Ink on paper, 46.1 × 22.3 in. Gubutsu-an Collection.

Click on **Image Gallery**, select *Kotobuki* and project it for the class to see.

INQUIRY

- Look at each stroke on the page. Can you tell where Hakuin started drawing the character?
- Describe the strokes. Are they heavy or light? Delicate or powerful? Fast or slow? How does Hakuin emphasize the character's massiveness?
- Notice the space between the strokes. How does Hakuin's spacing of the strokes contribute to the overall feeling of the character?
- Does the shape of the character remind you of anything?
- What kind of mood does the character have? Does it whisper its message, state it firmly or...?
- Looking at the size (it fills the entire page all by itself) and the style, consider the message the character might carry. What do you think this character means?

INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

To reach a broad audience, Hakuin borrowed themes outside of the traditional Zen realm of subject matter, often from Chinese culture including Chinese characters.

In Chinese and Japanese culture the character *kotobuki* represents longevity and good fortune.

In Japan, people mark milestones in old age by celebrating significant birthdays—the 60th, 70th, 77th, 88th and 99th are considered special.

When used alone the character *kotobuki* can mean “congratulations!”

Hotei as Everyman

Hakuin Ekaku, 1685–1768, *Hotei with a Mallet*. Ink on paper, 16.1 × 20.6 in. Man’yo-an Collection.

Click on **Image Gallery**, select *Hotei with a Mallet* and project it for the class to see.

INQUIRY

- What is Hotei doing? Describe his posture, facial expression and body language.
- What is he carrying?
- How does Hakuin imply a sense of energy? Motion?
- Look at the way the calligraphy is drawn. Does Hakuin unify the calligraphy with the drawing? How?
- Before you read the inscription, describe what you think the drawing might mean. The inscription reads:

Omoi kine to wa

Shine to no koto ka?

The mallet of thought/emotion—

Won’t it kill me?

The author of the catalogue and curator of *The Sound of One Hand*, Stephan Addiss explains several puns and word meanings in the inscription as follows: *Omoi* can mean “heavy” but also “thought” or “emotion.” *Omoi kine* means “heavy mallet” and *omoi-kiru* is the verb for “resigning oneself to fate.”

- With these puns in mind what might Hakuin be trying to say? Scholar Yamanouchi Chōzō suggests: “Hakuin comments that the mallet is heavy in the same way status and fortune and fame are burdensome. He admonishes us to throw them away and start living anew.” Scholar John Stevens proposes Hakuin might

have implied “Put the mallet down and you will feel so much lighter.”

- Which interpretation do you prefer? Do you have a different one?
- What evidence in the drawing supports your interpretation of the meaning?

INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

The figure of Hotei was a favorite subject that Hakuin returned to again and again.

Possessing both a secular and spiritual identity, Hotei (Budai in Chinese) according to Chinese tradition, was a Chan (Zen) monk alleged to have lived during the Later Liang Dynasty (907–923 CE) of China.

The word Hotei literally means “cloth bag” and it is an accessory the figure is never pictured without. Filled with food and drink and things given to him, Hotei’s begging bag is shared with all as he wanders through the countryside, playing with children and laughing nonsensically. Friendly and generous, Hotei is a symbol of magnanimity, contentment and happiness.

Although primarily a folkloric figure, Hotei also is a member of the Zen pantheon and understood to be a reincarnation of the Future Buddha, Maitreya. In other sects of Buddhism, Maitreya is believed to be the successor to the historic Shakyamuni Buddha, (the founder of Buddhism) when the *dharma* is forgotten on earth.

Like the old adage “You can’t judge a book by its cover,” Hotei, although appearing like a homeless simpleton, is an enlightened being.

FOOTNOTE

1. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, *Teaching Literacy Through Art, Year One 2004–05 Study*.