

How can I use these *Discussion Topics* in my classroom?

The goal of the following pages is to engage your students in an open-ended dialogue about works of art, leading to learning in several disciplines. This material may be used verbatim by teachers of students in grades 7-12, though the questions are broad enough to be modified easily for grades K-6 with the substitution of less advanced vocabulary. Use the presented comparisons and *Inquiry* as bases for discussion of the images with your students. You need not follow these questions as a script, though you may. You may also choose to have students respond to questions in written form.

How will using 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
- provide justification for opinions
- observe closely
- form hypotheses¹²

Beyond enhancing these abilities, the present lines of inquiry are meant to serve as entry points to learning more deeply about Japanese art and culture, as well as artistic techniques, aesthetics, and art historical concepts.

When students view and discuss works of art, and are introduced to selected related information, it fosters an engaging, contextualized learning environment. Through open-ended inquiry, students are encouraged to formulate educated opinions based on their own experiences, associations and observations. An additional benefit of this process is that the teacher acts as a facilitator, rather than an expert on a particular subject-matter, modeling the processes of posing provocative questions and seeking answers.

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

- Ask questions that have a broad range of possible answers. Avoid yes/no questions.
- Repeat comments and link similar or differing ideas to spur debate and to encourage students to justify their opinions.
- Accept comments neutrally and without judgment.
- If a comment seems off-topic to you, redirect the respondent to the visual: "What do you see that makes you think that?" or "How does the artist show you that?"
- If you do not know the answer to a particular factual question posed by a student, say so. Then ask how one might investigate or do research to find the answer. Encourage students to do so.

Works of art presented on these pages are part of the exhibition *Awakenings: Zen Figure Painting in Medieval Japan*, on view at Japan Society Gallery from March 28, 2007 through June 17, 2007.

¹ Museum of Fine Arts Boston, *Thinking through Art Pilot Program Study*, 1996-97.

² Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, *Teaching Literacy Through Art*, Year One: 2004-05 Study.

(1) Individuals in a Landscape

The Shrimp Eater. Kao (act. first half of 14th c.); seals: “Kao,” “Ninga.” Japanese, Nanbokucho period (1336–1392). Hanging scroll, ink on paper; 87.0 x 34.5 cm. Tokyo National Museum. Important Cultural Property. Courtesy of Tokyo National Museum and Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan.

Inquiry

- Describe the lines that you see in this painting. How would you characterize them?
- Imagine the movement of the artist’s brush as he painted this work. Where do you think he started? In which areas was his brush moving more quickly or more slowly? How can you tell?

Introduce Information:

This painting depicts the “Shrimp Eater,” one of a group of eccentric Buddhist saints with odd qualities.

- How does the artist use line to try to convey to the viewer that this figure is an “eccentric?”

Information for Educators

The “Shrimp Eater” was an eccentric Zen Buddhist saint, belonging to a category of individuals including historical personages as well as some who may not have existed as living figures, and who were likely co-opted from **Daoist** regional deities. These individuals often existed outside the realms of normal thought and behavior as a result of their understanding of Enlightenment. Some, such as this individual, did not even adhere to basic tenets of Buddhism, such as, in this case, the prohibition against consuming meat. Thus, these “scattered saints” embody some of the contradictions inherent in Zen Buddhism.

This painting is an example of a hanging scroll. Most scrolls of this type, in the context of Zen Buddhism, were not typically hung in temple halls for the purpose of communal worship. Rather, Zen Buddhist hanging scrolls were usually meant to be placed in monks’ or abbots’ quarters for the purpose of personal contemplation. In this way, most Zen hanging scrolls served as inspiration for monks’ personal paths to Enlightenment.

The Four Gentlemanly Accomplishments (2 of 4 sets of doors). Oguri Sokei (act. late 15th–early 16th c.). Japanese, Muromachi period (1392–1573), 16th c. Eight sliding-door panels (in two sets of four), ink and light colors on paper; 171.0 x 117.5 cm (each, first set); 169.5 x 91.2 cm (each, second set). Kyoto National Museum.

Important Cultural Property. Photo: Kanai Morio; courtesy of Kyoto National Museum.

Inquiry

- What do you see? What is happening in this painting?

Introduce Information:

The title of these panels, *The Four Gentlemanly Accomplishments*, refers to four hobbies elite men were expected to practice in China beginning in the 8th century. The Four Accomplishments are: calligraphy, painting, chess, and playing the qin (a stringed instrument, pronounced “kin”). By the time these panels were painted, this tradition had made its way to Japan, where the Japanese began to value these skills.

- How does this artist represent the relationship between man and nature in these panels? Which do you feel is more important to the artist, or are they equally important? Explain why.
- Try to identify areas of the painting where the artist uses **negative space** to define forms. Imagine that you are the artist who created this painting. Explain the differences between painting negative forms and positive forms.

Information for Educators

The Medieval Period in Japan (12th–16th century) was a time of unprecedented closeness in the relationship between China and Japan. Ideas were exchanged freely, and travel between nations was frequent, and in some cases expected. Furthermore, Japan looked to China at this time as a cultural model and readily absorbed their artistic, religious and intellectual traditions.

Among the ideas transmitted from China and cultivated in Japan during this period were Zen Buddhism, and the concept of the gentlemanly scholar who was literate in Chinese, and skilled in the refined arts of calligraphy, painting, chess, and playing the qin (known as the koto in Japan). These skills are known as the Four Accomplishments, two of which are represented in the panels shown here. The group of men to the right is playing chess, while a gentleman in the building to the left is viewing a painting (demonstrating an understanding of calligraphy and painting).

Related to this phenomenon, artwork was abundantly imported from China to Japan during this period, and thus influenced Japanese aesthetics. One example of this aesthetic and artistic cultural exchange may clearly be seen in these panels. The paintings follow the contemporary Chinese schema of emphasis on detailed landscape, including a clear fore-, middle- and background separated by an indistinct negative space.³

³ Barnett, Sylvan & Burto, William. *Zen Ink Paintings*. Tokyo: Kodansha International, Ltd., 1982, p.68.

Comparison Questions

- Compare and contrast the styles of these two paintings.
Introduce Information:
The paintings of *The Four Gentlemanly Accomplishments* are done in a style more associated with Chinese painting, while *The Shrimp Eater* is done in a looser, more individual style. Both of these approaches, however, were used by artists in creating paintings for Zen Buddhist functions.
- How might the style each artist uses be appropriate to the subject-matter of their respective paintings?
- Compare the role of nature in *The Four Gentlemanly Accomplishments* and *The Shrimp Eater*. Describe why you think each artist may have chosen to depict nature the way that he did in his painting.

(2) Depicting a Zen Buddhist Deity

Hotei. Kano Masanobu (1434–1530); seal: “Yusei.” Japanese, Muromachi period (1392–1573), late 15th–early 16th c. Hanging scroll, ink and light colors on paper; 81.5 x 44.8 cm. The John C. Weber Collection. © John Bigelow Taylor.

Inquiry

- What do you think the artist wants you to know about this person? How does the artist show the viewer this?
- Where do you see evidence of this particular artist’s interest in **quality of line** in this painting?

Introduce Information:

This is a painting of **Hotei**, a Zen Buddhist saint who was a beggar, and carried a large bag in which he kept all sorts of items. He was thought to be the reincarnation of a Buddha.

- If this person were to talk, what might he say to the viewer?

Information for Educators

Hotei (the Chinese name for this deity) was one of many Zen Buddhist “scattered saints”; eccentrics who likely originated as regional deities and were appropriated by Zen. Some were likely real individuals, while others may have been apocryphal, or composites of actual living individuals. Hotei was a vagabond figure, constantly carrying a large staff and a sack containing miscellaneous items. His and other Zen Buddhist saint’s idiosyncratic behavior was attributed to the fact that they had attained Enlightenment, and thus operated free from the conventions of logical order.⁴ Many interpret his particular character as a caution to exert kindness on all individuals, because even the most common man may be a reincarnation of the Buddha.

The artist who executed this painting, Kano Masanobu (~1454-1530), is a critical figure in the history of Japanese ink painting. He was the founder of the Kano School of painting, which lasted over 300 years, and is considered to be one of the most influential schools of this medium throughout art history. Kano Masanobu was a court painter for the Japanese Shogun, rather than a monk painter. However, he worked closely with Zen temples, creating commissions for them and their supporters. His style is reminiscent of Song Dynasty Chinese works, which were favored by Zen Buddhist patrons in Japan at that time. Styles within the Kano school changed over generations as traditions were passed on from Kano Masanobu to his son Kano Motonobu and beyond.⁵

Slumbering Budai. Attributed to Muqi (act. mid- to late 13th c.); seal: “Zen’a.” Chinese, Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), 13th c. Hanging scroll, ink on paper; 77.1 x 30.9 cm. Kyoto National Museum. Courtesy of Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan.

⁴ Lippit, Yukio. “Awakenings: The Development of the Zen Figural Pantheon,” in *Awakenings: Zen Figure Painting in Medieval Japan*, p.19.

⁵ Lee, Sherman. *A History of Far Eastern Art*, 5th edition. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994, p.440.

Inquiry

- Describe the mood of this painting. How do you think the artist wants you to feel about this painting? How does the artist want you to feel about this person?
- Where in this painting do you see evidence of this particular artist's interest in **tonalities** of ink?

Introduce Information:

This is also a painting of Hotei, the Zen Buddhist beggar saint.

- Can you find Hotei's attributes (staff and bag) in this painting? Why might the artist choose to create such an ambiguous and abstract painting of this Buddhist saint?

Information for Educators

Hotei and Budai are the same Zen Buddhist deity. Hotei is the Chinese name and Budai is the Japanese name for this individual.

Slumbering Budai is an example of what may be called the only style unique to Zen Buddhist ink painting during the Medieval Period. It is known as "apparition painting" for its use of thin washes of ink, highlighted by a small number of specific, darker details. Overall, it is difficult to characterize a style of Zen painting, since monks and professional painters working in service of Zen drew inspiration from and utilized so many different extant styles.⁶

The artist who painted *Slumbering Budai*, Muqi (pronounced "mu-chi"), was both a Chinese Zen Buddhist monk and a painter. This was not uncommon, though Muqi stands out somewhat as a semi-professional painter. Zen Buddhist monks were all trained in an allied artform; calligraphy, and those that pursued painting did so mainly to further their own insights into Enlightenment, rather than painting explicitly for others.⁷ While Muqi's work was not popular among Chinese patrons, his distinctive painting style was highly valued by Japanese monks and patrons (this trend continued from the 13th century into the 14th century).⁸ Even during his lifetime, Muqi's works were collected among the Japanese ruling class and, as a result, his style was often copied by later Japanese painters.⁹

⁶ Shimizu, Yoshiaki. "Zen art?" in *Zen in China, Japan, East Asian art : papers of the International Symposium on Zen, Zurich University, 16.-18.11.1982*. Helmut Brinker (ed.). New York: Peter Lang, 1985, p.91.

⁷ Colcutt, Martin. "'Zen Art' in a Monastic Context: Zen and the Arts in Medieval Kenchōji," in *Awakenings: Zen Figure Painting in Medieval Japan*, p.20.

⁸ Lippit, p.15.

⁹ Shimizu, Yoshiaki and Wheelwright, Carolyn (eds.). *Japanese Ink Paintings from American Collections*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, pp. 43–47.

Comparison Questions

- How are these two artists' paintings of the same Zen Buddhist saint different? How are they similar?

Introduce Information:

Up until the early 14th century, many images of Buddhist deities were meant to look almost exactly the same, and were often copied exactly from one another and from sketched models. These two paintings, though, depicting the same deity, show that individuality did develop in the painting of Zen Buddhist figures.

- What are some reasons that artists' works differ from one another, even if they deal with the same subject?
- Why might artists sometimes want to copy spiritual images exactly, rather than portraying them in a creative or more abstract manner?

(3) Portrait Painting

Bodhidharma Crossing the Yangzi River on a Reed. Painter unknown. Japanese, Nanbokucho period (1336–1392). Hanging scroll, ink, colors, and gold on silk; 69.0 x 40.6 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, 11.6312. Photograph © 2007 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Inquiry

- What do you notice about this painting? What do you notice about this person?

Introduce Information:

This is a historical Buddhist figure named Bodhidharma, a Buddhist monk originally from India. After attaining Enlightenment, Bodhidharma traveled to China to spread his teachings. He is known as the founder of Zen Buddhism in China.

- Does the artist give us any hints that this person is a spiritual figure?
- What clues does the artist give us regarding the setting of this painting? Where do you imagine this individual is? What does he appear to be doing?
- What are some elements that **balance** the composition of this painting?

Information for Educators

This painting depicts a central image in the legend of the life of Bodhidharma; that of him miraculously crossing the Yangtse River on a reed. While Bodhidharma was a historical figure, stories of his life are often embellished by legend. One such account relates that in the 6th century, Bodhidharma, having attained Enlightenment, traveled from India to Southern China to spread his teachings. There, he met with Emperor Liang Wu. The Emperor was a supporter of Buddhism, but was confounded by Bodhidharma’s apparently incomprehensible line of discussion with him.¹⁰

“What is the ultimate meaning of the sacred teaching?” Master replied, “Vast emptiness; nothing sacred!” Then the Emperor asked, “Who are you who confronts me?” Bodhidharma answered, “I don’t know.” The Emperor didn’t get it.¹¹

This is very typical of Zen, and text of the exchange between Bodhidharma and the Emperor, specifically, later became the basis of **koan**. Because the Emperor failed to grasp the enigmatic meaning of Bodhidharma’s statements, the meeting was deemed unsuccessful. Bodhidharma then headed north, miraculously crossing the Yangtse River on a reed. Upon arriving in the Sung Mountains, he spent nine continuous years meditating in a cave before establishing his first Zen Buddhist temple in China in Hunan Province.¹²

¹⁰ Shimizu, Yoshiaki. “Bodhidharma Meditating Facing a Wall” in *Awakenings: Zen Figure Painting in Medieval Japan*, p.72.

¹¹ Xisou Shaotan, *Wujia Zhengzong Zan (Eulogies of the Five Houses of the Legitimate Teachings; 1254)*, in *Dainihon Zokuzokyo*, 2B, 8-5. Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshu Guan, 1923, p. 453.

¹² Kanazawa, Hiroshi. *Japanese Ink Painting*. New York: Kodansha International, Ltd., 1979, p.47.

Portrait of Mokuan Shūyu. Painter unknown. Japanese, Nanbokuchō period (1336–1392), 1373. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk; 108.0 x 47.5 cm. Kyoto National Museum. Important Cultural Property. Photo: Kanai Morio; courtesy of Kyoto National Museum.

Inquiry

- How do you think the artist felt about the man in the painting? How can you tell?
- Notice that the sitter is not facing forward, but shown in three-quarter view. How might it change the painting to have the sitter directly facing the viewer rather than facing slightly to the side?

Introduce Information:

This is a painting of a Japanese Zen Buddhist monk, Mokuan Shūyu. Portraits of Zen monks were often created during this period, and artists who created them strove to be both realistic in their portrayal of the physical attributes of the sitter, and also to convey something about his character.

- Do you feel that this artist was successful in capturing more than just what Mokuan Shūyu looked like? Why or why not?

Information for Educators

This portrait is an example of a genre of painting known as **chinzō**, portraits of Zen priests. During the Medieval period, chinzō were often created to be conferred upon a monk or Master's students once they had attained Enlightenment. Monks carried these portraits with them, and many that were painted in China ended up in Japan upon Japanese monks' return from study abroad.

Portrait of Mokuan Shūyu, like many other examples of chinzō, is highly realistic and naturalistic. There is no setting; it is meant to be independent of space and time. These priest portraits are almost always in three-quarter view, and depict the full figure sitting in a chair, or a half-view of the sitter's torso, hands and head, as we see here. These works are known to have met the approval of the sitter during his lifetime, so they can be assumed to be very accurate portrayals.¹³ Examples of high-quality chinzō give a strong sense of the individual, which is rare in other contemporary forms of Chinese and Japanese figure painting.

¹³ Brinker, Helmut & Kanazawa, Hiroshi. *Zen Masters of Meditation in Images and Writings*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996, p.166.

Comparison Questions

- In general, why do you think artists paint portraits?
Introduce Information:
Both of these portraits depict real individuals that lived at one time, and who were respected within Zen Buddhism (though to different degrees). One (Bodhidharma) is a key **Patriarch** from India, while the other (Mokuan Shūyu) was a Japanese Zen Buddhist monk. The portrait of Bodhidharma was painted long after his death, while the portrait of Mokuan Shūyu was painted during his lifetime.
- What are some reasons that a portrait painted after a person's death might look different than a portrait painted during one's lifetime?
- What are some ways that the artist of *Bodhidharma Crossing the Yangzi River on a Reed* shows that Bodhidharma is a foreigner (Indian) and not Chinese or Japanese?
- Which portrait do you prefer? Give specific reasons why.