

## Asian Arts and Artists

**Asia is huge! It is the largest continent on earth and home to over 4.5 billion people—that's more than half the world's population! 48 countries and their dependencies make up Asia. Today, we will look at a few artworks from this huge continent to learn about the human stories each tells. What does the artwork reveal about the artist or the people who used it and lived with it? We will look at the materials, and think about the hands that made it.**

**It is important that we keep in mind that each artwork does not represent a whole culture. There are a variety of ethnic groups, histories, languages, landscapes, cultures, climates, and beliefs in every single country. We want to avoid generalizations or stereotypes.**

### ARTWORK 1:

#### Thailand, Asia

**Walking Shakyamuni Buddha, 15th century, Bronze with traces of pigment  
The William Hood Dunwoody Fund, 31.115**

#### Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. This sculpture made in Thailand shows an important teacher, called the Buddha, who gave up his life of comfort as a Prince to help people figure out how to escape from suffering. People valued his teaching so much they made it the basis of a religion called Buddhism.
2. This sculpture shows the Buddha as walking among the people, peacefully with his eyes lowered. His raised hand is a gesture of reassurance.
3. This way of showing the Buddha is closely associated with the Sukhothai Kingdom of Thailand, which flourished in the 1300s and 1400s (a long time ago). The long body, arms, and legs, oval face and smooth modelling of the Buddha's clothing are typical of this time period.
4. Thai images presented a new image of the Buddha that emphasized his earthly aspects, rather than royal traits. Sukhothai walking images like this connected the people more directly with the Buddha. They also communicated the idea that Thai kings were closer to the people than their counterparts in India or Khmer.

#### Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look closely at this sculpture of the Buddha. How would you describe him? How do you think he feels? What do you see that makes you say that? How do you feel when you look at him? Imagine that this is how many people in Thailand felt hundreds of years ago too.
2. Take the walking pose of the Buddha. Raise your hand in this gesture of assurance. Lower your eyes. How does this feel in your body and mind?
3. This sculpture is just four feet tall, about the same height as a second grader! How might the height (scale) of the sculpture help people relate to it? How would it feel different if it was really big, like an elephant? Or really small like a baby?

4. Imagine the artist who made this using his hands to model the clay (it was made of clay before it was turned into a bronze sculpture). Think about using clay or any soft material to model the long arms and flowing clothes and lowered eyes. Imagine the time it took him to make the designs in Buddha's hair. What do you think he might have been feeling or thinking about when he made this?

Time permitting, compare this walking Buddha with a seated Buddha, like the Enshrined Buddha from Myanmar.

**ARTWORK 2:****Kondō Takahiro, Japan, 1958****Reduction I, 2013, Porcelain with blue and green underglazes and "silver mist" overglaze  
The P.D. McMillan Memorial Fund, 2014.64, © Kondō Takahiro****Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)**

1. This contemporary sculpture made in response to disasters in Japan references more traditional sculptures of the Buddha.
2. Kondō Takahiro grew up in a family of traditional blue-and-white porcelain (ceramic) artists. His knowledge of working with porcelain clay and cobalt, led him to develop a highly personal style.
3. Takahiro coats his porcelain sculptures with a metallic combination of silver, gold, and platinum. In the final firing, this amalgam beads up on the surface, creating thousands of shiny droplets against the dark cobalt blue.
4. This porcelain sculpture is one of a series of five based on casts of his own body. The project was in response to the natural disaster of the tsunami and the human-made nuclear disaster at Fukushima in 2011. The figure represents what many people think of as a Japanese person in the timeless guise of a Buddhist holy man, seated in a meditative posture.
5. In this case, Kondō's beautiful "silver mist" glaze is intended to be a reference to the radioactivity that was released and that may well "drench" the people of Japan. Kondō's choice of title, Reduction, suggests the dire results of the disaster—the diminishment of an entire race.

**Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)**

1. Look closely at this porcelain sculpture based on the artist's own body. What words would you use to describe it? How do you feel when you look at him? What about the sculpture makes you feel this way?
2. Imagine Kondo Takahiro using his hands to model the clay (it was made of clay before it was covered in the textured glaze) to look like his own body. Then he glazes it with a mixture of silver, gold, and platinum to achieve the unique surface you see here. Imagine you could touch the surface of this sculpture. How do you imagine it would feel?
3. Compare this sculpture to the Buddhas around it. Why do you suppose this artist working today might want to refer to traditional sculptures? Given that Takahiro is commenting on the impacts of natural and a human-made disaster on the people of Japan, why do you think he might reference the Buddha in particular?
4. What surprises you most about this contemporary sculpture? Why do you think it is important to look at contemporary art by Asian artists?

Compare to a picture of Baatarzorig Batjargal's painting, Smoke, to see how a contemporary Mongolian artist incorporates a Buddhist bodhisattva (deity) into a work about the impact of rapid development and pollution on tradition.

### ARTWORK 3:

India, Asia

Shiva Nataraja (Lord of the Dance), 1100, Bronze

Gift of Mrs. E. C. Gale, 29.2

#### Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. The Hindu god Shiva appears in many different forms! In this sculpture from India Shiva appears as Nataraja, or Lord of the Dance. He raises his left foot in a graceful dance pose.
2. The artist who made this sculpture had to make sure to include recognizable symbols that people expected to see. In his upper right hand, Nataraja holds a drum, the sound associated with the creation of life. The flame that he holds in his upper left hand symbolizes destruction. The posture of Shiva's lower left and right palms signifies protection. The foot that rests on the demon's or assistant's back symbolizes the elimination of ignorance, while the raised left foot signifies salvation. A now missing ring of fire would have reinforced the message about the relationship between creation and destruction of the universe.
3. Shiva stands on the back of a fat, child-like creature clutching a snake. The creature's identity is still debated. Some scholars believe it represents a dwarf, which turns up in early texts as an assistant to Shiva's dance. Others argue it is a vanquished demon, named Apasmara or Mushalagan, that personifies ignorance.
4. This bronze sculpture of Shiva was probably paraded around an Indian community so that many people of all different social classes had an opportunity to experience seeing and celebrating it.

#### Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look closely at the sculpture of Shiva Nataraja. Describe what you see. What other details do you notice? What do you wonder about?
2. Take the pose of Shiva as closely as possible, given that you probably don't have four arms. How do you feel in this pose? What about it makes you feel that way? Why do you suppose the artist made him pose like this?
3. Look closely at Shiva's hairdo with a topknot decorated with crane feathers and a cluster of spiky leaves. His long hair is adorned with his sacred flower (the datura), a seated woman to symbolize the Ganges River, and a crescent moon. That's a lot of information to pack into a hairdo! Think about what you have heard about the sculpture so far. Why do you suppose the artist wanted to include images of or about flowers, water, birds, and the moon in this sculpture?
4. In its day, this sculpture was probably paraded through the streets in an Indian community, providing an opportunity for many people to see it. Imagine it being moved on a huge cart with wheels, maybe under a colorful canopy (like an umbrella). Imagine lots of people following the sculpture. What sounds do you hear? What scents do you smell? How do you feel?

**ARTWORK 4:**

**Suit by Unknown Japanese; Artist: Helmet by Saotome Iechika, Japan, Asia  
Red-and-blue-laced Suit of Armor from the Kii Tokugawa Family, 17th century, Iron,  
leather, lacquer, silk, wood, gold leaf and powder, bear fur  
The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund, 2009.60a-s**

**Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)**

1. This elaborate suit of Japanese armor is a lightweight, form-fitting type designed to protect the body in close combat. With a face mask, forearm sleeves, thigh and shin guards, and bear-fur boots, every inch of the wearer's body is protected. That said, the suit could have been worn in battle but probably was only used for parades.
2. Makers laced together hundreds of lacquered (lacquer is a material made from the sap of trees) metal and leather plates with red and blue silk cords to create the distinctive appearance of the armor and give it flexibility.
3. The suit may have belonged to a feudal lord named Tokugawa Yorinobu (1602–1671). He was the founder of the branch of the Tokugawa family that ruled Japan until 1867.
4. The helmet bowl consists of 124 plates, an unusually high number, designed in an upside-down acorn shape. A praying mantis, gilded with gold, is poised as if to strike its prey. The helmet is signed by Saotome Iechika, a famous armorer during the late 1500s and early 1600s.

**Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)**

1. Look closely at the Japanese armor. There is a lot to see here! What do you notice first? Next? What else do you see? What words (adjectives) describe it best?
2. Look at all the different materials that the suit of armor is made of. Where do you see metal? Fur? Cloth? Silk cord? Leather? Lacquer (a special shiny material made from tree sap)? Many different specialists worked on different parts of the armor. Why do you suppose it was important to make the armor so elaborate? Why might it have required so many different materials?
3. Imagine the man who wore this armor as he put it on piece by piece. How do you think he felt when he had the whole suit of armor on, including his bear-fur boots. Think about what he felt like when he moved. How do you think he felt? How might it be to move in this much stuff? Think about the sounds he might have heard when the lacquered metal and leather plates hit each other.
4. Look at the praying mantis on top of the helmet made by the artist Saotome Iechika. Describe it. What qualities of a praying mantis might make it a good symbol for a feudal lord? The armor also includes images of phoenixes, tortoises, and lions, all symbols of the family's power. What animal would you want on an outfit to signify your power?

**ARTWORK 4 alternate:****Replica of the Saan Teahouse at Daitokuji Gyokurin-in, Kyoto, 2001 (constructed)****Yasuimoku Komuten Company Ltd.****2001.204.1****Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)**

1. This tea house built by Japanese architects about 20 years ago is a copy of a hundreds-years old tea house in Kyoto, Japan. It is based on the Sa-an, an 18th century teahouse within the Zen monastery of Daitokuji in Kyoto that is now designated as one of Japan's "Important Cultural Properties."
2. This type of "simple" tea house was built as a reaction against Japan's elite rulers' big, fancy tea gatherings held in formal halls (giant rooms). Tea masters (specialists) began to promote the practice of wabi (rustic) tea in the 1500s and separate, specially designed teahouses began to be built.
3. The style of this tea house is called sōan, which means "grass hut." Like this one, sōan teahouses were small and built from humble materials including roughly milled lumber, bamboo, thatch, and earthen walls. In its simplicity, soan teahouses were meant to suggest a monk's retreat in the wilderness.
4. The low entranceway required all participants to humble themselves as they entered the tearoom from the garden. Although a built-in alcove for the display of art was adopted from more formal structures, its size was greatly reduced--sufficient only to display a small painting or simple floral arrangement.
5. A small, carved signboard under the eaves of the museum's teahouse reads "Zenshin-an," Hermitage of the Meditative Heart -- a name bestowed on it by a temple abbot from Kyoto.

**Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)**

1. Take your time to look at this tea house and the garden leading up to it. What do you notice? What words would you use to describe this tea house? The artists who made the tea house wanted to capture the feeling of being in a simple room or hut in nature. How have they done this?
2. The aesthetic called wabi favors a simple, humble beauty. You noticed the materials like wood and bamboo used to make this tea house. Now, let's look at the things in the tea house. What about them makes them appear not quite perfect? What seems simple about them?
3. The teahouse on which this one was based was called Sa-an, or "Hermitage of the Raincoat." How has the designer of this tea house also altered the garden environment to give the appearance that you might just stumble upon the structure walking through the woods on a rainy day?
4. Wabi was a very planned-for or contrived aesthetic. Imagine the artists of the clay teaware purposely making them imperfect, but also beautiful! What are some examples today of things that are marketed based on their imperfection?

**ARTWORK 5:****Korea, Asia****Lidded Jar with Handle, 9th century, Earthenware****The Ellen and Fred Wells Fund, 98.108.2a,b****Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)**

1. A Korean potter made this small jar (it is about 7 ¼ " tall) to be used as part of someone's table setting.
2. The potter probably made the body of the vessel by hand, without a potter's wheel, and attached it to the base (bottom). The lively design, specific to this time period in Korea, was made using stamps that he impressed into the clay when it was still damp. He added the curly handle and lid after it was shaped.
3. During the Unified Silla period (668–935), potters produced a wide variety of tableware, ranging from completely unadorned pieces to cups, jars, and bottles elaborately decorated with stamped designs.

**Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)**

1. Look closely at this small jar with a lid made in Korea over 1,000 years ago. What do you notice first? What draws your attention to that part? What words would you use to describe the vessel?
2. Imagine holding this jar in your hands, just like someone in Korea did over 1,000 years ago. What does it feel like? What do you see that makes you say that? Think about how it would feel if it held something hot. How would it feel differently if it held something cold. What would you use it for today? Where would you place it?
3. Think about the person who made this. If you have ever played with or made art from clay do your best to recall what that felt like. While the clay was still wet, he stamped the designs into the clay to make the pattern. What would you use to stamp in a design? Then he decided to make the curly handle. What do you think he was thinking about when he made that handle? What does it make you think about?

If possible, show a picture of Mia's sculpture *Some/One*, 2005, by Do Ho Suh.

A comparison presents an interesting opportunity to compare and contrast the repetition of forms and even the impression of marks to both works. While the small ceramic is playful in its details and feels highly personal, Do Ho Suh addresses the complexities of and contrast between personal and group identity.

**ARTWORK 6:****China, Asia****Imperial throne, 18th century, Polychrome lacquer over a softwood frame****Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton, 93.32a-d****Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)**

1. This huge throne was made for a famous Emperor named Qianlong who ruled China from 1736–95. It is a very rare and exceptionally large piece of court furniture and one of the more fully decorated thrones outside China. One of the reasons the throne is so big is to accommodate the many layers of silk clothing worn by the emperor and his court!
2. The throne includes images of dragons and heavenly landscapes painted in gold lacquer (see next key idea) across the entire seat. Five-clawed imperial dragons moving among clouds and grasping for a flaming pearl above the ocean are official insignia and similar to the decoration of court robes and other official court textiles of the period. (Compare to a robe nearby if possible or show a picture)
3. Other symbols include a shou, which is actually five bats put together in a creative way to communicate five aspects of longevity: long life, good health, comfortable wealth, virtue, and peaceful death. The mushroom symbol is called lingzhi and also symbolizes long life.
4. The throne is made of layers upon layers of lacquer, a natural and highly toxic substance that comes from the sap of lac trees. These layers are applied over a carved wooden frame. Some of the layers of lacquer are mixed with colors to make the images pop! For example, the curved legs, aprons, and openwork back and side panels are all carved in relief with scrolls and lacquered in green, red, and gold.

**Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)**

1. Take a look at this throne made for an Emperor in China almost 300 years ago. Without getting too close, make a list in your mind of some of the things you notice about it. What do you see? Why do you suppose an emperor (an important ruler) might want to show dragons in the heavens on his throne? The other image you noticed is a What do you wonder about this throne?
2. Imagine for a moment the emperor wearing many layers of garments including a fabulous silk robe (show picture) like this one at an important event. How do you think he might have felt? What do you see that makes you say that? What about the throne itself communicates the power of the Emperor?
3. The throne is filled with symbols that communicate the importance of long life, even the idea of living forever! Why do you think the royal court might have placed such huge significance on the idea of living a long life? For you today, what might be some of the benefits of living forever? What might be some of the downsides? Debate whether or not living forever would be a good or bad idea.



**ARTWORK 7:****China, Asia****Scholarly Pursuits, 17th–mid 18th century, Ink and color on silk****Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton, 2005.54.4****Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)**

1. This painted silk scroll from China illustrates the different roles assigned to men and women hundreds of years ago in China.
2. In imperial China, elite women mostly lived in the inner quarters of their homes, hidden away in confined spaces. On those rare occasions when they appeared in public, they were usually engaged in singing, playing instruments, and dancing to entertain men.
3. This scroll depicts groups of scholars engaging in various activities in a garden setting. In one scene, a group of women musicians is about to play for several comfortably seated scholars who are eating and drinking.
4. The artist intended us to compare the screen behind the musicians, painted with beautiful flowers, with the women themselves—reinforcing the idea of women as decorative objects meant for entertainment.

**Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)**

1. There is a lot going on in this painting. It is a type of painting called a scroll because it can be rolled out to show the picture and writing or up for storage! Take your time to look closely at the picture. Describe what you see. What seems to be going on? What do you see that makes you that?
2. We no longer know the name of the artist who painted this. Yet it is fun to think about them (it was most likely painted by a man) thinking about making this picture. Which parts do you imagine were most important to him? What do you see that makes you say that? If you were going to paint something on silk to show people hundreds of years from now what it is like in your social circle (school, community, classroom, etc.) today, what details would you include? Why?
3. This artwork says a lot about the life of Chinese gentlemen scholars who lived a very privileged life in their day. Based on the picture, what privileges did they enjoy? Women at this time, even those who shared the same social class, did not enjoy the same privileges. Here they are shown as accomplished musicians entertaining the men. What kind of art form might you use today to show the power and privilege dynamics between men and women in your life? Your community? The world?

Compare to a picture of Yang Yongliang's Artificial Wonderland II - Taigu Descendants to explore how the contemporary digital artist referenced historical Chinese painting.

## ARTWORK 8

**Black Hmong, Vietnam, Asia**

**Woman's Bib, 20th century, Cotton; resist dyed (batik) and embroidery**

**Gift of Richard L. Simmons in memory of Roberta Grodberg Simmons, 2004.169.51**

### Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. This woman's bib exemplifies the complex textiles, often with geometric, abstracted patterns, created by Hmong women. These textiles provide a shared visual language: patterns signify communal values, with the spiral motifs seen here associated with family. Over centuries of displacement, the Hmong use textiles as a primary transmitter of culture.
2. This woman's bib is an example of one of the most difficult techniques to produce--indigo batiks, which depend on a resist-dyeing process. First, the design is drawn on the cloth with wax, which resists dyeing and protects the pattern. Then the cloth is dipped in an indigo dye bath. Next, the wax is removed, revealing the intricate design. On this example, golden stitches complement the batik design.
3. The Hmong are originally from China, but during the last two hundred years many Hmong have migrated to other countries in Southeast Asia as well as Europe and North America. For many Hmong women, traditional clothing continues to be a source of creative expression as well as cultural affirmation.

### Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Take a look at this woman's bib, made by a Hmong woman. This is not a baby's bib--it is part of a woman's dress. What details do you notice? What words could you use to describe the designs? What do the designs remind you of or make you think about?
2. The technique used to make these designs is called batik. This particular kind is called indigo because it uses deep blue indigo dye. Imagine a woman drawing the design onto the cloth with hot wax, which she applies with a long metal cone. When she dips the cloth into the blue dye the wax pushes away the dye to protect the design. Then she removes the wax to reveal the intricate design. Which part of this process seems most difficult to you? Which part do you imagine is most exciting for the artist? Why do you think so? What art processes do you find most exciting? Why?
3. The patterns on Hmong clothing often communicate meaning. For example, the spirals here signify family. What are some other patterns and designs you can think of that also communicate ideas? How do you use symbols today to communicate what is important to you?

**Alternate to ARTWORK 8 : (Not on view but I will make another appeal to Pujan in the winter ahead of tours starting)**

**Pa Lee Thao, Laos**

**Village Story Blanket, 1983, Cotton; embroidery**

**Gift of Lucy and John Hartwell, 83.128, Copyright of the artist, artist's estate, or assignees**

**Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)**

1. Hmong artist Pa Lee Thao embroidered this “story blanket” while living in a refugee camp in Thailand. It shows specific sites in her home country of Laos as well as many of the activities she and her Hmong community participated in before they had to flee home because of the Vietnam War in Southeast Asia.
2. While in the refugee camps in Thailand, in order to generate additional family income, Pa Lee Thao and many other Hmong women used their remarkable needlework skills (traditionally used for making and decorating clothing) to create elaborately embroidered story panels like this one.
3. Artist Pa Lee Thao wrote about this artwork in a letter: “This village scene tells about the village Phou Bia in Laos. The house that the two dragons surround was a place that the Hmong’s army chief (General Vang Pao) used to live. It also used to be a temple for the Hmong population to praise the Lord. The other things on the bottom tell about the Hmong’s life in Laos. They used to feed the chickens and pigs and go to the farm. It also mentions the fruit and food that Hmong people produce in a year. Hmong were happy to celebrate the New Year. This is from Thailand made in 1983.”

**Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)**

1. There is a lot to see in this embroidered story cloth by Hmong artist Pa Lee Thao! Spend some time looking at the many details. What do you see? Name some of the details. What appears to be going on in some of the parts of the story blanket? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. It is impossible for most of us to imagine what life was like for Pa Lee Thao and other Hmong that were forced to leave home to live in a refugee camp in another country. What we might be able to imagine from looking at this story blanket is the enormous amount of time and skill it took for her to make this. It is just over 5 feet long and not quite 4 feet tall. Think about the artist putting all of the colored threads into small embroidery needles and putting these through the cloth over and over again to make the hundreds of pictures here. When you think about this, what do you wonder about?
3. Many Hmong artists in the Thai refugee camps made their embroideries to be sent to the United States where people were eager to buy them. In this way, they made extra money for their families and people in the United States learned about the Hmong people. What can you learn about Hmong life before the war by looking closely at this blanket? What details about your community would you include in an artwork to tell other people about it?

**In case we can get a Cy Thao on view, here is an example**

**ARTWORK TBD:**

**Cy Thao,**

**United States, 1972**

**#43, 1993–2001, Oil on canvas**

**Gift of funds from anonymous donors, 2010.55.43, © Cy Thao**

**Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)**

1. This painting by Hmong artist Cy Thao shows how the Hmong who relocated to Minneapolis and St. Paul in the 1970s and 80s had to adapt their traditional practices to the Minnesota calendar and seasons. This scene includes the Metrodome, a stadium in Minneapolis that no longer exists.
2. Cy Thao wrote a text to go with this painting. He wrote: To keep the culture alive we have to adapt. Instead of celebrating the New Year outdoor and after the harvest season, we celebrate it during American holidays or on weekends because it was the only time we can get off from work.
3. In 1975, Saint Paul became a popular destination for the active resettlement of Hmong people from Southeast Asia following the Vietnam War when many Hmong had been displaced from their homeland in Laos.
4. Cy Thao intentionally looked at Hmong needlework story blankets (see artwork 5) for inspiration. These were perhaps the most recognizable type of Hmong art in the United States, when he made his series of 53 paintings of the Hmong experience from their mythical past to the present. He emulated the way many Hmong embroidery artists showed human figures in his own art.

**Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)**

1. Look closely at this painting by Hmong artist Cy Thao. What do you suppose is happening in the painting? What do you see that makes you say that? What details do you notice?
2. Think about the colors and figures. How does this painting make you feel? What details lead you to feel that? Now, think about the artist Cy Thao painting this. What do you think he might have been thinking about when he painted it? How do you think he might have felt telling this part of his peoples' story with his brush and paint?
3. Name some details that show Hmong culture and American culture. How does Cy Thao show the two intersecting? Do you, a friend, or family member have cultural traditions that have been adapted to new ways? if so, what are they? How have they been adapted?
4. Cy Thao studied the artwork of Hmong embroidery artists for inspiration for his own way of showing the human figures in his paintings. What type of art do you (or would you) look at for inspiration for your own art? Why?

## Contemporary Artworks



Tiffany Chung, Vietnam, 1969

Reconstructing an exodus history: flight routes from camps and of ODP cases, 2017,  
Embroidery on fabric

The Henry Kinsell Endowment for Art Acquisition, 2018.12, © Courtesy of the artist and Tyler  
Rollins Fine Art, New York



Martin Wong, United States, 1946–99

Polaris, 1987, Acrylic on canvas

The P.D. McMillan Memorial Fund, 2017.35, © Estate of Martin Wong



Yang Yongliang, China, 1980

Artificial Wonderland II - Taigu Descendants, 2016, Digital print

The Friends of Bruce Dayton Art Acquisition Fund, 2018.9, © Yang Yongliang