

Honoring a Wise Person



Bodhisattva of Wisdom (Tikshna-Manjushri), 1403-24

Chinese (Ming dynasty), Gilt brass

Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 2001, 2001.59

Grades:	6 – 9
Subjects:	English Language Arts, Social Science, Fine Arts, Foreign Languages
Time Required:	2 – 4 periods, 45 minutes each
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Lesson Overview

Students will learn about Buddhism and how the religion changed as it spread throughout Asia. They will learn about bodhisattvas in general and Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, specifically. They will create a portrait of a wise person using attributes that will help to identify the figure.

Materials

- Reproduction of *Bodhisattva of Wisdom (Tikshna-Manjushri)*
- Sketch paper
- Heavyweight textured paper



- Crayons, pencils, oil pastels, and other art materials
- Markers

Lesson Steps

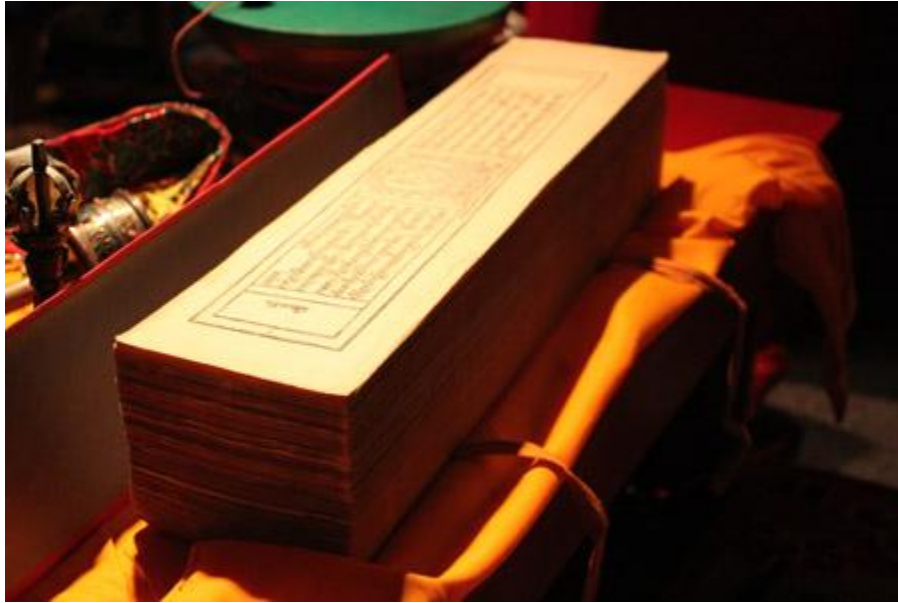
1. Have students look closely at *Bodhisattva of Wisdom (Tikshna-Manjushri)*. See how much students can figure out about the work when they take time to look at it, think about it, and share ideas.
2. Use a brainstorming technique, such as Pair Share, to get students started before sharing with the whole class.
 - Pair Share: Students turn to a partner and take turns making observations about the sculpture. After naming some of the most obvious things, they will begin to look more deeply and notice things that their partners did not. They should remember to share these ideas in the discussion later.
3. Use the following questions to begin a discussion:
 - What do you see? What can you find out about the work?
 - Where was the work made? What is it made of?
 - The figure was made in China of gilt brass. Gilt means an artist has covered it with gold leaf or powder.
 - Why might the artist have chosen this material? What effect does it have? What can you determine about the person depicted?
 - The material is precious and conveys a sense of opulence and splendor because the person depicted is an important Buddhist deity known as a bodhisattva (bo-dee-SOT-vah).
 - What is Buddhism?
 - Buddhism is a religion practiced mostly in Eastern and Southeast Asia and is named after its founder, Buddha. Around 600 BCE (prior to the year 0), a prince named Siddhartha Gautama (sid-DAR-tha GO-ta-ma) began to question his luxurious life in his parents' palace. Siddhartha's father tried to keep sheltered, but Siddhartha grew curious and snuck outside the palace walls. He went out into the world and saw a poor man, a sick man, a dead man, and a monk. Recognizing that life is impermanent and full of suffering even for a prince, he decided to leave the palace and to live the life of a wandering ascetic (person who practices strict self-denial as a measure of personal and spiritual discipline). In his travels, Siddhartha contemplated suffering. He wondered what causes suffering and why must people suffer. In a place called Bodhgaya (bode-GUY-ah), India, he meditated beneath a Bodhi (BOH-dee) tree and achieved enlightenment (a state of heightened spiritual awareness), becoming the Buddha, which means "enlightened one" in Sanskrit, an ancient Indian language. The Buddha went on to teach that desire is the root of suffering and that people must lead right and virtuous lives free of desire if they want to escape the cycle of suffering. Buddhists believe in reincarnation—that they will be reborn after they die. The goal of Buddhism is to achieve nirvana, a state of enlightenment, so that people will not be reborn and will no longer suffer.
 - As Buddhism spread through Southeast and East Asia, different groups of people began to practice regional variations of the core faith. Developments in belief and practice changed the art, iconography, and scripture associated with Buddhism. The figure of the bodhisattva is one of the most significant of these developments. Bodhisattvas are enlightened individuals who decide not to enter nirvana. Instead, they choose to be reborn so they can continue to help people seek enlightenment.

- Who is the person depicted in the sculpture?
 - Manjushri (man-JOO-shree) is the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. Because bodhisattvas played an increasingly prominent role in Buddhism as it spread through Southeast and East Asia, Manjushri was venerated among the Chinese like a deity. Through devotional practices like prayer and offerings at temples, Chinese Buddhists looked to Manjushri for guidance and wisdom. He has four arms as a symbol of his divinity.
- Where did Manjushri live?
 - He lived on a mountain called Wutaishan (woo-TIE-shon; meaning “five-plateau mountain”). On the next page is a print of Wutaishan, which depicts Manjushri’s earthly abode teeming with devotees. They proceed down the paths, having visited the bodhisattva’s temple. In the background, there are the five peaks for which Wutaishan was named.



Map of Wutaishan, 1846, Sino-Tibetan, painted and colored xylograph, Rubin Museum of Art

- Now that we have seen where Manjushri lives, let’s go back to looking at the sculpture of him. What is he holding? What do these objects mean? What symbols can you identify?
 - Manjushri holds four attributes (objects closely associated with or belonging to a specific person). In his top left hand, he wields a sword; in his top right hand, he holds a book like the one seen below; at one time he held a bow and arrow in his bottom left hand, but they have since been lost. His bottom right hand is positioned in a mudra, a symbolic hand gesture. This gesture, known as the prithvi mudra, symbolizes the earth, steadiness, and the willingness to forgive.
 - With the sword, Manjushri cut a gorge to drain the lake from the Kathmandu valley, an important spiritual site in Nepal. The book is the Prajnaparamita Sutra, which means “The Perfection of Wisdom.” Manjushri uses the sword and the book to confound ignorance and wields the bow and the arrow against egotism.



Buddhist book of prayer

- Manjushri sits on a stylized representation of a lotus blossom, a symbol typically associated with the Buddha. Because the flower grows up from mud and water into an exquisite bloom, it became an important metaphor for the Buddha's own life; his enlightenment (represented by the lotus) grew out of worldly suffering (represented by mud). Because bodhisattvas are closely tied to the Buddha, they are often depicted sitting or standing on a lotus blossom.



Lotus blossom

- What is the purpose of this object? Why was it made?
 - In China, Tibet, and Nepal, because of Manjushri's popularity, worshippers often had devotional objects made to be given as offerings. These offerings, often paintings or sculptures, earned individuals merit with a particular deity. This figure of Manjushri was commissioned out of gratitude to the bodhisattva. It was a way for the worshipper to thank the bodhisattva for his wisdom and compassion.



Activity

1. Ask the students to think of a wise person—either someone they know personally or someone famous.
2. Tell them that they are going to create a portrait of this person, using attributes. They should think about what the person will carry in his/her hands that will help to identify the person depicted.
3. Have students sketch out their ideas first, considering:
 - whether their wise person will be sitting or standing
 - what the setting will be
 - what the person will wear
 - what the person will carry in each hand that will help to identify the figure
4. Next, ask students to transfer their ideas to the heavyweight textured paper and tell them to fill up their whole page.

Expanding the Lesson

Students could do one or more of the following:

- Write a letter to that person to thank him/her for what they have taught the student.
- Present their drawing to the class.

Vocabulary

ascetic: person who practices strict self-denial as a measure of personal and spiritual discipline.

attribute: an object closely associated with or belonging to a specific person.

Buddha: founder of Buddhism, the enlightened one who went on to teach that desire is the root of suffering and that people must lead right and virtuous lives free of desire if they want to escape the cycle of suffering.

Buddhism: a religion practiced mostly in Eastern and Southeast Asia and is named after its founder, Buddha.

bodhisattva: enlightened individual who chooses not to achieve nirvana. Instead, the Bodhisattva is reborn in order to continue to help others seek enlightenment. In Buddhism, the decision to become a Bodhisattva is seen as the ultimate sacrifice.

enlightenment: a state of heightened spiritual awareness.

gilt: an object made of one material (for instance, the figure of Manjushri is made of bronze) and covered with a thin layer of gold.

lotus blossom : a flower that became an important symbol for Buddhism. It grows in mud and water just as enlightenment grows out of worldly suffering.

mudra: a symbolic hand gesture.

nirvana: a state of enlightenment.

Prajnaparamita: a Buddhist text on the perfection of wisdom.

Sanskrit: an ancient Indian language.



Illinois Learning Standards

English Language Arts

3 – Writing

4 – Listening and Speaking

Social Science

16 – History

17 – Geography

18 – Social Systems

Fine Arts

26 – Creating and Performing

27 – Arts and Civilization

Foreign Languages

29 – Culture and Geography