MASTERPIECES OF CHINESE PAINTING 700–1900
TEACHERS’ RESOURCE

Learn more about the exhibition at the home of creativity
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Attributed to Emperor Huizong (1082–1135), Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk (detail), early 12th century. Photograph © 2013 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Introduction

Masterpieces of Chinese Painting 700–1900 is a temporary exhibition introducing the key themes and aesthetics of Chinese painting over a span of 1200 years. It brings together some of the finest examples of Chinese painting, the majority of which are being exhibited in Europe for the first time. Some of the paintings are so fragile that they have to be changed during the exhibition.

Chinese paintings were originally meant to be appreciated in a private setting instead of being displayed in a gallery. The viewing would be for a period of a few hours to weeks, but never for long-term display. Handscrolls, for example, were meant to be held with both hands and viewed one section at a time, thus ‘unfolded on the left and rolled on the right’.

The brushwork of a Chinese artist is built on training in calligraphy, a highly respected art form in Chinese art. Through examining the hand movement and brushwork, it is believed that the personality of the calligrapher can be revealed. The appreciation of a piece of calligraphy is not simply to examine the execution of strokes but also the personal qualities embedded within. Similarly in painting, artists attempt to go beyond mere likeness of their subject matter, and strive to convey their essence.

This resource can be adapted for use with Primary or Secondary school groups.

Pre-visit activities

• Download the exhibition image bank to learn about key themes and artworks.
• Research the genres of Chinese painting; for example, figure, landscape, bird and flower paintings.
• Research animal symbolism in Chinese culture.

The Museum visit

School groups are requested not to teach, draw or work in groups in the exhibition space to avoid overcrowding. We recommend that students work in pairs to explore one or more of the following themes.

What do the animals in the paintings represent?
The dragon and the phoenix are two of the four auspicious animals in Chinese culture (together with tortoise and qilin – a mythical hooved creature). The dragon is the ruler of rain and water and a symbol of masculinity, fortune and power. The phoenix, king of birds, symbolises femininity, peace and prosperity. When shown together they symbolise the emperor and empress respectively. The crane is the carrier of Taoist immortals and symbolises longevity. Its call represents the voice of a sage. The rooster and the magpie symbolise promotion and high official rank. Monkeys are linked to the Buddhist tradition of contemplation.

What do the poems tell you about the paintings?
Many of the paintings are inscribed with poems that help to reveal or enhance the meaning of the painting. A tradition of paintings linked to literature emerged during the Song dynasty (960–1279). Artists incorporated poetry into their painting, which often had philosophical and political connotations. References to nature are made frequently throughout the poetry. Scholar artists were equally accomplished in painting, poetry, calligraphy and combined them in a single form of expression.

What are the key features of Chinese landscape paintings and how did landscape painting change through time?
There has been a long tradition of landscape painting in Chinese culture. Artists had a keen enthusiasm for the visible world and created works depicting mountains, rivers, flora and fauna, the changing seasons and weather. Scroll paintings were meant to give the sensation of travelling through the landscape. The subject matter and palette changed over the centuries. From the 16th century onward, some painters were influenced by western art which introduced the concepts of linear perspective and chiaroscuro, while others often emulated the styles of old masters.

After the exhibition, we recommend visiting the permanent collection in the China gallery (Room 44, Level 1). Students will find artists’ tools and further examples of animal symbolism on objects such as dragon robes, the imperial throne and ceramics.

Visit the digital installation in the Sackler Centre and step into virtual Chinese paintings inspired by two works in the exhibition – Nine Dragons and Saying Farewell at Xunyang. Students can explore the world of Chinese painting and gain an insight into the uses of colour and brushwork.

Follow-up activities / find out more

• Study some of the poetry in the exhibition in more detail. Create your own visual representation of the poem.
• Research seal marks in Chinese painting, especially those of Emperor Qianlong. Design a seal mark.
• Research more Chinese objects from the V&A’s collection: http://collections.vam.ac.uk/
• Visit the V&A’s China hub with links to resources for the permanent collection: www.vam.ac.uk/china