Classroom Workshop: Painting in the Forbidden City

**Created by:** Andrea Tomkiel

**Audience:** Grades 6-10

**Duration:** 30 minutes-1 hour (adjustable for class length)

**Overview:**

Students will discover how China’s ancient emperors supported and encouraged the arts that were created within the Forbidden City. Children will understand the rich development of painting that is regarded as the greatest of China’s fine arts. Students will create their own Chinese landscape painting art project.

**VOCABULARY:**

**calligraphy:** the art of writing, using tools of brush and ink, is the visual art form prized above all others in traditional Chinese culture.

**Chinese painting** formats: there are four hanging scroll, hand scroll, albums & fans. There are three genres: landscapes, human figure and bird & flower

**bird-and-flower painting** is a kind of painting named after its subject matter, and covers flowers, birds, fish, insects, plants, and pets like dogs and cats. The **peony** represents high position, great wealth; **pine** strands for longevity and integrity; **bamboo** symbolizes grittiness and modesty; **mandarin ducks** are an emblem of conjugal affection; a **red-crowned crane** is symbolic of longevity.

**calligraphy Ink:** made from pine soot which is compressed into sticks or cakes

**brush handles:** made of wood, bamboo as well as jade or lacquer with animal hairs

**iconography:** the science of identification and interpretation of symbols, themes, and subject matter in the visual arts. Also refers to the artist's use of this imagery in their particular work.

**symbols:** use of words, sounds, gestures, or visual images to convey ideas and beliefs.

**tree symbols:** pine, bamboo, plum
**flower symbols:** peony, lotus, chrysanthemum, orchid, daffodil, peach

**animal symbols:** fish, dragon, bats or birds

**Three Perfections:** refers to artists’ attempts to master painting, poetry and calligraphy at the same time. Typically after an artist has finished a painting, he will make an inscription with calligraphy directly on the picture. The simplest inscription will contain his name followed by his seal or seals. The artist may add a date, something about the person for whom the picture was painted, a note on the occasion or the style he has chosen to paint. Beyond this the artist may include a short poem, prose or a lengthy inscription exploring insight into their painter’s process and personal life. Very rarely does a single artist have talent in all three.

**Learning Objectives:**

1. Children will understand the rich development of painting that is regarded as the greatest of China’s fine arts.

2. Children will know how landscape paintings are the expression of ancient Chinese beliefs in the unity of man and nature.

3. Students will learn about Emperor Xuande and his formation of a Painting Academy in the Forbidden City, which established and encouraged a new heyday of court painting.

**Materials:**

Xuan calligraphy paper (or any sort of absorbent paper)

Chinese writing brushes

ink stick or bottled black ink

ink stone

white paper for mounting paintings (12 x 18 or bigger)

white Elmer’s glue

**NY State Standards:**

The Arts

Standard 1  Creating, Performing, and Participating in the Arts

Standard 2  Knowing and Using Arts Materials and Resources
Standard 3: Responding to and Analyzing Works of Art

Standard 4 Understanding the Cultural Dimensions and Contributions of the Arts.

Social Studies Standards

Standard 2 World History

Standard 3 Geography

Procedure Introduction:

Welcome students and say we will be discovering how China’s ancient emperors supported and encouraged the arts that were created within the Forbidden City. I had the chance to visit myself and I am excited to share my first hand impressions.

Procedure: Discussion:

The reign of Emperor Xuande, (r.1426–1435) has been called a golden era of stability. He was also a leader of artistic trends when he formed the Xuande Painting Academy, and reestablished a new heyday of court painting in the Forbidden City. When painters submitted works for approval, the Emperor would scrutinize and critique each and every one. At the Academy, a rigorous and systematic structure of recruitment, examination, and promotion was instituted that attracted talented artists from across the empire for many decades.

Painting played a key role at the imperial court, in the social, spiritual, and political realms. Emperor Xuande was also gifted himself as an artist, in painting and calligraphy, attaining marvelous results in landscapes, figures, animals, birds-and-flowers, and grasses-and-insects styles. He was best known for the powerful brushwork in painting and calligraphy, which gave his art great vigor and vitality.

The rich development of painting is regarded as the greatest of China’s fine arts. Historically, the emphasis moved from religious icon figures into predominantly landscapes. The approach was impressionistic rather than realistic. The artist was selective with his details and concentrated more on the true essence of his subject. Color was felt to be less important and monochrome painting predominated. The landscape represented nature as a whole, where a spray of bamboo was the microcosm of the universe.

Landscape was a subject that appealed to artists for many reasons. In particular as to what the mountains evoke: the remote, eternal and overpowering expression of scale as related to humans. Painters were also expressing the life force they found in the world, in both animate and inanimate things, and themselves. In choosing landscape as their major theme, artists were doing no more than seeking to express, as directly as possible, the ancient Chinese belief in the unity of man and nature. It was so popular that a style of
painting known as the “Master Mountain” emerged, where beautiful ink strokes shows a quiet and reflective scene.

**Procedure: Art Project:**

Distribute supplies to children and give oral directions. Imagine you are talented artist and painter Emperor Xuande and make your own Chinese landscape painting. Prepare and explain to children that they need to be patient and understand that this will take some practice getting used to brushes.

**Calligraphy Landscape Painting:**

1. Prepare a Chinese writing brush.
2. Soak it in a cup of water.
3. Take the brush out when it is soft.
4. Hold the brush in your right or left hand. Holding the brush higher creates weaker, softer strokes while holding closer to the bristles create solid, more defined strokes.
5. Use your ring finger, middle finger and thumb to hold the brush.
6. Keep your elbow above the table.
7. Dip the ink stick in water and grind against the ink stone until the ink has an oily consistency.
8. If using bottled ink: Pour ink into the ink stone.
9. Begin drawing a landscape, tilting the brush using the fingers, not the hands.
10. When dry, glue onto white paper, and make scrolls.

**Procedure: Wrap up and Goodbye:**

**Media Resources:**

www.walfc.org  
www.china360online.org
**Print Resources:**

*This is the Greatest Place! The Forbidden City and the World of Small Animals* by Brian Tse (children)
*In the Forbidden City* by Chiu Kwong-chiu (children)
*The Forbidden City* by Geremie R. Barme (adult)
*The Forbidden City: Center of Imperial China* from Harry A. Abrams Publishers (adult)
*China: Land of Dragons and Emperors* by Adeline Yen Mah (children)
*Calliope* magazine, Volume 19, Number 5: China's Forbidden City (children)