Art Activity: Emperor’s Garden & Seal

**Created by:** Andrea Tomkiel

**Audience:** ages K-5 and their adult partners

**Duration:** Approx. 30 minutes

**Overview:**

Families will be ancient explorers and discover magical secrets hidden in the Forbidden City. Participants will examine and identify the process of how the Forbidden City was build and created so long ago. Children will make their own emperor’s garden and seal art project to take home.

**Vocabulary:**

*animals:* there are ten on the roofs of the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Forbidden City, symbols on these ridges include a dragon, phoenix, lion, horse, sea horse, and sea creature.

*architecture:* ancient style that featured timberwork combining with stone carving, and more. Industrious Chinese craftsmen’s and laborers created these wonders.

*Central Axis:* unique in China, main structures are located on a central north-south axis while less-important structures are located to the left and right. The whole layout is symmetrical.

*seal:* red ink signature of either the artist’s name, nickname, style name, name of the studio where it was created, the collectors, or owners.
yin-yang: the harmonious interplay among complementary cosmic forces, especially as seen in the natural world.

**Learning Objectives:**

1. Children will be aware of the political purpose and cultural significance of the Forbidden City

2. Children will understand the life of China’s emperors and their unique ceremonial and ritual role

3. Children will create art projects that foster fine and gross motor, listening and language skills

**Materials:**

**Collage**
- large white paper (9”x12” or bigger)
- bright paper scraps
- shiny foils and papers
- crayons
- white Elmer’s glue or glue stick
- scissors
- sequins or any other fun extras

**Seal**
- foam plates, cut into 2” x 2” squares
- red ink pads
- small scratching tool (e.g. paperclips, toothpicks, pencil nub)
- tape (preferably double-sided)
- object to serve as seal handle (can use gluestick)

**NY State Standards:**
The Arts
Standard 1 Creating, Performing, and Participating in the Arts
Procedure Introduction:
Welcome families and say we will be learning about the Forbidden City. Begin by asking if they have heard of this place, which is the largest building standing for more than six hundred years. Share personal experience and/or knowledge/interest in the place.

Procedure: Discussion:
We may fantasize that the life of China’s emperors was easy. But today we will be exploring the very complex challenges that kept them busy. They met each morning with advisors and officials, and attended up to a staggering array of items of business. Some of these duties were also ritual and ceremonial activities. In this way the emperor legitimized his authority, promoted confidence between his family and bureaucracy, and inspired awe among the common people.

Everything about the imperial institution was designed to foster a sense of sacred splendor, formidable power and unapproachable remoteness. A common sentiment was “Heaven is high and the emperor is far away” (Tiān gāo, huángdì yuǎn). The ultimate representation of this way of the life was the building of the Forbidden City.

It was the creation of Emperor Yongle (1403-1424), who moved the capital from Nanjing to Beijing in 1403. Construction on the Forbidden City was completed in 1420. It has a massive layout of grand palaces ensconced behind giant walls, moats, and guards. The Forbidden City itself was another symbol that the emperor had a unique role at the center of the universe and the apex of the world.
Procedure: Book
To explore and take a deeper look, show the Hall of Supreme Harmony fold-out spread from *In the Forbidden City* by Chiu Kwong-chiu and Ben Wang. Look at the emperor’s seal on the cover of the book.

After seeing this panel, how do these buildings make them feel?  
What does this teach us about how difficult, or not, it was to build the buildings?

Procedure: Art Project:  
Distribute supplies to children and give oral directions. Imagine they are emperors like Emperor Yongle and build their own Forbidden City picture. What kind of buildings, palaces, and gardens would you like to create? Then they will finish with an official Emperor’s seal.

Remind them everything inside the Forbidden City was made only from wood and trees. They will begin by cutting colored papers with scissors in the shape of trees. (See the attached “Nature Template” for pre-drawn shapes for use by younger children.) Make branches with fruits and different birds. Also for many imperial family members, the gardens were a favorite place to spend time. Do they want to add wild and wonderful flowers reaching up to the sky? How about water lilies and fish in fountains, and streams with flowing water?

Emperor’s Seal  
Each emperor had his own individual made seal. Children will make their own design first by drawing it on a 2” x 2” square of foam plate and then scratching the design over the design using a straightened paper clips or some other small tool. They can write their name, the character for their zodiac sign using the attached “Chinese zodiac characters,” common characters using the attached “common characters,” or anything else of their choosing. They will then tape the foam square to an object that can be used as the seal
handle, such as a glue stick. Press the scratched design into the red ink pad. Then add it to the collage mural, as the signature for your picture it should be in the lower right corner.

**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)