

UNIT 1: GEOGRAPHY AND ENVIRONMENT
LESSON 2

Symbolic Animals

Explore the symbolic meanings associated with different animals in Chinese art



Lesson Overview

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Define symbolism
- Learn the symbolic meanings associated with different animals in Chinese art and culture
- Think about how animal symbolism can relate to the meaning and function of an artwork
- Create and sketch a symbolic animal that relates to the student's own life

VOCABULARY

<u>Symbolism</u>	The use of symbols, such as images or words, to convey another meaning
<u>Phoenix</u>	A legendary creature in Chinese mythology, considered the “king of birds” (unrelated to the Western mythological phoenix)
<u>Dragon</u>	A legendary creature in Chinese mythology, believed to control rainfall and water (unrelated to the Western mythological dragon)

REQUIRED MATERIALS

- Paper
- Pencils or markers

INCLUDED RESOURCES

- [Google Slides deck](#)

REQUIRED PREPARATION FOR TEACHER

Set up your Google Classroom (or other online learning platform) to include:

- Space for students to submit final written reflections
- Space for students to share their drawings (optional)

For the Teacher

Background Information

Works of art often feature symbols that express wishes for a person's well-being or reminders of ideal behavior. In Chinese art, some of this imagery comes from Buddhism, Confucianism, or Daoism. Other images come from a Chinese tradition of homophones or puns, or from literary sources. Symbolic meanings can also stem from an animal's observed behavior: geese, for instance, were believed to mate with one partner for life and therefore came to represent marital fidelity.

Symbolic animal imagery is common in Chinese art throughout history. The animals are both real and mythological; some common examples include tigers, fish, dragons, and phoenixes.

Artwork Description

PILLOW IN THE FORM OF A TIGER, 1182

This ceramic pillow takes the shape of a crouching tiger. The oval panel on the tiger's back is painted in dark brown with a bird perched on a branch of bamboo. Its hollow, molded form was initially covered with a white slip, a mixture of water and clay used for decorating ceramics. An orange-brown slip was then applied to the body, excluding the back, ears, and eyes, which all remain white. The artist created the tiger's stripes and features with black brushstrokes, as well as the bamboo branch and bird. The pillow was then coated with a transparent glaze, with the base unglazed, and fired at a high temperature. This is a Northern Cizhou ware piece, made from gray stoneware with white slip applied to refine the surface. The piece is inscribed on the base: "purchased for 31 *wen* on the thirteenth day of the first month of *ren ying*." The second character of the cyclical date on the base is slightly obscured, but the date appears to correspond to the Jin era, possibly 1182 or slightly earlier.



Pillow in the Form of a Tiger, 1182. Cizhou ware, earthenware, painted slip decoration with transparent glaze, 4 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (11.1 × 17.1 × 36.8 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of the Asian Art Council, 1993.56. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

EMPEROR'S ROBE WITH BUTTONS, EARLY 19TH CENTURY

This robe for the emperor was made to be worn for special occasions, such as religious ceremonies and festivals. It opens on the right side, is fastened with brass buttons, and has long sleeves with cuffs shaped like horses' hooves. The robe is made of a yellow K'ossu (tapestry) weave silk, with elaborate embroidered patterns, mostly in several shades of blue. These include numerous five-clawed



Emperor's Robe with Buttons, early 19th century. Silk kesa with silk embroidery and brass buttons, armpit to armpit: 26 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 55 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (67 × 141 cm); sleeve: 26 $\frac{1}{16}$ in. (68.5 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Brooklyn Museum Collection, 34.1475. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

dragons—three on the front, three on the back, and two on the shoulders—flaming jewels, bats, circular longevity characters, and clouds. Scattered among the clouds are the Twelve Imperial Symbols: the sun and the moon (on the shoulders), the constellation, the mountain, the dragons, the flowery bird, the cups, the water weed, the millet, the firs, the axe, and the symbol of distinction. On the sleeves, above the elbows, are wave and island patterns incorporating the Eight Lucky Symbols of Buddhism, and below the elbows are long, wavy striations.

About the Artworks

PILLOW IN THE FORM OF A TIGER, 1182

Ceramic pillows were initially developed during the Sui dynasty (581–618 C.E.) and remained popular between the seventh and the fourteenth centuries. For people who could afford them, hard pillows like these were household items, used to support the head while sleeping on the side. This pillow takes the form of a tiger because, according to Chinese lore, the tiger frightens away malevolent spirits. Tigers were thought to exorcise evil based on their association with the Daoist celestial Master Zhang, who lived during the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 C.E.). Images of Master Zhang riding his tiger were popular in Chinese folklore and were thought to protect a home from evil spirits and drive away the demons of illness. The delicately painted bird on a bamboo branch is inspired by a form of fan painting popular at the imperial court during the Jin dynasty (1115–1234).

EMPEROR'S ROBE WITH BUTTONS, EARLY 19TH CENTURY

This silk robe for the emperor is lavishly decorated with symbolic imagery. Many of these motifs were exclusive to the emperor's clothing. The Twelve Imperial Symbols symbolize his power over all elements of the universe. Bright-yellow garments were likewise reserved for the emperor or high-ranking officials, and were associated with imperial power and prosperity. Other symbolic imperial elements on the robe include a number of highly detailed dragons. Dragons in Chinese mythology—unrelated to those of Western mythology—are believed to control rainfall and the water, and are generally regarded as kind, good-natured creatures that bring good luck. They are also powerful, closely associated with the emperor; they are, therefore, often used to represent imperial power in works of art. Only the emperor was allowed to wear clothing incorporating designs showing dragons with five claws. Other high-ranking officials were permitted to wear garments decorated with four-clawed dragons.

Lesson

This lesson uses virtual resources, including a [Google Slides deck](#) with instructions, images, and other media, that provide students with an introduction to the idea of animal symbolism in Chinese art.

The lesson is broken into three sequential activities:

- In [activity one](#), students define the word *symbolism* and think about symbolic qualities associated with a range of animals in Chinese culture.
- In [activity two](#), students look closely at two works of art, learning more about symbolism associated with tigers and dragons, and considering how symbolic meaning can relate to an artwork’s function.
- In [activity three](#), students draw animals to symbolize aspects of their own personalities, using the [San Diego Zoo Kids website](#) to find images and information about different animals.



Lesson Extensions

ELA CONNECTION—ANIMAL STORIES

Ask students to watch the first two minutes of this [video](#) to hear the [Great Race](#), a famous story about animals in Chinese culture. Ask each student to create a symbolic animal and write a short story about it. Before writing, they should think about the animal’s special qualities, and how it might use those qualities during a typical day or under special circumstances. Students can also share their animal with a partner and create a story together about how their animals might interact.

ARTS CONNECTION—OBJECT DESIGN

Both the pillow and the emperor’s robe are functional objects, meaning they were made to be used for a specific purpose. The animals depicted on them symbolically relate to the object’s function. Ask students to sketch a design for a functional object that includes their symbolic animal, considering these questions: What kind of object would it be, and what purpose would it serve? How would the symbolic animal relate to the object’s use? If time and materials allow, have students create their objects.

Cover:
Emperor's Robe with Buttons, early 19th century.
Silk kesa with silk embroidery and brass buttons,
armpit to armpit: 26 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 55 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (67 × 141 cm);
sleeve: 26 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (68,5 cm). Brooklyn Museum;
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Support for the Arts of China Teaching Toolkit was made possible by the Freeman Foundation.

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