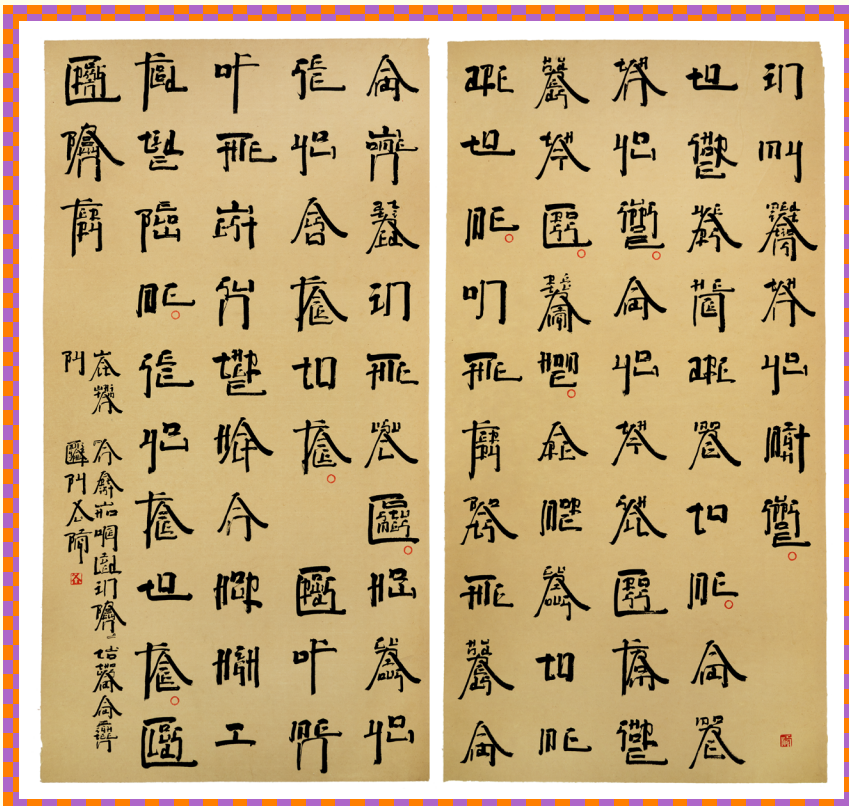


UNIT 3: GLOBAL EXCHANGE
LESSON 4

Connecting Cultures

Explore issues of immigration and the ways in which the visual arts and writing can be used to connect cultural histories and traditions



Lesson Overview

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Define culture and think about how people can connect multiple cultural influences through art
- Learn about the history and practice of Chinese calligraphy
- Look closely at a work of art and consider how art and writing can connect different cultures
- Experiment with different ways of expressing themselves through writing

VOCABULARY

<u>Culture</u>	Traditions, practices, language, dress, histories, ideas, and/or rituals that connect people in a community
<u>Calligraphy</u>	Writing letters and words in an artistic and beautiful style
<u>Square Word Calligraphy</u>	A system developed by artist Xu Bing for writing English that organizes the letters of each English word into structures that resemble Chinese characters

REQUIRED MATERIALS FOR STUDENTS

- Paper
- Pens or pencils

INCLUDED RESOURCES

- [Google Slides deck](#)
- Walt Whitman, "[Crossing Brooklyn Ferry](#)" (audio)

REQUIRED PREPARATION FOR TEACHER

- Set up your Google Classroom (or other online learning platform) to include:
- Space for students to share their final artworks and written reflections

For the Teacher

Background Information

Calligraphy, referring to a beautiful, stylized kind of writing, was traditionally revered as one of the highest forms of artistic expression in China. The practice of Chinese calligraphy dates back thousands of years, and its prominence attests to the important role of language in Chinese culture. Written Chinese does not use an alphabet; instead, each word is signified by a unique character. It requires years of study and practice to learn calligraphy—mastering brushstrokes, copying traditional works, and memorizing complex characters. The ability to write in this manner traditionally signified a person’s status as an elite scholar, well-versed in literary and aesthetic traditions. Calligraphy is still widely practiced in China.

Xu Bing spent his childhood in Beijing; he was taught traditional Chinese calligraphy by his father, and attributes his fascination with the written word and with the physicality and aesthetics of language and books to his parents’ influence. Xu Bing immigrated to Brooklyn in 1990, and in 1994 developed Square Word Calligraphy, a writing system in which English words are written in the style of traditional Chinese calligraphy.

Artwork Description

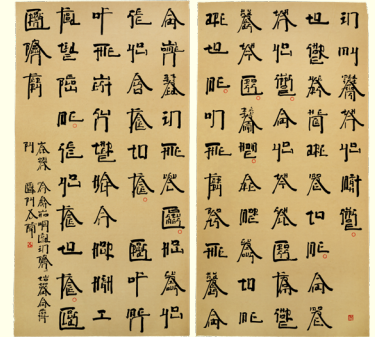
Xu Bing's *Square Word Calligraphy: Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, Walt Whitman* is a monumental work comprising two panels, each more than 7 feet high and roughly 4 feet wide, made with ink on paper. It is an example of Square Word Calligraphy, a writing style developed by Xu in which English words are painted in a style similar to those found in traditional Chinese calligraphy. The text, taken from the first stanza of Walt Whitman's poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1856), is meant to be read from left to right, in English word order, and then from top to bottom in columns, as with traditional Chinese texts. It reads:

Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,
By Walt Whitman

Calligraphy by Xu Bing
An artist who used to live in Brooklyn.

Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!
Clouds of the west—sun there half an hour
high—I see you also face to face.
Crowds of men and women attired in the
usual costumes, how curious you are to me!
On the ferry-boats the hundreds and
hundreds that cross, returning home, are
more curious to me than you suppose,
And you that shall cross from shore to shore
years hence are more to me, and more in my
meditations, than you might suppose.

Small red circles are used to indicate line breaks in the poem. The work also includes the artist's seal in red ink, spelling out his first name (to the far left) and last name (to the far right) in Square Word Calligraphy.



Xu Bing (Chinese, born 1955). *Square Word Calligraphy: Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, Walt Whitman*, 2018. Ink on paper, (mounted): 48¹³/₁₆ × 89⁷/₁₆ in. (124 × 227 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Xu Bing to the Brooklyn Museum in honor of his father, 2018.24a-b. © Xu Bing Studio

About the Artwork

Square Word Calligraphy: Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, Walt Whitman was created specifically for the Brooklyn Museum's new galleries for the Arts of China. First exhibited in 2019 to coincide with Walt Whitman's two-hundredth birthday, the work pays homage to the writer's literary legacy and his ties to Brooklyn. Whitman was one of the most influential American poets, known for his humanism and as the father of free-verse poetry. The poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," first published in 1856 in Whitman's controversial collection *Leaves of Grass*, describes the experience of riding between Manhattan and Brooklyn on a crowded ferry. It is often interpreted as a reflection on interconnectedness: Literally, the ferry connects Brooklyn to Manhattan, and figuratively, it connects people from different cultures and social backgrounds through their shared experience of the ride. The poet even feels connected to people he imagines riding on the ferry many years after his death.

Throughout his career, Xu Bing has explored language and writing, viewing them as adaptable political tools for expression. He developed Square Word Calligraphy as a way to bridge his experiences of growing up in China and then immigrating to the United States, and has said that it is one way of helping American viewers to better understand the practice of Chinese calligraphy. Just as Whitman's poem speaks to connectivity, so does Xu Bing's *Square Word Calligraphy: Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, Walt Whitman*. The work links Xu to Whitman through their shared relationship to Brooklyn and their explorations of language, as well as through Xu's attempts to bridge the gap between Chinese and American cultural traditions.

Lesson

This lesson uses virtual resources, including a [Google Slides deck](#) with instructions, images, and other media to introduce students to the work of contemporary artist Xu Bing and help them consider how art can bridge cultural differences.

The lesson is broken into three sequential activities:

- In **activity one**, students define the term *culture* and consider the ways in which people bring cultural ideas, objects, and practices to new communities.
- In **activity two**, students are guided through an exploration of Xu Bing’s *Square Word Calligraphy: Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, Walt Whitman*. They practice Square Word Calligraphy, read part of a poem by Walt Whitman, and think about the ways in which the arts can connect different cultures.
- In **activity three**, students develop their own expressive styles of writing. They brainstorm words and writing styles to convey aspects of their identities and communities, and each create a three-word poem to share with the class.



Lesson Extensions

ELA CONNECTION—SHARED EXPERIENCES

Reread the first stanza of Walt Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” and remind students that one of the themes of the poem is how different people can connect and come together through shared experiences, like riding on a crowded ferry. Ask them to share other examples of when different people come together to share an experience, then to choose one and brainstorm words that come to mind to describe the experience. Ask students to use their lists of words to write their own poems.

ARTS CONNECTION—TYPOGRAPHY

Ask students to share their final artworks through an in-person or online “gallery.” Ask them to consider: What different kinds of writing styles did you see? Show students Xu Bing’s Square Word Calligraphy key again, and ask them to develop their own font, designing each letter and putting it into a chart similar to Xu Bing’s.

Cover:
Xu Bing (Chinese, born 1955). *Square Word*
Calligraphy: Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, Walt Whitman,
2018. Ink on paper, (mounted): 48⁵/₁₆ × 89³/₈ in.
(124 × 227 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Xu Bing
to the Brooklyn Museum in honor of his father,
2018.24a-b. © Xu Bing Studio

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