

Lesson Plan: Silk around the World



Man's Rank Badge

About 1880/1900

Manchu

China, Qing Dynasty (1644–1911)

INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

This lesson plan supports the integration of artworks into K–12 teaching. It focuses on a single work of art from the museum’s global collection and provides sequential activities, related resources, and extensions that activate students’ critical and creative thinking skills, deepening their sense of self and encouraging them to connect with others and engage more fully with a complex world.

Key Words

silk, Silk Road, China, Qing Dynasty, imperial, Gee’s Bend, quilts

Suggested Age Range

This content is adaptable for use by 3rd through 8th grade students.

Essential Questions

- How has Chinese art and culture contributed to the development of ideas, beliefs, and practices around the world over time?

INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

How to Use This Lesson

This lesson includes a series of three activities that can be facilitated by the teacher or assigned to students to complete asynchronously. When completed in sequence, these activities build student engagement, first by increasing their awareness through observation and then by deepening their understanding of an artwork and its cultural and historical context. Students are further encouraged to make connections between the work of art and their own lives and experiences. All activities are framed by the essential question/s of the lesson and support student voice and multimodal learning.

- **Look** activities promote sustained observation, active listening, and curiosity. (5–10 minutes per activity)
- **Explore** activities provide opportunities for students to consider further contextual information, including diverse perspectives, and to challenge their assumptions. (15–30 minutes per activity)
- **Respond** activities engage students in creative expression, self-reflection, and the synthesis of ideas. (15–30 minutes per activity)

For additional approaches to engaging students in observation and meaning-making with works of art, consult the Art Institute of Chicago’s [Tips for Discussing Works of Art](#) or use the [Making Observations and Questions](#) activity.

Learning Standards

Next Generation Social Science Standards

Human-Environment Interaction: Place, Region, and Culture

D2.Geo.4.6-8. Explain how cultural patterns and economic decisions influence environments and the daily lives of people in both nearby and distant places.

D2.Geo.7.3-5. Explain how cultural and environmental characteristics affect the distribution and movement of people, goods, and ideas.

Common Core Literacy Standards

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.7

Draw information from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Key Ideas and Details

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it. Cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

National Core Arts Standards:

Visual Arts: Responding, Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work

Enduring Understanding: Visual imagery influences understanding of and responses to the world



Look

There is a lot to see in this small square fabric, which is about the same size as a washcloth. Take some time to look closely and describe what you notice.

- What colors or patterns do you see?
- Do you recognize things you have seen before?
- Write down as many as five observations and share them with your teacher or classmates.

Look again.

- Some of the details in the picture shown on this fabric square don't look exactly like we might see them in the real world. Instead, colors or shapes are used to represent those things. This way, or style, of creating a picture is called **abstract**.

. Now that we know that the artist who made this artwork used an abstract style, let's look at the diagram to help us learn more about what we are looking at.



Explore

This elaborate fabric square is a *buzi* (補子 *bǔ-zi*), an **embroidered badge** worn on the outer coat of certain people in Chinese culture from the 15th to the 20th century. The *buzi* tells other people about the person wearing it. They could be a statesman, a military official, or the wife of one of these people. The picture below shows how the badge would be attached to someone's coat.



Man's Bufu (Court Surcoat), Qing dynasty, 1875/1900

Read the following text together as a class, or divide up the bullet points among small groups, sharing what you learn with each other afterward.

- The *buzi* featured in this lesson was made during the Qing **dynasty** in China, which lasted from 1644 to 1912. A dynasty is when one family rules a country or region for a long period of time. Typically, the head of the family will be the ruler of the land, like an emperor or king.

- The sun (太阳 tàiyáng) is depicted as a red disk at the top of the *buzi*. The color red is strongly associated in China with life and warmth, and particularly the sun. On this *buzi*, the sun represents the emperor.
- Ceremonial Scepter (如意 ruyi) translates to “as you wish” and were used during ceremonies by the emperor. During the Qing dynasty, they were symbolic of political power and were given as gifts to and by the emperor.
- Fierce animals like leopards, lions, and bears are pictured on *buzi* worn by military officials. In the Qing dynasty, the leopard (豹 bào) represented the third level, or rank, in the military. Birds like the silver pheasant, mandarin duck, and egret are shown on *buzi* worn by civic officials.
- The desire for longevity, or long life, was highly valued and symbolized in several ways on this *buzi*.
 - Eight peaches (桃子 táozi) are believed to bring about immortality, or never-ending life.
 - Bats (蝙蝠 biānfú) have been living in China for thousands of years and help peaches live and grow through pollination.
 - Chrysanthemum (菊 júhuā) usually symbolises joviality or a gentleman's moral quality.
 - Mushrooms (靈芝 língzhī) are used in Chinese medicine to promote long life.
- Clouds (云 yún) are considered lucky because they bring much-needed rain to water the crops. They are a very common symbol in Chinese art and when depicted in five colors represent the five blessings of life, important symbols in **Buddhism**.
- Many of the words for the details shown on this *buzi* are **homophones**. This means that they have a similar pronunciation to other words but have different meaning. This creates a connection between the two words. By showing the image of one of the two words, however, we are reminded of the other word and its meaning. This creates a connection between the two words. For instance, the Chinese word for bat (蝙蝠 biānfú) is a homophone for the word that means luck and happiness (福 fú). And the Chinese word for a tide made of waves (潮 cháo) sounds the same as the word for imperial court (朝 cháo).
- Many of the symbols we see in the *buzi* come from **Buddhism** and **Taoism**, which were both practiced in China at the time the *buzi* was made and are still practiced there today. Including such symbols on the badge highlights the overlapping of religious beliefs in China at the time it was made.

Based on the symbols, who would have worn this *buzi*?

What is the relationship between the sun and the other elements in the *buzi*? What might this tell us about the role of the emperor during the Qing dynasty?

What new questions do you have? Where could you go to learn more?

Explore Further: Following Silk from China throughout the World

Read the details below about silk production together as a class or in small groups, sharing what you learn with each other afterward.

How is silk made?

Creating silk is a long and complicated process that requires technical skills and patience. The history of silk can be traced back almost 6,000 years ago in China to the Neolithic period.

After silk moths lay eggs, the caterpillars (silkworms) that hatch grow by eating mulberry leaves. Once they have stored up enough energy, the silkworms secrete silk fibers around themselves to form cocoons. Silk craftspeople usually boil the cocoons (which kills the larvae), pull silk strands from them, and spin it into thread. After this process, the raw silk must be boiled again to remove impurities. It is then bleached in preparation for dyeing or printing to create different colors and patterns.



Silkworm Pupa, Shang or Western Zhou Period, 13th/10th century BCE

How can this artwork made of silk help me understand social and political structures?

Silk was originally reserved for the emperor of China, but over time it became available to wealthy individuals as well as civic and military workers. The choice to use silk as the material for this *buzi* was very important. When the man who wore the badge walked along the streets of China in the 1800s, other people would see it and know that he was an important military soldier for the emperor.

Almost 1,500 years before this badge was made, silk was only made in China. It became a highly desirable trade item in other parts of Asia and, eventually, Europe and beyond. Because of silk's value in trade, we came to call this exchange of goods (including silk and many other goods) the Silk Road. For many centuries, silk was a luxury material used in clothing, furniture, and other items made for people with power and wealth. During the Industrial Revolution, new types of machinery and production allowed silk and many other fabrics to be made more quickly and inexpensively. Today, silk is widely available in both luxurious and more inexpensive forms, and it is used in many different ways.

Explore through comparison:



"Housetop Half-Log Cabin" Quilt by Jessie T. Pettway, 1975

Silk is one of the materials used in this quilt made by Jessie T. Pettway in the African American community of Gee's Bend, Alabama, in the United States.

The women in this community have been making quilts from scraps of clothing, blankets, and other materials for almost 100 years. In the 1900s, the women and their families were sharecroppers, working on a cotton plantation along the Alabama River. They owned very little and made quilts from whatever they had available, passing down the techniques from generation to generation. By the time this quilt was made in the 1970s, members of the Gee's Bend community had survived the inhumane conditions of tenant farming and **Jim Crow** laws. As part of the **Freedom Quilting Bee**, established in the 1960s, some of the quilters were able to sell their quilts for a profit, and many quilts were eventually purchased by museums.

In the 1900s, silk may not have been available to the quilters of Gee's Bend. In the 1960s and 1970s, when this quilt was made, silk garments were widely available at various price points. Furnishing fabrics were even sent by manufacturers in New York to quilters working at the Freedom Quilting Bee when there was great popularity and enthusiasm for the quilters and their work.

Where do you find silk used today? Is it part of any traditions within your family or community?

Respond

My Buzi Badge

Create your own *buzi* to wear or display for friends, family, and classmates.

First, decide the format of your *buzi*.

- A patch for your backpack
- A design for a shirt
- A poster for your bedroom door or another space that's important to you
- Something else

Then, find your inspiration!

- Something you are proud of
- Your strengths
- Your family
- Your community
- A personal experience

Choose types of details that will express your ideas through symbols. Select at least 4 from this list:

- animals
- colors
- nature (plants, natural forms, etc.)
- shapes
- textures
- patterns
- people

Make some sketches of your ideas to help you plan your final design. Then, using whatever materials you have selected, create your *buzi* and display it with pride!

Glossary

abstract: does not attempt to represent an accurate depiction of a visual reality but instead uses shapes, colors, forms, and gestural marks to achieve its effect

badge: a distinctive emblem worn as a mark of office, membership, achievement, licensed employment, etc.

Buddhism: a widespread eastern and central Asian religion and philosophy, founded by Siddhartha Guatama in northeastern India in the 5th century BCE that explains suffering is inherent in life and that one can be liberated from it by cultivating wisdom, virtue, and concentration

buzi: rank bandages (also called rank insignia or Mandarin squares) used in China during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties to demonstrate the wearer's rank

embroidery: the art of working raised and ornamental designs in threads of silk, cotton, gold, silver, or other material, upon any woven fabric, leather, paper, etc., with a needle

Freedom Quilting Bee: a quilting cooperative established in 1966 by a group of African American women in the community of Rehoboth, Alabama. These groups arose during the civil rights movement and provided a way for African American women to generate income

homophone: each of two or more words having the same pronunciation but different meanings, origins, or spelling—for example, new and knew

Jim Crow: laws designed to marginalize African Americans and enforce racial segregation in the US South from the end of Reconstruction to the mid-20th century

pattern: a repeated decorative design

silk: a fine, strong, soft, lustrous fiber produced by silkworms in making cocoons and collected to make thread and fabric

symbol: a thing that represents or stands for something else, especially a material object representing something

Taoism (Daoism): a popular Chinese religion or philosophy originating in the doctrines of Lao Tzu but later highly eclectic in nature and characterized by a pantheon of many gods and by the practice of alchemy, divination, and magic. Taoism advocates for a life of complete simplicity and naturalness and of noninterference with the course of natural events in order to attain a

happy existence in harmony with the Tao. Tao is a Chinese word meaning the “way”, “path”, or “method”.



Related Resources

- [Asian art](#)