

UNIT 1: GEOGRAPHY AND ENVIRONMENT
LESSON 3

Landscape Poetry

Learn about the history of Chinese landscape painting and its close connection with poetry



Arts of China
TEACHING TOOLKIT

Brooklyn Museum

Lesson Overview

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Define landscape while reflecting on landscapes they see in daily life
- Learn about depictions of landscapes in Chinese visual art and poetry
- Describe landscapes by considering emotions, natural and built environmental features, and different sensory details
- Write their own descriptive poems about a landscape

VOCABULARY

Landscape A type of artwork that shows an environment, either real or imagined

Hanging scroll A common vertical format for East Asian painting and calligraphy, typically made of paper or silk and hung on the wall

REQUIRED MATERIALS

- Pencil

INCLUDED RESOURCES

- Three poems by Wang Wei, from *Wang River Collection*
- Landscape poetry worksheet
- Touch object (for physical toolkit): bamboo brush
- Reproduction (for physical toolkit): Hua Yan, *Landscape*, 1727

For the Teacher

Background Information

The tradition of landscape painting in China dates back more than a thousand years, to the late Tang dynasty (618–907). Landscape paintings were a means for artists to convey ideas and feelings about the natural world—and, often, about society more broadly. Artists took inspiration from the world around them, but rather than painting exactly what they saw, they created imagined, evocative scenes filled with sinuous rivers, lush foliage, and mountain peaks disappearing into mist. These compositions frequently suggest religious, philosophical, and political ideals. Many landscape artists were also scholars and poets, and landscape paintings regularly include inscriptions of poetry about the natural world, evidencing the close relationship between written and visual forms of expression in China.

Artwork Description

Landscape, by Hua Yen, is a monumental ink painting that combines an interest in the conventional landscape tradition with a playful, relaxed quality. At the bottom of the scroll, twisting tree trunks grow out from a rocky gorge, producing dense foliage that arches over a river. The river winds from the lower left corner of the scroll toward the top, drawing the viewer's eye through the landscape. Towering, dramatic cliffs rise up from the riverbed and are dotted with trees, bushes, and built structures nestled into the landscape. Pointed mountaintops in the upper section of the scroll fade into a misty background. Throughout the image, Hua used expressive brushwork; by varying the opacity of his ink and the weight of his brushstrokes, he created depth and texture. At the upper right, seals and inscriptions include the artist's name, the date the work was painted (1727), and poetry written by Wong Sung-nien.



Hua Yen (Chinese, 1682–1765). *Landscape*. 1727. Ink and light color on paper, image: 69½ × 14⅞ in. (176.5 × 57.8 cm); overall: 114 × 23¼ in. (289.6 × 59.1 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Anonymous gift, 80.119.1. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

About the Artwork

The artist Hua Yan belonged to the group of Qing-dynasty painter-scholars called the “Eight Eccentrics.” One of the most interesting figures among the group, Hua was a poet, intellectual, and art historian, conscious of his connection to the scholar-gentleman tradition. Based in the Yangzhou area, the Eight Eccentrics rejected orthodox styles of painting in favor of individualized expression. The inscriptions on this painting, most of which were written by one of the artist’s older colleagues, reflect something of the spirit of the group, and describe a Daoist immortal who is “detached and different from others” and a lonely house in the mountains that offers an escape from society’s constraints. The grandeur of the mountainous setting is accentuated by the inclusion of tiny rooftops and figures.

Lesson

STEP 1: 5 MINUTES

Introduction

Tell students that you are going to be learning about *landscapes*, which are artworks that show an environment. Explain that landscapes can depict natural elements, built elements, or both.

Ask students to close their eyes and picture the view from outside a window in their home. What is the first thing they think of? Have a few students share their ideas.

Explain that landscapes don't always show the environment exactly as it is. Sometimes, artists choose to focus on the things that they find most exciting or important, and at others, they make up imaginary landscapes.

STEP 2: 20 MINUTES

Artwork Discussion

Tell students that you will be learning about a landscape painted by an artist named Hua Yan almost three hundred years ago.

Show students an [image](#) of Hua Yan's *Landscape* and ask them to view it from a distance. (If using the physical toolkit, you can refer students to the included reproduction; if not, you can project the image or share [detail shots](#).) Then ask: What's one adjective, or descriptive word, you'd use to describe this landscape, and why? Have a few students share.

Encourage students to look at the image more closely for details. Explain that the painting was made with ink on paper, using a special kind of brush called a bamboo brush. Pass the bamboo brushes around, and ask students to imagine how they would make some of the brushstrokes they see in the painting.

Ask students:

- What *natural* details do you notice?
- What *built* details do you notice?

Explain that artists at that time were inspired by things they saw in real life, but the landscapes they painted were imaginary, meant to convey feelings and ideas about

nature rather than just representing what they saw.

Ask students to imagine they could step inside the landscape. Then ask them:

- What would you hear?
- What would you smell?
- What would you touch?

STEP 3: 20 MINUTES

Activity: Landscape Poem

Explain to students that many artists during this time, including Hua Yan, were also poets, and landscapes were a common theme in both visual art and poetry.

Show students the poem “Deer Park,” by Wang Wei. Ask students to close their eyes while you slowly read it aloud, and ask them to imagine the landscape described in the poem:

DEER PARK

No one seen. In empty mountains,
hints of drifting voice, no more.

Entering these deep woods, late sun-
light ablaze on green moss, rising.

Ask: What kind of landscape did you imagine? Ask a few students to share.

Explain that these poems, just like Chinese landscape painting, were meant to convey feelings or ideas about nature. Ask: How did the poem make you feel?

Tell students that they are going to write their own poems, conveying their feelings about a landscape. Have students sit near a window and observe the landscape outside. Alternatively, you can ask students to picture a landscape they can see outside a window in their home.

Pass out the landscape poetry worksheet, and give students a few minutes to fill it out. Encourage students to use specific, descriptive language as they write their poems.

If time allows, ask a few students to share their sensory poems.

Lesson Extensions

ELA CONNECTION—POETRY WALK

Ask students to read other examples of poetry from Wang Wei's *Wang River Collection*, such as "The Path to the Temple Tree" or "The Luan Family's Rapids" (handout can be found in Worksheets and Additional Materials). Read one or two poems with the students, asking them to share details they notice and examples of descriptive language. After discussing the poems, go on a neighborhood walk, asking students to write down things they see, smell, hear, and feel. Ask students to use their observations to write their own poems describing the landscape, and then have them take turns sharing aloud.

ARTS CONNECTION—IMAGINED LANDSCAPES

Ask students to imagine their ideal landscape. Would it be mostly natural, built, or a mixture of the two? Would there be other people there? What kinds of things would they see, smell, hear, and feel there? Ask them to brainstorm by writing or sketching different elements they might want in their landscape. Then, on a larger piece of paper, have students combine the different elements into a single composition. Finally, ask each student to add a short poem somewhere on the sheet that describes the finished landscape.

Worksheets and Additional Materials

Landscape Poetry Worksheet

Name _____

Write your own poem describing a landscape. Use specific, descriptive words, and be creative!

Looking at _____, I feel _____,
(detail of the landscape) (emotion)

I see _____ and _____.
(noun) (color)

I hear _____, and smell _____.
(sound) (scent)

The landscape around me is _____ and _____.
(description of temperature/weather) (adjective)

After you're finished writing your poem, give it a title. What is the location, and what is a word or phrase you would use to describe the landscape you wrote about?

Title _____

Poems

Poems from *Wang River Collection*, by Wang Wei (699–759)

DEER PARK

No one seen. In empty mountains,
hints of drifting voice, no more.

Entering these deep woods, late sun-
light ablaze on green moss, rising.

THE PATH TO THE TEMPLE TREE

The sunless, narrow path to the temple locust tree
is deep, dark—with much green moss.

I should wait at the gate after sweeping
in case the hill monk comes back.

THE LUAN FAMILY'S RAPIDS

In a blast, the wind drives the autumn rain;
the downpour flows, slithering, shallow over rocks.

Waves jump up, splashing into each other;
an egret startles, white, then it's down again.

Cover;
Hua Yan (Chinese, 1682–1765). *Landscape* (detail), 1727.
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