

**UNIT 2: BELIEF SYSTEMS**  
LESSON 4

# The Life of a Confucian Scholar

Consider how objects and images can represent scholars' ideals



# Lesson Overview

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Learn about the five constants (virtues, or good qualities) of Confucianism and relate these constants to their own lives
- Discover how particular artworks and objects tell us something about the people who value them and their beliefs
- Design and arrange a scholar's study to reflect their own commitment to knowledge and scholarship as well as their own interests

## VOCABULARY

<u>Belief system</u>	A set of ideas that guides our morals and actions; sometimes belief systems are associated with religion, but they are not always spiritual or religious
<u>Confucianism</u>	A belief system based on the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius
<u>Calligraphy</u>	Writing letters and words in an artistic and beautiful style
<u>Philosophy</u>	A set of ideas about how to do something, how to live, and how we understand the world
<u>Scholar</u>	Someone who studies one or more areas of knowledge in depth

## REQUIRED MATERIALS

- Paper
- Pencil

## INCLUDED RESOURCES

- Touch objects (for physical toolkit): bamboo brushes, limestone sample

# For the Teacher

## Background Information

Confucianism is a belief system based on the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius, who lived from 551 to 479 B.C.E. during the Zhou dynasty. Confucius believed that human beings are fundamentally good and teachable, and that they can improve themselves through observation and action. The five constants (virtues) of Confucianism include compassion (*ren*), justice (*yi*), respect for tradition (*li*), knowledge (*zhi*), and integrity (*xin*).

Confucianism was immensely influential in Chinese government, and Confucian philosophies and ideals served as the structure for civil-service examinations. These exams required aspiring government officials to be well-versed in art, literature, and other intellectual pursuits, giving rise to the Confucian scholar-official class. For a Confucian scholar to succeed in being both a good citizen and a good official required a lifelong commitment to the arts and scholarship. Thus, a government official might return home after work to write poetry or paint a landscape. When we examine objects used in everyday life by Confucian scholars, we can find out more about how they lived, who they were, and how they learned and studied.

## Artwork Description

The artworks in this lesson include a scholar's rock (an actual rock made of limestone); a contemporary painting of a scholar's rock, made with ink on paper; and a bronze brush rest. The scholar's rock stands on a pedestal; it is a little more than a foot tall, and has a width and depth of about half a foot. Liu Dan's framed painting is much larger, measuring 8 feet high by 5 feet wide. The third object, *Brush Rest in the Form of a Mountain*, is a gilded-bronze sculptural object (the gilding is now mostly worn away) formed in the shape of five wave-washed mountain peaks, with the highest one at the center. The brush rest is much smaller than the other objects, measuring just under 4 inches high, about 7 inches wide, and almost 2 inches in depth. This object exemplifies another way natural elements became part of a traditional Chinese scholar's study. In this case, nature is stylized, the mountains are smooth, and the waves are suggested by concentric lines.



*Scholar's Rock*, 18th century. Limestone, 15½ × 8¾ × 6¼ in. (54.3 × 22.2 × 17.1 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Alastair Bradley Martin, 2002.57. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

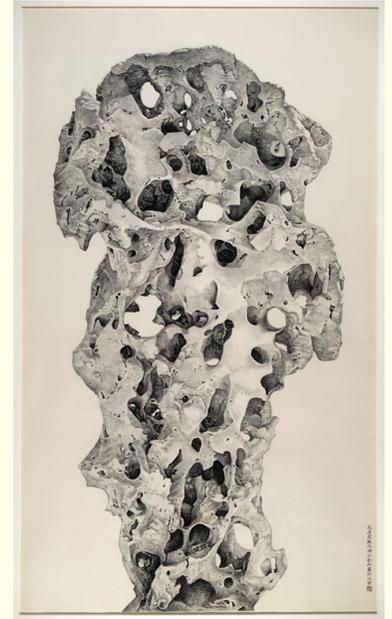
## About the Artwork

Scholars' rocks are often actual rocks, typically limestone, or, more rarely, petrified wood, that are found in nature and have been eroded by water and acidic soil over time. Some found rocks are slightly modified (polished or sanded) later, while others are made in ceramic by craftspeople. Scholars' rocks are also seen in Chinese paintings. The rocks often resemble a landscape of mountains or caves, suggesting a land where immortal beings lived. Rocks can also evoke the shapes of animals or mythical creatures. Scholars' rocks were placed in a scholar's study and admired for their beauty as well as being used as visual tools for reflection and inspiration. They were typically prized for four qualities: thinness (*shou*), openness (*tou*), perforations (*lou*), and wrinkling (*zhou*).

Like a scholar's rock, *Brush Rest in the Form of a Mountain* evokes natural forms; the mountainous shape is not only beautiful, but also brings to mind ideas of seclusion and reflection in the mountains, away from society. This brush rest is also a functional object used to hold calligraphy brushes. Reading and writing were essential, lifelong practices for Confucian scholars, and special writing tools were important components of a scholar's desk.



*Brush Rest in the Form of a Mountain*, 18th century (possibly). Bronze, traces of gilding,  $3\frac{7}{8} \times 1\frac{1}{16} \times 7\frac{1}{16}$  in. (9.8 × 4.5 × 17.9 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Frank L. Babbott Fund, 37.371.15. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)



Liu Dan (Chinese, born 1953). *Taihu Rock from Jiemei Studio*, 2006. Ink on paper, image:  $102\frac{3}{4} \times 60\frac{1}{4}$  in. (260 × 152.7 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of the Asian Art Council, 2005 China Trip Participants, in honor of Amy G. Poster, Lisa and Bernard Selz Curator and Chair, Asian Art, 2006.19. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

# Lesson

## STEP 1: 10 MINUTES

## Introduction

Tell students that a belief system is a set of ideas that guides our morals and actions; sometimes belief systems are associated with religion but they are not always spiritual or religious. Today they will be learning about Confucianism, a belief system based on the teachings of a Chinese philosopher, Confucius, who lived in the fifth and sixth centuries B.C.E.

Explain: In addition to his other teachings, Confucius believed that people should strive to improve themselves. He identified five constants, virtues everyone should work toward: *ren* (compassion), *yi* (justice), *li* (respect for tradition), *zhi* (knowledge), and *xin* (integrity).

Divide students into five groups. Assign each group one of the five constants and ask them to discuss the actions they could take to demonstrate this virtue. (It may help to have the constants printed out and legible, or have them on separate cards that are distributed to each group.) If time allows, ask one person from each group to share their findings.



*Scholar's Rock*, 18th century. Limestone,  $1\frac{1}{2} \times 8\frac{3}{4} \times 6\frac{3}{4}$  in. (54.3 × 22.2 × 17.1 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Alastair Bradley Martin, 2002.57. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

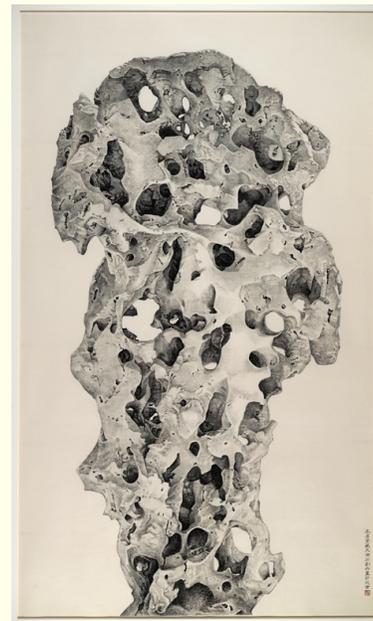
## STEP 2: 20 MINUTES

## Artwork Discussion/Comparison

Explain that: Confucianism emphasizes lifelong study of art, poetry, and literature. Confucian *scholars*, or people who commit to studying one or more topics in depth, would keep many special objects on or near their desks, and you are going to look at some of those objects together.

Show students *Scholar's Rock* and *Taihu Rock from Jiemei Studio* and ask them to look closely.

Give students pencils and paper. Ask them to create a blind-contour drawing of each piece, or a drawing where they do not look at the paper as they draw and instead keep their eyes on the object. They may choose which piece to draw first but will be given no more than 30 seconds for each drawing.



Liu Dan (Chinese, born 1953). *Taihu Rock from Jiemei Studio*, 2006. Ink on paper, image:  $10\frac{2}{8} \times 60\frac{1}{8}$  in. (260 × 152.7 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of the Asian Art Council, 2005 China Trip Participants, in honor of Amy G. Poster, Lisa and Bernard Selz Curator and Chair, Asian Art, 2006.19. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

Ask:

- What were some of the details you noticed in these pieces?
- What are the similarities you notice between these pieces?
- What are some differences between the pieces?

Pass out the limestone sample, and explain: These are two different examples of scholars' rocks. One is an actual rock made of limestone, from the nineteenth century, and one is an ink-on-paper depiction of a scholar's rock. Many scholars' rocks are naturally occurring, not made or drawn by an artist. They might be appreciated for their shapes, textures, and even the sounds they make when struck.

Show students *Brush Rest in the Form of a Mountain*.

Ask:

- What do you notice about the shape of this object?
- What do you think this object was used for?

Explain: This is a brush rest made of gilded bronze, in the shape of mountains; the space between each mountain is designed to hold calligraphy brushes, which are special brushes used for decorative writing with ink. Pass around calligraphy brushes, if available.

Ask: Why do you think a scholar might want objects like a scholar's rock or the brush rest on the desk?



*Brush Rest in the Form of a Mountain*, 18th century (possibly). Bronze, traces of gilding,  $3\frac{7}{8} \times 1\frac{11}{16} \times 7\frac{1}{16}$  in. (9.8 × 4.5 × 17.9 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Frank L. Babbott Fund, 37.371.15. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

## STEP 3: 15 MINUTES

## Activity: Create a Scholar's Study

**Explain:** Many elites, including government workers, in China were Confucian scholars who made landscape paintings or wrote poetry in their free time. They kept items on or near their desks that reminded them of nature and inspired them; scholars' rocks were popular, as were writing and painting tools, such as special brush rests.

**Ask:** What kinds of things do you make or learn about outside of school? What is it about these things that you enjoy?

Tell students they will be designing an ideal place to learn and study. Their studies can include objects for inspiration like the scholars' rocks, or functional objects like the brush rest. They can also include useful furniture like a couch to lounge on or an upright chair and desk to sit at and work, and even a bright light for reading.

Pass out paper and pencils, and ask students to begin brainstorming: What are some objects that you would like in your study?

As they begin to draw, ask students to think about the objects in their scholar studies as well as the overall arrangement of the room. How would you like the space to make you feel? What ideas do you want your study to remind you of?

After ten minutes, ask students to share their studies with a partner. Partners can ask questions about any of the objects in the study, and students can take the opportunity to change or add anything to their studies.

As an optional homework assignment, ask students to create their own study spaces at home based on some of the things they discussed in class.

# Lesson Extensions

## SCIENCE CONNECTION—EROSION

Remind students that many scholars' rocks were formed naturally over time by water, acidic soil, or weather conditions. Define the term erosion, explaining that rocks can be gradually worn down and shaped by these things, and show them examples of rock formations that have been shaped by erosion. Ask them to experiment with erosion using different kinds of candies submerged in jars of water: leave some of the jars sitting still and shake others, to see how moving water causes erosion more quickly. You can also try adding acidic substances, such as vinegar, to some of the jars to see how that affects erosion.

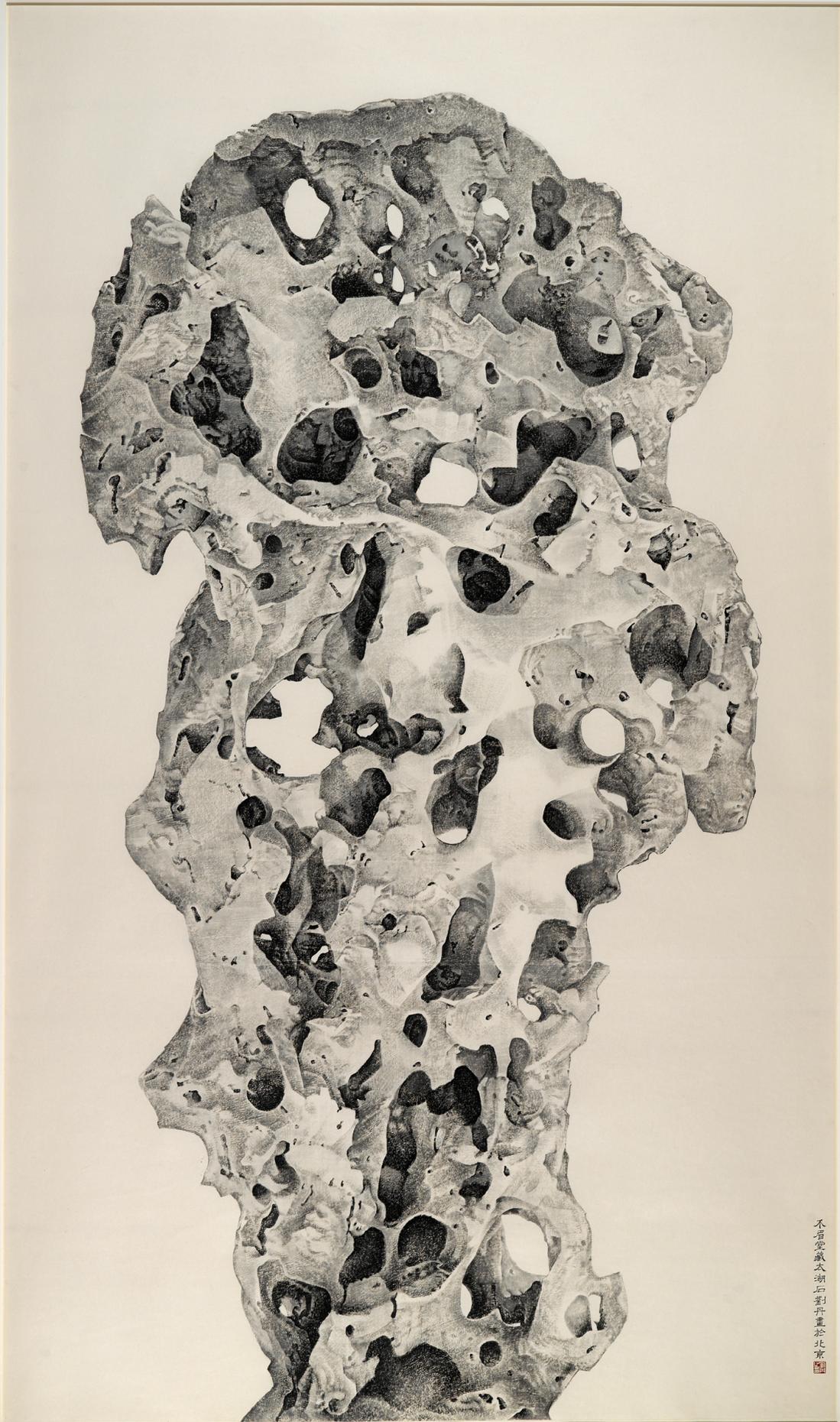
## ARTS CONNECTION—INSPIRING OBJECTS

Show students the scholar's rock, and explain that these rocks were meant to inspire creativity by reminding scholars of beauty and nature. Ask students to consider: What kinds of things inspire you? Ask them to brainstorm a list, then create an abstract sculpture using different elements of the things that inspire them. Students can use clay to build their sculptures, and then use paint or other mixed media (such as found objects, sequins, etc.) to decorate the surfaces. Have them place their finished sculptures on their desks at school or wherever they study at home.

# Worksheets and Additional Materials







不肖堂藏太湖石劉丹畫於北京

Cover:  
*Scholar's Rock*. 18th century. Limestone, 15½ × 8¾ × 6¾ in. (34.5 × 22.2 × 17.1 cm). Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Alastair Bradley Martin, 2002.57. Creative Commons-BY. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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

This resource was written by Cheri Ehrlich, Curriculum Consultant, and Michael Reback, Teacher Services Coordinator, with assistance from Joan Cummins, Lisa and Bernard Selz Senior Curator, Asian Art, and the staff and students from P.S. 029 Bardwell, P.S. 321 William Penn, P.S. 015 Patrick F. Daly, and P.S. 032 Samuel Mills Sprole.

The Arts of China Teaching Toolkit initiative is coordinated by Michael Reback, Teacher Services Coordinator, with assistance from Keonna Hendrick, School Programs Manager, and Adjoa Jones de Almeida, Director of Education.