

Arts of Buddhism



Expressive Guardians



Learn about facial expression through exploration of a Buddhist guardian figure

Lesson Overview

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Explore how artists use facial expression to convey emotions
- Learn about Buddhist *Shitennō* and discuss their protective role in Buddhist temples
- Create a sculpture inspired by the protectors in their own lives

Vocabulary

Shitennō

Japanese name for the guardians who protect the four quarters of the universe in the four cardinal directions, warding off evil and guarding the nation

Buddhism

A widespread religion or philosophical tradition originating in India

Facial expression

The movement or position of facial features to convey feelings

Required Materials

- Pencils
- Paper
- Air-dry clay (if available)

Included Resources

- [Example images of full *Shitennō* sculptures](#)
- [Example image of a Buddhist temple](#)

For the Teacher

Background Information

Buddhism is a widespread Asian belief system and philosophy that originated in India, traveling via trade routes to Korea and China, then introduced into Japan in the sixth century. Today, Buddhism is a major global religion, and it is still an integral part of Japanese society, where it is the second most practiced religion after Shintoism.

Buddhist temples in Japan sometimes included sculptures of *Shitennō*, also known as the Four Heavenly Guardians, Buddhist gods whose role was to protect the temple's sacred precincts. They would usually be in a group of four facing each of the cardinal directions (north, east, south, west), and would surround a larger figure of a Buddha. They would typically have been placed in a temple sanctuary around a main altar, protecting one of the more central Buddhist images. *Shitennō* are just one kind of Buddhist guardian that might be represented in Japanese Buddhist temples. There are also pairs of guardians who stand on either side of temple entrances or on either side of a seated Buddha, and there are larger groups that stand in a ring around a Buddha.

Artwork Description

This larger-than-life-size head, nearly two feet tall, was originally part of a much larger, full-bodied sculpture. A protrusion at the base, where the raw, unpainted wood is visible, shows where the neck would have connected with the body of the sculpture. The guardian head's skin is bright green, although much of the pigment has discolored or chipped away over time, revealing large areas of the black lacquer underlayer. His facial expression is exaggerated, with a flared nose, deeply furrowed brow, and menacing, open-mouthed snarl. Large, bloodshot eyes—made from crystal and inlaid into the wood—stare downward, focusing intently on something below. An elaborate metal crown, depicting lotus imagery and a swirling motif, sits atop the figure's head.

About the Artwork

The Heavenly Guardians would have been dressed as military generals in armor and carrying an assortment of weapons and objects that help them eliminate evil influences and overcome the enemies of Buddhism. The guardians stood in aggressive poses, wearing ferocious expressions, ready to fend off any evil spirits or, symbolically, any negative qualities such as greed or corruption that might come to the temple. Sometimes, the figures are represented standing triumphantly over the defeated bodies of a writhing demon, symbolizing dominance over and subjugation of any enemies of Buddhism. This guardian was made during the Kamakura period (1185–1333), a time that saw increased emphasis on expression and energy in sculpture.

Lesson

Introduction/Warm-Up

Ask students:

- Has anyone heard the phrase “facial expression”?
- What do you think it means?

Explain that “facial expression” means the movement or position of facial features. Facial expressions are one way that people communicate their feelings, either intentionally or not.

Tell students that they’re going to practice using just their face to convey an emotion. Start by practicing together: Ask students to think about how they would convey happiness using only their face. Then, on the count of three, have them make their facial expression. Ask them to hold their facial expressions for five seconds while they look around to see how other students conveyed happiness with their faces.

After five seconds, ask:

- How did you convey happiness with your face?
- What did you see your classmates doing to convey happiness?

Next, ask students to quietly choose a different feeling they want to convey with a facial expression. Have them pair up with the person sitting next to them, and, on the count of three, to make a facial expression. Remind students not to use any other parts of their body, just their faces! After a few seconds, ask students to guess which emotion their partner was trying to convey.



Artwork Discussion

Show students Head of a Guardian. Before discussing the artwork as a group, pass out pencil and paper. Ask students to sketch the artwork quietly for five minutes, trying to capture as much detail as they can.

After students finish their drawings, ask:

- What details did you notice while you were sketching?
- What feeling do you think this figure is trying to convey?
- How would you describe this figure's facial expression?

Encourage them to be specific about what they see, and to look at different parts of the face, such as the forehead, eyes, and mouth.

Tell students that the artwork is almost 2 feet tall—much bigger than a human head! Although we only have the head now, originally it was part of a much larger sculpture, including a full body that was probably more than 8 feet tall.

Ask them to imagine:

- What do you think the body of this sculpture might have looked like?
- How do you think it might have been posed?

Give students five seconds to think, then ask for a few volunteers to stand up and make the pose they imagined.

Tell students that this artwork shows the head of a *Shitennō*, also known as the Four Heavenly Guardians. Show example images of other *Shitennō* and explain that these sculptures were made for Buddhist temples in Japan. Show the image of a Buddhist temple and explain that Buddhism is a widespread Asian belief system and philosophy that has been practiced in Japan for about 1,500 years.

Ask:

- How do you think it would feel to be inside this temple?
- Why do you think *Shitennō* sculptures were placed inside temples like this?

Explain that Buddhism teaches the importance of values such as kindness toward people and animals, self-control, and wisdom. Sculptures like this one were meant to protect against impulses such as greed or corruption, seen as harmful in Buddhism.

Ask:

- What kind of facial expression and body language would you use to warn an enemy to stay away?





Head of a Guardian, 13th century. Hinoki cypress wood with lacquer on cloth, pigment, rock crystal, metal. Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alastair B. Martin, the Guennol Collection, 86.21. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)



Four Heavenly Kings. (Photo: courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#))



Kōfuku-ji Temple. (Photo: Hyppolyte de Saint-Rambert, courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Activity

Ask students:

- Who are some of the protectors in your community?
- What do they protect you from?

Tell students that they are going to create a work of art inspired by the idea of protection. Have them independently brainstorm qualities that they associate with their protectors while you pass out the air-dry clay.

Note: If air-dry clay is not available, students can also use paper and colored pencils to draw their ideas.

Have students select two to three of the qualities they brainstormed, then ask:

- How could you depict these qualities just through a figure's head?

Encourage them to consider facial expression and different kinds of adornments as they create their sculptures. If mirrors are available, you can also encourage students to practice making different kinds of facial expressions in the mirror to get ideas for their artwork.

If time allows, have a few students share their sculptures with the group, explaining what qualities they chose to represent and how they depicted those qualities in their artwork.



Extension Activities

Social Studies Extension— Kōfuku-ji Temple

Explain to students that Head of a Guardian previously belonged to the Kōfuku-ji Temple, a large and historically significant temple in Japan. Show them the location of the temple, in Nara, on a map, and explore images of the temple together. You can use the [Kōfuku-ji Temple's website](#) to find a map of the temple complex, images of buildings and important artworks in the temple's collection, and more information about the temple's history.

Arts Extension—Protectors

Ask students to continue thinking about protectors in their community, then ask:

→ What are some other examples of protectors you can think of?

Encourage them to think about people, real or imaginary, they know from history, books, movies, etc. Afterward, ask students to draw their own imaginary character, using inspiration from one or more of the protectors in their communities. Have them consider facial expression, pose, costume, and other attributes while they work on their design. When they finish their drawings, ask students to write a short description about their artwork.

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Cover:

Head of a Guardian (details), 13th century. Hinoki cypress wood with lacquer on cloth, pigment, rock crystal, metal. Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alastair B. Martin, the Guennol Collection, 86.21. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)