

# Arts of Buddhism



## Geometric Mandalas



Look for repeated shapes, colors, and patterns in Buddhist mandalas



# Lesson Overview

# Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Look closely at a mandala and consider how it would be used in Buddhism
- Consider how lines, shapes, and colors can be used to create patterns
- Practice creating their own symmetrical patterns with cut paper

## Vocabulary

**Mandala**

Buddhist devotional images with geometric designs representing the cosmos

**Buddhism**

A widespread belief system and philosophy that originated in Asia

**Symmetry**

Something that looks the same, or very similar, on both sides of a dividing line

## Required Materials

- 8 1/2 × 11 paper
- Scissors
- Drawing tools (colored pencils, markers, crayons)

## Included Resources

- [Exploring Symmetry worksheet](#)

# For the Teacher

# Background Information

Mandalas are Buddhist devotional images. They have been created since the fourth century and are used to the present day in India, Tibet, Nepal, China, Japan, Bhutan, and Indonesia as well as worldwide. Most mandalas take the form of geometric diagrams, often containing images of enlightened figures and religious symbols. They can be very simple, drawn on paper or the ground; they can be elaborate, painted on scrolls or walls; they can be made of colored sand; they can even be three-dimensional, rendered in sculpture or architecture. Mandalas represent the spiritual journey, starting from the outside of the design and proceeding to the inner core through its many layers. Buddhist practitioners study the lessons and prayers associated with mandalas, and repeated use of different mandalas is believed to bring wisdom, healing, and contentment.

## Artwork Description

This Mandala of Vajrasattva, which was made in the fifteenth century, is painted on cotton and decorated using opaque watercolors. The central figure is Vajrasattva, a bodhisattva (or enlightened figure) who helps practitioners to gain enlightenment. He is seated in meditation, adorned with jewels and silk garments and holding the *vajra*, a stylized lightning bolt representing the power and brilliance of knowledge.

The mandala depicts the top view of a three-dimensional celestial palace. At the center of the mandala is the deity Vajrasattva, from which everything in the universe is believed to emanate. He is surrounded, in a circle configuration, by four guardians. The floor of the palace is divided into four colors: red, green, yellow, and blue. The first outer square, with variously colored stripes, depicts the four palace walls, with four T-shapes representing entryways to the palace. Just outside the walls is a square veranda, colored in red, with sixteen small figures depicting goddesses of various colors.

The outermost stylized square represents the ornate roof of the palace. The palace rests on two circles of decorative patterns that are further surrounded by the ring of five colored flames of pristine awareness. Each corner is adorned with a vase and lotus motif enriched with green vines, white circular blossoms, and auspicious emblems.

## About the Artwork

The word *mandala* comes from the Sanskrit word for circle and refers to the sense of wholeness created by circular forms. Mandala art often has a central point from which all lines, colors, and symbols radiate. Mandalas are tools for spiritual guidance that consist of geometric configurations and patterns. They serve as an aid in meditation, focus the attention of practitioners, and are often considered to be a symbol of the universe in its ideal form.



# Lesson

# Introduction/Warm-Up

Ask students to imagine somewhere they want to go. This could be a literal place or a goal they want to achieve. Ask them to close their eyes and imagine the journey in as much detail as possible:

- Where are they heading?
- Where are they starting from?
- What are the steps they have to take to get to their final destination?
- Who or what do they have to pass along the way?

Give students a couple of minutes to focus on this question, then ask a few volunteers to share about their journey.

Explain that they are going to look at a special kind of artwork that helps people on their own journeys.



# Artwork Discussion

Show students the image of the Mandala of Vajrasattva. Ask them:

- What is the first thing you noticed?
- What is one word you would use to describe this artwork?

Ask students to look at the artwork more closely for thirty seconds. Then ask:

- What details did you notice after looking more closely?
- What colors do you see? What shapes?
- What do you notice about the figures in this artwork?

Tell students this artwork is an example of a mandala. Mandalas are used in Buddhism, a belief system practiced all over the world, as a guide for meditation, which means thinking deeply or focusing your mind for an extended period of time. Explain that Buddhists in many different cultures create mandalas. Show students two examples: one from Japan, painted on silk, and one from Tibet, made out of sand.

Show students the Mandala of Vajrasattva again and ask:

- Where does your eye go first when you look at this artwork?
- Where does it go next?
- Do you see any shapes or colors that are repeated?
- How would you describe the figures in this image?

Explain that, although mandalas initially look complicated, they are created using specific symbols and repeated, geometric patterns. Viewers are meant to “travel” through the mandala along a certain path, stopping at different parts of the image to think about its meaning.







Mandala of Vajrasattva, 15th century. Opaque watercolors on cotton. Brooklyn Museum; Frank L. Babbott Fund, Frederick Loeser Fund, Caroline H. Polhemus Fund, Caroline A.L. Pratt Fund, Charles Stewart Smith Memorial Fund, Ella C. Woodward Memorial Fund, and Designated Purchase Fund, 81.10. (Photo: George Roos, image courtesy of the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation)





*Taizō-kai Mandara*, 14th century. Opaque watercolor, ink, gold on silk. Brooklyn Museum; Museum Collection Fund, 21.240.2 (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)





Sand mandala. (Photo: Andrew Davidson, courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#))

# Activity

Tell students that they will try making their own repeating patterns, inspired by repeated shapes and forms of the mandala.

*Note: Throughout this section, we will create diagrams/worksheets to help illustrate these concepts and guide students through the activity.*

Ask students:

→ Has anyone heard the word “symmetry”?

Explain that symmetry means something that looks the same, or very similar, on both sides of a dividing line. The line of symmetry is a line that passes through the center of an object or image that is symmetrical. Show students an example, and explain that to find the line of symmetry, they can think about where to fold something so that both parts overlap exactly.

Tell students they are going to practice using lines of symmetry to make their own works of art, inspired by the repeated shapes and forms of the mandala.

Pass out materials, along with the instructional worksheet. Practice part one together as a class:

- Make a square piece of paper by folding one corner of a rectangle down to form a triangle.
- Cut off the excess paper.
- Fold the triangle in half to make a smaller triangle, then fold it in half again.
- If you unfold your square, you'll see four folds.

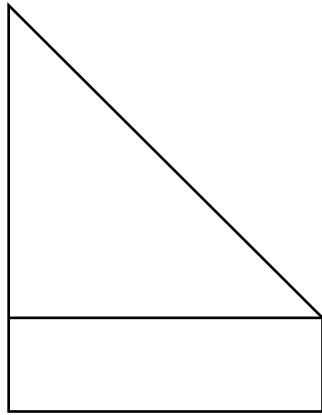
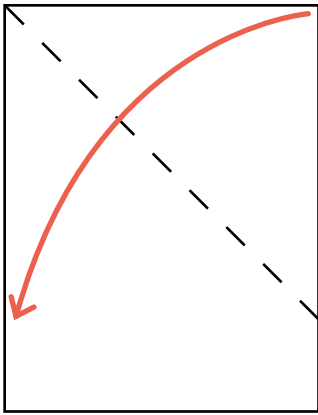
Have students fold their paper back into a small triangle, and experiment with cutting out shapes along the edges. Encourage students to try cutting different kinds of shapes or lines, on different parts of the triangle, then unfolding their paper to see what the design looks like. They can also repeat specific shapes to create patterns in their finished artwork.

If time allows, after experimenting, students can take a second piece of paper to make a “final” design.

Pass out colored mark-making materials and have students finish their artworks by decorating around the cut-out shapes. Encourage them to use colors, shapes, and lines to make repeating patterns, and to keep their artwork symmetrical by making sure all eight of the folded sections of their square are identical.

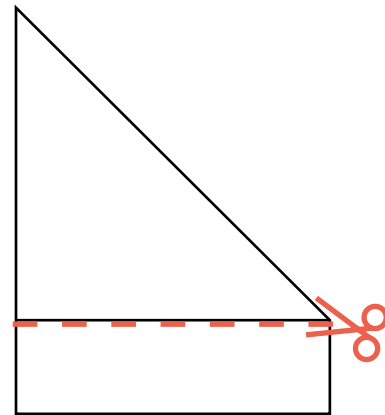


# Exploring Symmetry

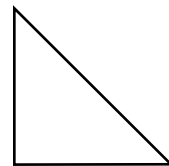
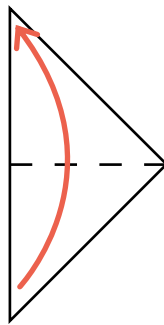
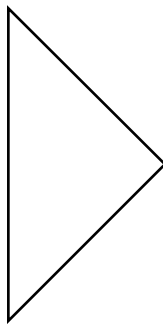
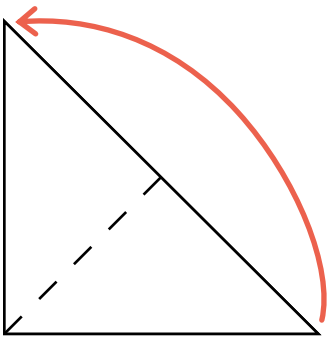


Make a square piece of paper by folding one corner of a rectangle down to form a triangle.

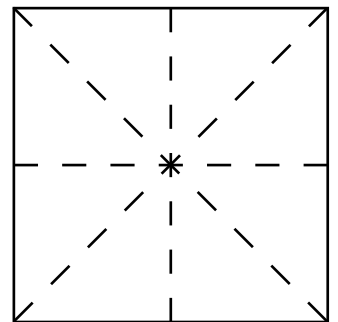
Cut off the excess paper.



Fold the triangle in half to make a smaller triangle, then fold it in half again.



If you unfold your square, you'll see four folds.



# Extension Activities

# Math Connection— Exploring Symmetry

Remind students that “symmetry” means something that looks the same, or very similar, on both sides of a dividing line. Ask them if they can find examples of things in the classroom that are symmetrical, and to identify the line of symmetry. Then, have them practice creating symmetrical structures using blocks (such as LEGOs or foam blocks). Have each student build half of a structure, without thinking about symmetry, then swap with a partner who will try to build the other half to make the final structure symmetrical.

# Arts Connection— Mapping Your Journey

Remind students that mandalas are almost like maps, meant to help guide Buddhists on their journey toward wisdom. Ask students to imagine a goal they want to work toward—you might share an example from your own life—and to brainstorm all the steps they’ll need to take to achieve that goal. Then, have them illustrate maps to help guide their journey, showing some of the steps they’ll take to get there. Encourage them to think about milestones in their journey, and what kinds of people or things will help them along the way.



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Cover:  
Mandala of Vajrasattva, 15th century. Opaque watercolors on cotton. Brooklyn Museum; Frank L. Babbott Fund, Frederick Loeser Fund, Caroline H. Polhemus Fund, Caroline A.L. Pratt Fund, Charles Stewart Smith Memorial Fund, Ella C. Woodward Memorial Fund, and Designated Purchase Fund, 81.10. (Photo: George Roos, image courtesy of the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation)