

Activity 3.1 The Power of the Image

Performance Objectives Students examine an image of compassion in the Buddhist tradition, analyzing components of the concept, then produce their own image of compassion through art.

Grade Level 3–8

Essential Questions How do symbols function in an image?
Why is knowledge of a culture’s symbolic language important to understanding an image?
How are abstract ideas shown in visual images?

Standards **Social Studies**

World History

- Studying about different world cultures and civilizations, focusing on their accomplishments, contributions, values, beliefs, and traditions
- Exploring the lifestyles, beliefs, traditions, rules and laws, and social/cultural needs and wants of people during different periods in history and in different parts of the world
- Viewing historic events through the eyes of those who were there, as shown in their art, writing, music, and artifacts

Visual Arts

- Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matters, symbols, and ideas
- Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

Time Required One class period

Materials Photocopies of the *Portrait of the Bodhisattva Guanyin* and **Introductory Questions** from the beginning of this section or the *Visible Traces* poster
Photocopies of the **Iconography for the Portrait of the Bodhisattva Guanyin** handout
Colored markers/colored pencils/crayons
Sculpting clay
Paper

Assessment Piece Students’ verbal responses; illustration

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- Procedure
1. Many objects in *Visible Traces* represent the transmission of ideas through a written language. A bodhisattva is one who has achieved enlightenment but chooses to delay the rewards of nirvana, in order to help others achieve their own enlightenment. Distribute photocopies of the *Portrait of the Bodhisattva Guanyin* and discuss the **Introductory Questions**. This portrait of Guanyin, the bodhisattva associated with compassion and mercy, offers a vivid example of how ideas and doctrines are communicated and shared through images. Continue the dialogue with students by asking them how the concept of compassion is represented in this rubbing. Point out that this is not a fixed representation of the goddess. It is believed that there are as many as thirty-three different images of Guanyin—both male and female, young and old—in Chinese iconography.
 2. As a class, make a list on the blackboard of features that students see in the image. (plants, waves, a child, circles behind the heads of Guanyin and the child, and so forth) Explain that in art, some features are universal, meaning that they can be readily understood by anyone, whereas others are specific to a particular culture.
 3. Distribute the **Iconography for the Portrait of the Bodhisattva Guanyin** handout and see if, knowing the properties of some of the symbols in the image of Guanyin, students can guess their meaning.
 4. How would students depict an abstract notion, such as compassion, freedom, or stability in an image? Ask students to include symbols from their own experience. Provide materials for creating drawings or sculptures.
 5. Display the artworks and discuss the symbolism and treatment of abstract concepts.

Handout Iconography for the Portrait of the Bodhisattva Guanyin

Enlightenment

The ultimate wisdom attained in Buddhism.

Nirvana

The Buddhist term for the ultimate release from earthly desires, and the attainment of disinterested compassion and wisdom.

In Buddhism, a bodhisattva is one who has attained *enlightenment* but chooses to delay the rewards of *nirvana*. Instead, he or she helps ordinary people reach enlightenment more easily and quickly. The wise and compassionate bodhisattva known as Avalokitesvara in Sanskrit, and Guanyin in China, was frequently prayed to for assistance.

Iconography is the reading of symbols in a painting or sculpture. Be an art detective and use the clues below to read the picture of Guanyin.

Bamboo: Bamboo has hollow stalks, which allow it to bend and endure heavy winds. It is a symbol commonly used in Chinese painting. Given its properties, what might bamboo symbolize?

Guanyin floating on water: Guanyin is standing on a lotus leaf. Rooted at the bottom of a pond, the lotus surfaces on muddy water to flower. It is an important symbol in Buddhism. How might it be interpreted?

The child next to Guanyin: He is the boy pilgrim Sudhana (Shancai in Chinese). According to the Garland Sutra, Sudhana visits fifty-three teachers to learn about the teachings of Buddhism. Guanyin is the twenty-eighth. Why is he prominent in this image?

Handout Iconography for the Portrait of the Bodhisattva Guanyin

The circles behind the heads of Guanyin and Sudhana: These are mandalas. *Mandala* is a Sanskrit (an ancient Indic language that is the classical language of India) word that literally means “circle.” In Buddhism it signifies meditation through which enlightenment is often achieved. In some schools of Buddhism, one can achieve enlightenment quickly by appealing to a bodhisattva. Why might Guanyin and Sudhana have mandalas behind their heads?

What other cultures depict religious figures with circles behind their heads? What about these representations and their symbolism is similar to the mandalas in this image? What is different?

The notion of compassion: Guanyin is associated with compassion. How is compassion conveyed in this image?