

Activity 5.2 The Expressive Brush

Performance Objectives Students will express emotion using brushstrokes, demonstrating that ideas can be communicated through style as well as subject matter. This activity offers students the experience of working with the tools of Chinese calligraphy and exploring visual effects made by brush and ink.

Grade Level 6–12

Variation Grade Level 3–5

Essential Questions How did educated Chinese study calligraphy?
How is Chinese calligraphy expressive?
What is the role of the dynamic line in calligraphy?

Standards **Social Studies**

World History

- Knowing the social and economic characteristics, such as customs, traditions, child-rearing practices, ways of making a living, education and socialization practices, gender roles, roots, and religious and spiritual beliefs, that distinguish cultures and civilizations
- Knowing important historic events and developments of past civilizations
- Viewing history through the eyes of those who witnessed key events and developments by analyzing their literature, diary accounts, letters, artifacts, art, music, architectural drawings, and other documents

Language Arts

Language for Information and Understanding

- Following directions that involve a series of actions
- Using discussion to explore complex concepts and ideas, clarifying the use of comparisons, analogies, and the elaboration of ideas

Visual Arts

- Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes
- Selecting analyzing and reflecting on effectiveness of chosen media, techniques and processes; taking advantage of the qualities of techniques, and processes to enhance communication of experiences and ideas
- Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

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Time Required One class period for art activity, one for reviewing logos or advertising

Materials Photocopies of the *Manual of Paintings by Masters of the Successive Periods* and **Introductory Questions** from the beginning of this section or the *Visible Traces* poster
Paintbrushes for each student (standard camel hair, round, no. 12, works well)
Black ink (at least one container for every two students)
Water (one container for rinsing brushes for every two students)
Paper towels for cleanup
Paper (newsprint or watercolor)

Assessment Piece Brush paintings, student reflections

Procedure

1. Arrange art materials for students.
2. Allow students a few minutes to practice the different ways the ink and brush can be used to produce a variety of strokes, especially in terms of pressure on the brush, length or direction of strokes, amount of ink on brush, or thickness of curves and lines. These techniques produce what is known as “dynamic line”—a prominent feature of Chinese calligraphy and painting.
3. Introduce the activity by briefly reviewing the role of calligraphy in Chinese culture (see background essay, “**Chinese Calligraphy**,” assigning the reading to older students if desired), emphasizing that before one could start to express oneself through calligraphy, one had to study the masters for years. This study was repetitive—copying famous examples of calligraphy over and over. Distribute and examine photocopies of the *Manual of Paintings by Masters of the Successive Periods* and discuss the **Introductory Questions**. Continue the dialogue with students by asking how this manual might have been used.
4. In order to foster students’ appreciation of this kind of study, ask them to select a handwriting sample and practice executing several letters of the alphabet a number of times, very slowly, to try to replicate them. Explain that a Chinese scholar would have practiced in such a manner for years before developing his or her own expressive style.
5. Move on to the idea of expression, discussing with students what it means. Raise the question: How might dynamic line be expressive?
6. Have students fold a fresh piece of paper into eight sections (one fold from top to bottom and two from side to side). Open the paper.
7. Have students number the sections, starting at the top, proceeding from left to right. Explain that you will give them a word or phrase for each block on the paper. When the word is given, they will have two to three seconds

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to make a visual impression of the word in a block.

8. Read the following words to the students at a steady pace—their first impulse will produce the best results:

- | | | | |
|----------|-----------------|-------------|-----------------|
| 1. Anger | 2. Peacefulness | 3. Joy | 4. Human energy |
| 5. Woman | 6. Depression | 7. Solitude | 8. Confusion |

Be certain that students are using the same block for their sketches (anger is in block 1, for example) for ease in comparing the results later.

9. Post the completed papers around the room. Have students compare their work. There will be many remarkable similarities among representations. For example, anger generates angles, hard lines, sharpness. Peacefulness is often expressed through long, horizontal lines, joy through upward motion, human energy through an explosion, woman through circles, depression through downward motion or something heavy bearing on something small. Solitude is frequently a small isolated point or line and confusion a jumbled image.¹

Discuss the results and ask students the following questions:

What different techniques were used to communicate the feelings behind the words?

Can you suggest reasons that there are similarities?

How might this information be used by an artist when painting?

Could an artist communicate ideas through the style of painting as well as the subject matter?

11. Reexamine the *Manual of Paintings by Masters of the Successive Periods*. Ask students: How are the lines in the calligraphy dynamic? What do you think the person who wrote this might have been feeling?

Extensions Look at how writing styles are used in our culture, using advertising and logos as examples. For homework, have students collect samples of logos or advertisements that use particular styles of writing to promote a feeling or concept associated with their company or product. Boeing's logo, for example, is both strong and slanted, giving a sense of stability and movement. Have students present their samples, offering an analysis of the qualities suggested by the style of writing.

Have students write a poem from the activity **Expressing the Self Through Word and Image** in a style that evokes the image they are projecting to

1. This concept is borrowed from: Betty Edwards. *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain: A Course in Enhancing Creativity and Artistic Confidence*. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher; 1979.

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their audience.

Younger students may write their names in a style that evokes qualities they associate with themselves. Have them write two to three sentences explaining what their style is intended to evoke.

Variation for
Grades 3–5 Have each student wear a smock to protect their clothing. Instead of black ink use watercolors that will wash off the skin easily. Cover desks with newspaper or recycled paper.