

Writing Across Cultures - The Chinese Pillow Poem

GRADE LEVEL: Elementary, Middle School

SUBJECT: Visual Arts, Social Studies, Literature

MEDIA: Writing

FEATURED ARTWORK:



Pillow, Earthenware with slip and glaze, 1115-1368 A.D., Jin-Yuan dynasty, China, San Antonio Museum of Art, Gift of Lenora and Walter F. Brown, 2004.20.11

OBJECTIVE:

After examining a clay pillow from the San Antonio Museum of Art's collection, students will construct similar pillows of their own. They will decorate their pillows with original poetry, following the model of the poem inscribed in one of the Chinese pillows.

DISCUSSION:

Pillows made of fired clay covered in glaze were popular in traditional China, particularly between the 7th and 14th centuries. The use of such pillows in China may be related to the belief that resting the head on the earth, one of the five elements of the universe, improves health and intellectual ability. In the summer, ceramic pillows were cool and comfortable; while in the winter, textiles were placed on top of the pillow for warmth.

There are several uniquely shaped clay pillows in the San Antonio Museum of Art, including one inscribed

with a poem. The poem is set to a popular tune of the time called “Music Filling Heaven” and describes the owner’s sleeping space:

I lean from the tall tower

Concealed behind the blind

In an ice cold jar, wine is served,

Soaked plums float in this gourd!

Small gall-bladder vase.

Pomegranate blossoms arranged.

Porcelain pillow, gauze curtain

Just right beside the window.

Green mountains, pale, pale

Dots at the edge of the sky

A fisherman, creaking his oar.

Fragrant on the breeze, budding flowers:

Ten miles of lotus bloom!

- Translated by Jonathan Chaves

The poem is written in an elegant and energetic calligraphic style. The simple color palette provides a rich harmony for the eye and complements the literary harmony of the poem.

MATERIALS:

- 12 x 18" white construction paper
- Pencils
- Draft paper
- Watercolors
- Calligraphy pens and ink or permanent markers
- Staplers
- Staples

PROCESS:

A. Writing the poem for Grades 5-8

1. Read and discuss Chaves’ translation of the pillow poem with the students, noticing how the poet uses specific detail to create a picture of his sleeping space.
2. Have students point out examples of imagery evoking each of the five senses. How does the poet reveal his positive feeling about the space without telling us directly?
3. Ask the students to use this poem as a model for a pillow poem of their own. You might also have them

follow some of the conventions of classical Chinese poetry, such as end-stopped lines, caesura and couplets. Suggest a poem of about six to eight lines. Discourage them from attempting strict meter or rhyme. Rather, ask them to concentrate on using specific detail and sensory imagery to create a picture of their sleeping space.

Adaptation for Grades 1-4

Instead of attempting to write the poem, have students select 5-8 words that best represent their sleeping space, and write those words on their pillows. Very young students can draw images on their pillows.

B. Creating the pillow

1. Fold a sheet of 12 x 18 inch white construction paper in half. Inscribe the poem on the front (top half) in pencil, and add visual imagery. The edges can be rounded to soften the shape.
2. Paint the pillow using watercolors and a palette of three colors. Students can use the *sancai* colors or create their own palette. Trace over the poem with pen and ink or permanent marker.
3. Stuff the pillow with crumpled paper and staple the edges shut.

TEKS:

Visual Art:

117.32.1 Perception. The student develops and organizes ideas from the environment.

117.32.2 Creative expression/performance. The student expresses ideas through original artworks, using a variety of media with appropriate skill.

117.32.3 Historical/cultural heritage. The student demonstrates an understanding of art history and culture as records of human achievement.

Language Arts:

110.18.2 Reading/Vocabulary Development. Students understand new vocabulary and use it when reading and writing.

110.18.4 Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Poetry. Students understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about the structure and elements of poetry and provide evidence from text to support their understanding.

110.18.14 Writing/Writing Process. Students use elements of the writing process (planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) to compose text.

110.18.15 Writing/Literary Texts. Students write literary texts to express their ideas and feelings about real or imagined people, events, and ideas.

Social Studies:

113.18.15 Culture. The student understands the similarities and differences within and among cultures in various world societies.

Lessons are written by area educators and the San Antonio Museum of Art Education department. If you are interested in sharing your lesson ideas featuring works of art from the museum's collections with the San Antonio Museum of Art Education department, please email education@samuseum.org.