

Asian Art

BY DORINDA NEAVE, LARA C. W. BLANCHARD,
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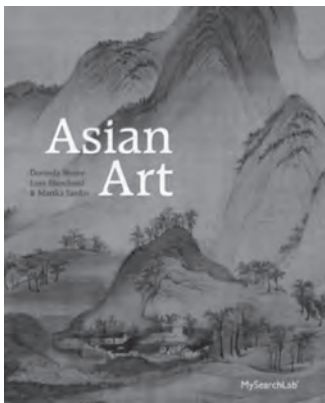
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Reviewed by Kachina Martin

*When society changes, thinking changes,
and naturally art changes as well.*

—Xu Bing, *A Book from the Sky*



A *Book from the Sky* by Xu Bing is the opening image from chapter 10, “The Push for Modernization: 1912 to the Present” in the textbook *Asian Art* by Dorinda Neave, Lara Blanchard, and Marika Sardar (Pearson, 2014), winner of the 2016 Franklin R. Buchanan Prize. Xu’s statement opens the text of the chapter, framing the essence of the big ideas in this section of the book. Each chapter of *Asian Art* opens in this manner, with a full-page, richly colored image of a work of

art and a thoughtful quote that creates a context for the work. *Asian Art* is a well-organized, highly readable text that provides educators of all disciplines ways to address and include the arts of Asia in their curricula. The book is not only an excellent reference for teachers with little knowledge of the art of South and Southeast Asia, China, Korea, and Japan, but an important textbook for teachers in art-related fields.

After spending several class sessions studying the art of China, my students in Global Studies were asked to respond to Xu’s assertion and consider how it reflected the art of China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To receive full credit for their responses to this writing prompt, students were required to use specific works of Chinese art to support their assertions. “Prompts,” as the students come to know, are an integral part of Global Studies, an honors-level team-taught course addressing art, literature, history, and music for eleventh-grade students. All four teachers in Global Studies use prompts as a way to engage students in the topics we are studying. Prompts can be used as a means to introduce students to a concept, assess comprehension, or, as in this case, help students review for an upcoming exam. Generally, students are given approximately ten minutes to respond to the prompt, and depending upon the scope of the question, instructor expectation varies from a well-written paragraph to brief notes. In this case, my expectation was for students to be able to identify the speaker, Xu, a contemporary artist whose work *A Book from the Sky* challenges the significance of text, as well as the role of history and writing in China. Traditional woodcut techniques are used to produce a monumental installation, which we discussed at length in class. Throughout my lecture on Chinese art, students were introduced to a variety of art. It was then fair to expect the students to recall artists’ names and titles of specific pieces in this prompt and to relate the art to the context of the society of the time period. Given the broad nature of the question and the time allotted, students were encouraged to answer the prompt in note form, and

students exchanged papers when time was called. I used this prompt as a way to assess comprehension by asking students to share their peers’ responses in preparation for the exam scheduled for the next day.

Consider as well the quotation that opens chapter 9, “The City and the Market in Chinese Art: The Ming and Qing Dynasties,” in which Wen Peng comments on the exchange of a work of art for “a flock of geese,” signifying the importance of art as a commodity, a good to be exchanged on the open market. The work that accompanies this quote is a detail of the painting *Zhao Mengfu Writing the Heart Sutra in Exchange for Tea* by Qiu Ying. The exchange of goods and services and the study of supply and demand form the backbone of economics. Creative teachers of other math-related fields will certainly find ways to utilize many of the pieces addressed in *Asian Art* to frame questions that relate to their disciplines, and this text will serve as an important resource. To this end, each chapter concludes with a section titled “Cross-Cultural Explorations.” Of the four questions for students to consider that encourage further study and comparison to other cultures in chapter 9, the authors note that “patronage helped to shape the art of the Ming and Qing dynasties,” and query if it is “truly possible to produce art in a context entirely separate from market forces” (219).

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With the push in many school districts to incorporate STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and STEAM (STEM plus the Arts) initiatives, using artwork as ways to frame larger questions in math and science classrooms encourages well-rounded thinkers and gives teachers a unique way to engage students. I have worked collaboratively with our Technology Education department—which offers a Computer Aided Drafting class, an Architectural Drawing and Design class, and an Engineering Design class—to encourage the use of structures such as the Hall of Supreme Harmony from Beijing’s Forbidden City as an exemplar of post and beam techniques (196–197). Likewise, the Shinto shrine at Ise provides students with the opportunity to study concepts in engineering and physics. The complex has been rebuilt every twenty years since the seventh century, each time without the use of nails, employing the mortise-and-tenon technique. Study of the shrine not only offers students the opportunity to study STEM concepts, but also enables students outside arts-related fields to learn about Shintoism and the aesthetic associated with shrines dedicated to Shinto *kami* (nature spirits). These concepts are clearly and concisely addressed on pages 287 and 288 as part of the discussion of the Ise Shrine. Along with lesson-appropriate selections from the introduction, the book delivers a thorough background to students new to the discipline of art history and the evaluation of works of art and architecture. The text is written in a direct and engaging manner. Its readability allows teachers of any discipline to use the text with high school students for independent reading in both career and college-level tracks. Middle school teachers may want to read with students to ensure comprehension.

As a Studio Art and AP Art History teacher, I am impressed with the multiple applications for this text in all my classes. The use of quotes and beautiful visuals makes this text an invaluable resource in Global Studies,

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where I focus on the arts of Africa and Asia. The sections titled “Closer Look” encourage deeper study of significant pieces, enabling students to see the rich details that might otherwise be missed, while integrating important vocabulary and significant concepts through these mini-lessons. In chapter 1, students are shown the *Great Departure of the Buddha* from the Great Stupa at Sanchi, India, to emphasize the use of the continuous narrative, offering visual reinforcement that parallels their study of the life of the Buddha, thus familiarizing students with the symbols that are associated with him (12). This detailed look at just a small part of the east gateway of the Great Stupa reinforces the grandeur of this monumental structure and the importance of Buddhism. These details speak to countless hours of dedicated artisans who toiled to craft this work (11). Primary documents like Kamo no Chōmei’s *An Account of a Ten-Foot Square Hut* from Japan, written in 1212, help further contextualize the art within chapter 14, “Strife and Serenity: Kamakura, Muromachi, and Momoyama Periods.” In other chapters, these sections, titled “Point of View,” reference contemporary perspectives to show the connection between the past and the present.

Approximately a quarter to a third of the students in Global Studies will continue their study of art history by enrolling in my Advanced Placement Art History course. As teachers of this subject know, the College Board recently changed the focus of the AP exam to encourage depth of knowledge by focusing on 250 works of art made by artists around the world from the prehistoric to modern day and time periods, working in a wide range of media. Students must be able to address the form, function, content, and context for each of these selected artworks. *Asian Art* can play an important role in teaching AP Art History. Beyond the text’s engaging style of writing, it is significant that a large portion of the 250 pieces selected by the College Board is included within the book, especially many of the contemporary ones. Few texts provide such an in-depth and wide-ranging look at current artistic trends in Asia. Some chapters feature a section titled “Compare”; the comparison of Edouard Manet’s *Olympia* to Japanese artist Morimura Yasumas’s *Portrait (Futago)* found in chapter 15 is noteworthy in its ability to encourage students to consider issues of sexuality and race while reflecting on the context of each piece (379). In addition, for the AP students, the “Cross-Cultural Exploration” questions are indispensable tools for review. I use these questions as another way to encourage students to compare and contrast previously studied pieces with those addressed in each chapter.

As a Studio Art teacher, I am always seeking art beyond the European tradition to use as examples for my students. I have used many works within the text as a visual prompt to help students begin brainstorming for their next piece. Our district encourages writing in all disciplines, and pieces like Bharti Kher’s *Indra’s Net Mirror I* immediately engage students as they identify and respond to the artist’s use of the elements and principles, encouraging students to consider who created the piece and what message the artist was trying to convey. These written responses establish

a springboard to class discussion about art and its connection to contemporary issues, enabling students to understand how media choices affect the viewer’s response to the work. Kher, who is now based in New Delhi after being born and studying in England, uses found objects, as well as many other kinds of media, just as the painter Robert Rauschenberg did in the creation of his *Combines*. Students should be exposed to both artists, enriching their understanding of how art mirrors not only a culture but a time period. From this introduction, students were tasked with the creation of a mixed-media sculpture that spoke to an issue of their choosing. The results were phenomenal, with students tackling issues of gender inequality, racism, and poverty, as well as more personal concerns.

Art teachers see the broadest range of students in any school district. In a single day in my studio classroom, I move between working with students for whom holding a pencil is a challenge due to physical and mental capabilities to assisting students who are preparing portfolios to enter college. *Global Studies and AP Art History move me out of the studio and into a more traditional classroom setting. In all of these settings, Asian Art has been a go-to resource for both historical and contemporary references, as well as lesson ideas.* I have shared sections of the text with teachers in English and history, as well as instructors in math- and science-related fields. It is worth noting that the online accessibility of pronunciation guides was an empowering tool for my students, as well as my colleagues, who are largely unfamiliar with Asian languages, enabling all to speak confidently about works of art and the artists who make them. ■

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