Asian Art
By Dorinda Neave, Lara C. W. Blanchard, and Marika Sardar
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 a 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.
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.

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 Chômei’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 Yasumasa’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 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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