



## **China Program Teacher Guide at the George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum**

Thank you for choosing to bring your students to the Springfield Museums' China School Program. Below please see background information, suggested pre-visit activities and two handouts you may use in your class.

### **China Program Highlights**

Teachers: Your students will tour the museum in small groups with a docent (museum guide) participating in interactive activities and discussion.

- China's unique role as the oldest continuing civilization in the world.
- Chinese innovations, especially silk production
- The Silk Road
- Burial customs and ancestor rituals
- Symbolism found in Chinese art and everyday objects
- Chinese calligraphy – a writing system that blends written communication with an art form

### **Chinese Art Collection**

The George Walter Vincent Smith Museum has the largest Chinese art collection in Western Massachusetts. Ranging from burial objects and ceremonial vessels to decorative cloisonné, the collection highlights Chinese symbolism, afterlife beliefs and cultural values. The collection also makes a natural connection to China's influence on western art and design, as the collection is largely the product of nineteenth century American collecting tastes, when Asian art was hugely popular with Americans and Europeans.

### **Museum History**

The George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum is one of the two Springfield Museums dedicated to fine and decorative arts. It represents the very personal taste of the Victorian collector whose name it bears. The Museum was built in 1895 in the style of an elegant Italian villa and opened to the public in 1896 as the "Art Museum."

Inside the golden brick facade you'll be treated to the distinctive art preferences of Smith and his Springfield-born wife, Belle Townsley Smith. Smith made his fortune as a

carriage manufacturer in New York City and retired when he was just 35 years old. He and his wife moved to Springfield in 1871 and devoted their lives to collecting art. Although Smith never visited Asia, he had a life-long appreciation for its decorative arts and culture. By buying from dealers in New York and Europe, he became a leading 19th-century collector of Chinese, Japanese and Middle Eastern art, and also amassed an outstanding selection of 19th-century American paintings.

Little is known about the details of Smith's life. He was a very private person, and after his death his wife disposed of a number of diaries and letters that did not pertain directly to their art collections. The couple had no children and there are no known family descendants. George Walter Vincent Smith's legacy is this Museum.

Smith stated that his criterion for collecting was beauty. This love of beauty, combined with his appreciation of the finest craftsmanship from around the world, resulted in a selection of art which represents both the individual man and the collective taste of the Victorian era.

### **Museum Exhibits**

The avid collectors acquired a renowned collection of Japanese arms and armor, including many fine examples from the time of the Samurai; Japanese ivory carvings, intricate lacquers, decorative and utilitarian ceramics; and the largest collection of Chinese cloisonné in the Western world. A focal point of the collection is an elaborately carved Shinto shrine.

The Museum's collection of Middle Eastern rugs is ranked among the top 10 collections of these objects in the United States. Since many of the rugs were not antique when purchased, they are still in extremely good condition. While oriental rugs were an important part of most Victorian collections, they were usually treated as furnishings. Smith, however, considered rugs to be art objects and hung many of them on the walls next to paintings, elevating them to equal status with the "fine" arts.

Throughout his life G.W.V. Smith supported the American artists of his time. Some of the earliest art works he bought were paintings by artists he knew in New York City in the late 1850s and early 1860s. The Smith collection is especially strong in landscape paintings, particularly those by Hudson River School artists, fine genre paintings, and seascapes by A. T. Bricher. The Museum holds the largest collection of works by J.G. Brown (1831-1913) in a public museum, including the much-reproduced painting, *The Berry Boy*.

Classical and Renaissance art is represented in the Museum's rare collection of 48 plaster casts. In Victorian America's art museums, casts provided what was for most visitors the only contact with ancient sculpture. The casts in the G.W.V. Smith Art Museum are remarkably accurate reproductions of these masterpieces, made from molds taken directly from the originals.

## **Suggested Activities**

1. On a world map locate Asia, East Asia and China.
2. Have students free write “What I Know” and “What I Want to Know” about China. As a group discuss student responses.
3. Create a classroom timeline of Chinese history, illustrating that China is the world’s oldest continuing civilization.
4. Assign students to a buddy to research a major Chinese innovation and answer the question – “how does this innovation affect my life today?”
  - silk production
  - calligraphy
  - the compass
  - fireworks
  - gunpowder
  - the seismograph
  - the wheelbarrow
  - tea drinking
  - chopsticks
  - paper
  - kite making and kite flying
  - the umbrella
  - paper money
  - porcelain
5. Define “ancestor” and discuss why respect for ancestors is valued by many world cultures.
6. Define “symbolism” and prepare students for seeing images as meaningful and able to convey many meanings.
7. Discuss beliefs about an afterlife and burial customs – students will see a rare Chinese jade burial suit.
8. Introduce students to Buddhism and Confucius.

## Be on the lookout for...

When you visit the George Walter Vincent Smith Museum you will see many symbols and decorations that are significant within Chinese culture. Here are a few to look for when you visit.



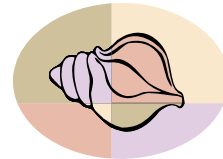
Lotus



Toatie



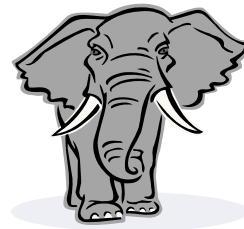
Crane



Conch



Phoenix



Elephant



Dog of Foo



Dragon

## Words to Know

Match the word with its definition.

- |                 |                                              |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------|
| 1. Buddhism     | A. Translucent pottery made from clay        |
| 2. Confucianism | B. A fiber secreted by a caterpillar         |
| 3. Ancestor     | C. An ancient metal working technique        |
| 4. Bamboo       | D. A roll used to write on or as decor       |
| 5. Silk         | E. An alloy of copper and tin                |
| 6. Calligraphy  | F. The energy or life force in living beings |
| 7. Cloisonné    | G. Set of teachings taught by the Buddha     |
| 8. Chi (Qi)     | H. A way of life taught by Confucius         |
| 9. Jade         | I. A writing system and an art form          |
| 10. Porcelain   | J. Fast growing plant and natural resource   |
| 11. Scroll      | K. An ornamental stone                       |
| 12. Bronze      | L. A parent or parent of a parent, etc       |

*Answers: 1:G 2:H 3:L 4:J 5:B 6:I 7:C 8:F 9:K 10:A 11:D 12:E*