The Art and Culture of Chinese Brush Making

The project was effective in helping students understand the significance of historical art forms in the Chinese culture and allowing them to explore the use of traditional materials to create art.

Curriculum/State Standards
(Abridged from National Standards for Arts Education developed by the Consortium of National Arts Education Associations)
Standard 1: Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes
Standard 2: Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas
Standard 3: Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

Overview
Students will be asked to complete activities that allow them to answer the inquiry question, “How does modern culture and technology affect historical art forms?” Activities will range from traditional ink painting techniques to making paintbrushes, grinding ink, and writing proverbs. This unit of study will be completed during art class in conjunction with and as a companion to the students’ history unit on modern China and technology. They were also able to compare traditional art forms to modern technologies and debate how technology has changed these forms, either for good or bad. The lesson was taught in conjunction with a history/writing unit in which students read the Tao Teh Jing and wrote their own proverbs. Students were highly engaged in creating their brushes, ink, and scrolls, and used symbolic imagery to convey messages about their values and beliefs. The difficulty and complexity of the project allowed students to understand the status of artists in Chinese culture and the treasured aspects of their work.

Objectives
The students will create traditional bamboo paintbrushes out of materials used historically in China.
The students will create a scroll depicting a Chinese proverb.
The students will describe the importance of passing on traditional art forms in Chinese culture.
The students will develop an understanding of how modern technology and norms affect traditional art forms.

Materials
bamboo, animal hair, feathers, watercolor paper, rice paper, sumi ink, paintbrushes, copy paper, books (The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting, The Way of the Brush, The Tao The Jing, Chinese Characters, Scholastic Art, Modern Chinese Painting), hack saws and clamps, drill, drill bits, beeswax, embroidery thread, printmaking ink, printmaking material (safety-cut), Internet access

Readiness Activity
Students were given a homework assignment to research “The Four Treasures of the Study.” Once they came to class with their information, they discussed the importance of these four things in Chinese culture. (ink, ink stone, paper, brush)

Strategies/Activities
Week 1
Day 1 - Students will read an article about Chinese scroll painting in Scholastic Art magazine and will answer questions about the design elements and meaning of traditional Chinese paintings

THIS WINNING PROJECT IDEA SUBMITTED BY:

Tara Kennedy
Foothills School of Arts and Sciences
Boise, ID

GRADE LEVEL
6-8
6 WEEKS
$495 TOTAL BUDGET
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(horizontal and vertical scroll formats, materials used, negative space, asymmetrical composition, symbolism).

Day 2 - Students will research the “Four Treasures of the Study” (the brush, ink, ink stone, and paper) in traditional Chinese culture and create an argument for the importance of one of these materials. Students will then debate with other students in the class to convince them of the importance of these materials.

Days 3 and 4 - Students will create one of the four treasures of the study: the bamboo brush. They will cut bamboo pieces and scraps of animal hair and hide (or feathers and raffia) to create the bristles of the brush. The brushes will be embellished with waxed thread, animal sinew, leather, and stone beads. These brushes will function both as tools for painting, and as artworks in themselves. Students will verbally reflect on the process and the importance of teaching a traditional art form like brush making, particularly in the history of Chinese culture.

Week 2

Days 5-7 - Students will use their brushes and other bamboo brushes to practice different techniques of painting with ink. They will create washes, lines, dots, and use a variety of traditional brushstrokes. They will gain inspiration from the books, The Way of the Brush: Painting Techniques in China and Japan, The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting, the periodical}

Scholastic Art, and Chinese Modern Painting. Students will also practice creating images of four common symbols in Chinese culture: bamboo, chrysanthemums, plum blossoms, and orchid. These are called “the Four Gentlemen” of Chinese painting. Students will discuss the symbols and will research the meaning of a variety of plant and animal symbols used in China.

Students will experiment with grinding their own ink on an ink stone.

Week 3

Days 8-10 – Students will use proverbs written in their history class and develop a set of symbols that could represent the proverb. They will complete practice paintings and sketches for their culminating project.

Week 4

Days 11-13 - In conjunction with their history/social studies unit about modern China, students will choose one aspect of contemporary Chinese culture or technology to research. They will verbally present their findings to the class.

Culminating Activity

Week 5

Students will create a Chinese scroll or fan to represent their written proverb. They must use traditional Chinese symbols and painting techniques, but can also incorporate modern technology into their project. Students will describe, in writing, the different aspects of the creation process, including whether the technology is helpful or detrimental to traditional art forms. Work will be displayed in the classroom.

Evaluation Method

- Product of bamboo brush and painted scroll, with rubrics to guide aesthetic choices
- Verbal debates about the importance of the “Four Treasures of the Study”
- Verbal presentation of Modern Chinese culture and/or technology.
- Written artist statements for culminating projects