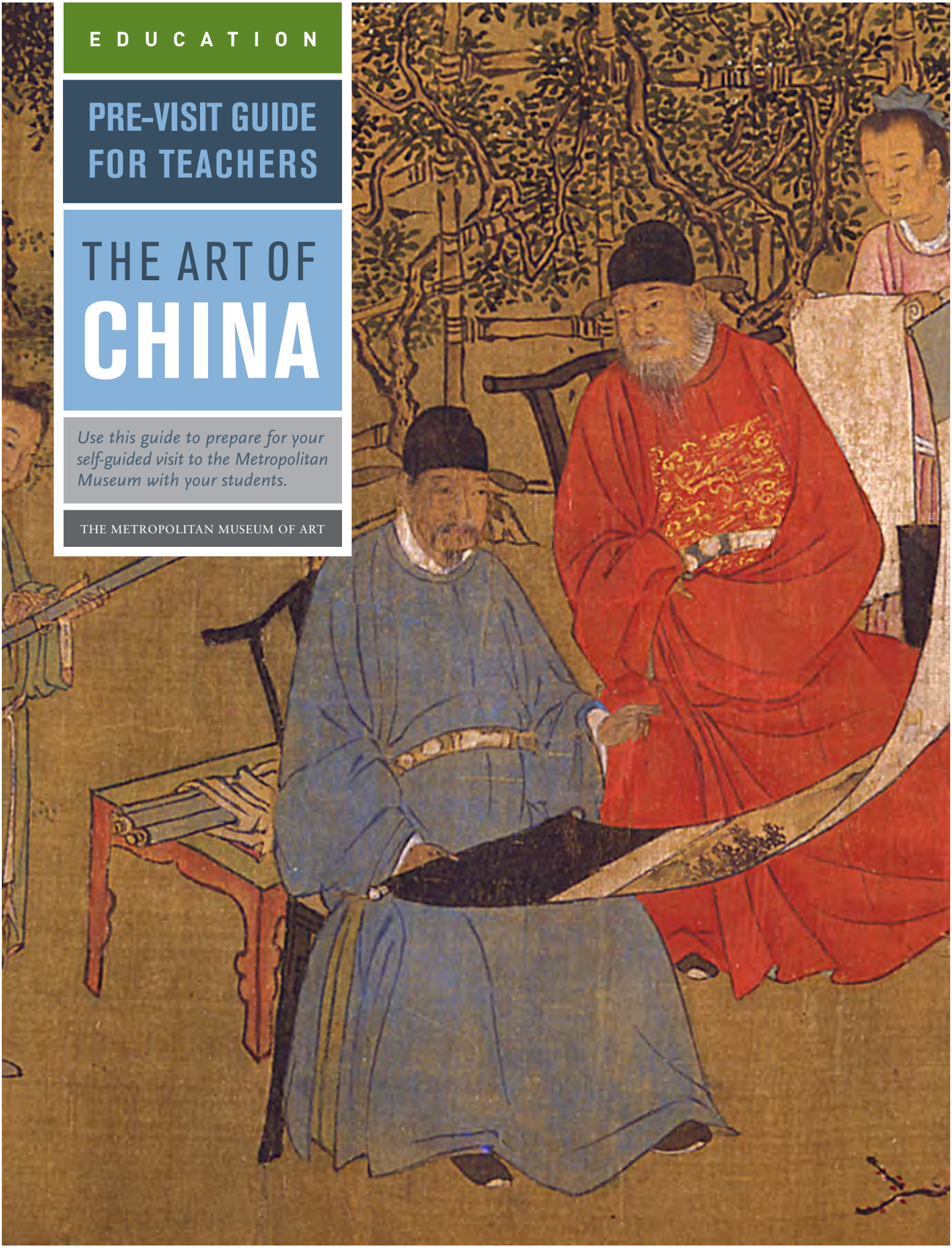
EDUCATION

PRE-VISIT GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

THE ART OF CHINA

Use this guide to prepare for your self-guided visit to the Metropolitan Museum with your students.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



This guide will help you prepare for your self-guided visit to the Metropolitan Museum with your students. Use the links to the Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, *the curatorial department, and other areas on the Museum's website to access descriptions of works of art, thematic essays, and further relevant content.*

Introduction

China is one of the world's oldest continuous civilizations. Its rich and dynamically changing history stretches back over seven thousand years and is marked by the rise and fall of many dynasties and occasional periods of disunity. Each dynasty had its own distinct characteristics and, during many eras, encounters with foreign cultural and political influences through territorial expansion, invasion, or immigration. Chinese culture thus evolved over thousands of years with contributions from many different peoples.

The Metropolitan Museum's collection of Chinese art is one of the largest and most comprehensive in the West and reflects a broad range in date, from the second millennium B.C. through the twentieth century. Highlights of the collection include archaic bronzes and jades, ceramics, and metalwork from the Neolithic period (ca. 5000–2000 B.C.) to the Tang dynasty (618–907). Also notable are extensive holdings of Buddhist sculpture, including large-scale stone and wood images from the fifth century through the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). The Museum has an extraordinary selection of Chinese calligraphy and paintings—both monumental landscapes and more intimate glimpses of nature—and has works in both the scholarly and the courtly traditions from the eighth through the eighteenth centuries. A variety of painting formats are represented: albums, fans, handscrolls, and hanging scrolls. Chinese artists and craftsmen were skilled at adapting a wide range of materials to functional and luxury objects and worked in nearly every medium available to them. Many examples of such objects in clay, bronze, lacquer, and jade, among other materials, are also on view. An extensive collection of ceramics shows the superlative development of this art form in China.

For millennia Chinese artists and craftsmen have produced objects that are not only engaging and beautiful but also reflect their primary ideas, concerns, values, and traditions. Many of China's most important belief systems and practices, such as the yin-yang polarities, Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, ancestor worship, and the written language through calligraphy, have their origins in antiquity and still influence current society. Poetry and brush-written calligraphy were, and still are, greatly valued. Together with painting they are known as the Three Perfections, reflecting the esteemed position of the arts in Chinese life.

Landscapes, flowers, birds and other creatures, and natural elements have been represented in nearly every artistic medium and period in China. In the galleries you will see many examples of natural imagery ranging from vast mountainscapes to intimate garden retreats. Artists examined the relationship between humankind and nature in this way. Literary allusions, philosophical concepts, and symbolic associations often added layers of meaning to visual images.

Images of real and legendary human beings are another recurrent theme in Chinese art. Depictions of figures conveyed not just their physical appearance, but also their role and status as, for example, religious practitioners, immortals, emperors, and members of the educated elite.

The Galleries

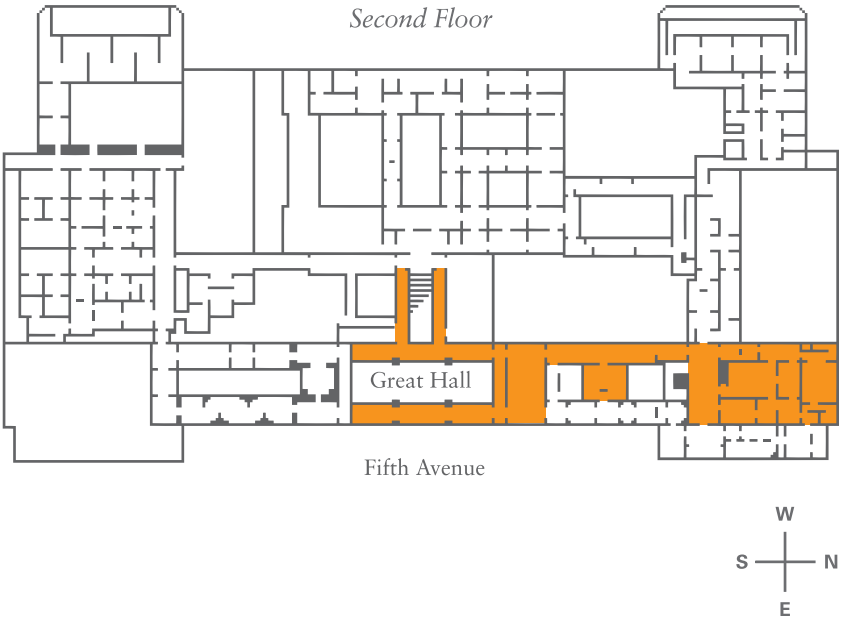
The Chinese collection occupies the north end of the Museum on the second and third floors. The galleries are generally organized as follows: ceramics, Buddhist sculpture, ancient art (Neolithic through Tang dynasties), paintings and calligraphy, and later decorative art (Song through Qing dynasties).

The Great Hall Balcony exhibits the Museum's extensive collection of Chinese ceramics. Smaller installations on the balcony often explore the impact of Asian ceramics on European traditions and the relationship between Chinese wares and those made in Islamic cultures of the Near East.

On view at the entrance to the Asian Art wing, in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, is an enormous mural dedicated to the *Buddha of Medicine Bhaishajyaguru* (ca. 1319), an important example of North Chinese painting. This gallery also features other examples of large-scale sculptures and steles.

The Charlotte C. Weber Galleries for the Arts of Ancient China display archaic bronzes and jades, ceramics, and metalwork. Monumental stone sculptures and Buddhist images round out the presentation of early art and culture in these galleries. Paintings and calligraphy are presented in the Douglas Dillon Galleries, the C. C. Wang Gallery, and the Frances Young Tang Gallery. The Florence and Herbert Irving Galleries for Decorative Arts on the third floor display functional and luxury objects, such as jades, lacquers, metalwork, textiles, and other objects from the twelfth through the nineteenth centuries.

A unique feature of the Chinese art galleries is the Astor Court, modeled on a Ming-dynasty (1368–1644) scholar's courtyard in the Garden of the Master of the Fishing Nets in Suzhou, a city west of Shanghai famous for its garden architecture. The garden court, meticulously constructed by Chinese craftsmen using traditional methods and materials, includes an adjoining room for the Museum's collection of Chinese hardwood furniture.



Planning a Tour

When visiting the Metropolitan Museum with your students, prepare your tour with the following in mind:

- Less is more. Select five or six works of art to discuss over the course of an hour in the galleries.
- Choose works that are located away from doorways and areas that are heavily traversed by visitors.
- Include works that are visible to all students in your group for purposes of discussion and viewing.
- Make sure that there are enough chaperones in your group to divide the students into smaller groups for gallery discussions.
- While touring the galleries, please give priority to lecturers wearing Museum IDs who are guiding groups. If they are discussing a work that you would like your students to see, please select another work to view and discuss in the interim.

Please Note: *Although most of the suggested works in this guide will be on view when you visit the Museum, conservation concerns mandate that certain gallery installations, such as those displaying paintings and fragile textiles and lacquers, are rotated on a regular basis. We recommend that you use* Search the Collections *online or come to the Museum to verify that the objects you want to discuss are on display prior to bringing your group.*

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's school tour program is made possible by the generosity of Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman.

Background and Themes to Consider

Use the following links to content on the Museum's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History *to help you prepare for your visit.*

Formats and Materials

Chinese Calligraphy
Chinese Gardens and Collectors' Rocks
Chinese Handscrolls
Chinese Painting
Painting Formats in East Asian Art
Painting in Ink on Paper from China
Painting in Ink on Silk from China

Special Themes and Topics

Landscape Painting in Chinese Art
Longevity in Chinese Art
List of Rulers of China
Nature in Chinese Culture
Scholar-Officials of China

Questions for Discussion in the Galleries

- What underlying meanings do you think the artists intended in this work of art?
- What does the work of art tell us about its audience and the original context?
- What do the materials used in these works of art tell us about Chinese civilization?
- Which works suggest a story or a narrative?

Suggested Works of Art to Explore

Please note that titles, dates, and other object information on the website and on gallery signage may vary as the result of ongoing research.

Spouted ritual wine vessel (*guang*), Shang dynasty,
early Anyang period (ca. 1300–1050 B.C.), 13th century B.C.
Possibly Anyang, Henan Province, China
Bronze; 13 in. (33 cm)
Rogers Fund, 1943 (43.25.4)

Learn more about the Shang and Zhou Dynasties: The Bronze Age of China.

Pendant in the form of a knotted dragon,
Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–256 B.C.), 3rd century B.C.
China
Jade (Nephrite); 3 1/8 in. (7.9 cm) x 2 1/16 in. (5.2 cm)
Gift of Ernest Erickson Foundation Inc., 1985 (1985.214.99)

Learn more about the Shang and Zhou Dynasties: The Bronze Age of China.

Female Dancer, Western Han dynasty (206 B.C.–9 A.D.), 2nd century B.C.
China
Earthenware with slip and pigments; H. 21 in. (53.3 cm)
Charlotte C. and John C. Weber Collection, Gift of Charlotte C. and John C. Weber, 1992 (1992.165.19)

Learn more about the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.).

Animal pen with figures, Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 A.D.), 1st–early 3rd century A.D.
China
Earthenware with green lead glaze; H. 9 1/4 in. (23.5 cm)
Charlotte C. and John C. Weber Collection, Gift of Charlotte C. and John C. Weber, 1994 (1994.605.21)

Learn more about the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.).

Altarpiece dedicated to Buddha Maitreya (*Mile*),
Northern Wei dynasty (386–534), dated 524
China
Gilt bronze; H. 30 1/4 in. (76.9 cm)
Rogers Fund, 1938 (38.158.1a–n)

Learn more about Chinese Buddhist Sculpture.
Learn more about the Period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties (386–589).

Buddha, probably Amitabha (*Amituo*), Tang dynasty (618–906), early 7th century
China
Dry lacquer with traces of gilt and pigment; H. 38 in. (96.5 cm)
Rogers Fund, 1919 (19.186)

Learn more about Chinese Buddhist Sculpture.
Learn more about the Tang Dynasty (618–906).

Night-Shining White, Tang dynasty (618–906), ca. 750
Han Gan (Chinese, active 742–56)
Handscroll; ink on paper; 12 1/8 x 13 3/8 in. (30.8 x 34 cm)
Purchase, The Dillon Fund Gift, 1977 (1977.78)

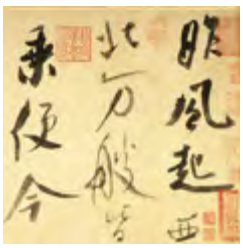
Learn more about the Tang Dynasty (618–906).

Arhat (*luohan*), Liao dynasty (907–1125), ca. 1000
Hebei Province, China
Earthenware with three-color (*sancai*) glaze; H. 41 1/4 in. (104.8 cm)
Frederick C. Hewitt Fund, 1921 (21.76)

Learn more about Chinese Buddhist Sculpture.

Summer Mountains, Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), 11th century
Attributed to Qu Ding (Chinese, active ca. 1023–ca. 1056)
Handscroll; ink and pale color on silk; 17 7/8 x 45 3/8 in. (45.4 x 115.3 cm)
Ex coll.: C.C. Wang Family, Gift of The Dillon Fund, 1973 (1973.120.1)

Learn more about the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127).



Sailing on the Wu River, Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127), ca. 1096
Mi Fu (Chinese, 1052–1107)
Handscroll; ink on paper; 44 columns in running-cursive script;
12 1/4 in. x 18 ft. 3 1/4 in. (31.1 x 557 cm)
Gift of John M. Crawford Jr., in honor of Professor Wen Fong, 1984 (1984.174)

Learn more about the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127).

Viewing Plum Blossoms by Moonlight, Southern Song dynasty (1271–1368)
Ma Yuan (Chinese, active ca. 1190–1225)
Fan mounted as an album leaf; ink and color on silk; Image: 9 7/8 x 10 1/2 in. (25.1 x 26.7 cm), with mat: 15 1/2 x 15 1/2 in. (39.4 x 39.4 cm)
Gift of John M. Crawford Jr., in honor of Alfreda Murck, 1986 (1986.493.2)

Learn more about the Southern Song dynasty.

Wang Xizhi Watching Geese, Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), ca. 1295
Qian Xuan (Chinese, ca. 1235–before 1307)
Handscroll; ink, color, and gold on paper; 9 1/8 x 36 1/2 in. (23.2 x 92.7 cm)
Ex coll.: C.C. Wang Family, Gift of The Dillon Fund, 1973 (1973.120.6)

Learn more about the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368).

Twin Pines, Level Distance, Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), ca. 1310
Zhao Mengfu (Chinese, 1254–1322)
Handscroll: ink on paper; 10 1/2 x 42 1/4 in. (26.7 x 107.3 cm)
Ex coll.: C.C. Wang Family, Gift of The Dillon Fund, 1973 (1973.120.5)

Learn more about the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368).

Buddha of Medicine Bhaishajyaguru (Yaoshi fo), Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), ca.1319
China
Water-based pigments over foundation of clay mixed with straw;
H. 24 ft. 8 in. (751.8 cm); W. 49 ft. 7 in. (1511.3 cm)
Gift of Arthur M. Sackler, in honor of his parents, Isaac and Sophie Sackler, 1965 (65.29.2)

Learn more about the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368).

Woods and Valleys of Mount Yu, Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), dated 1372
Ni Zan (Chinese, 1306–1374)
Hanging scroll; ink on paper; 37 1/2 x 14 1/8 in. (95.3 x 35.9 cm)
Ex coll.: C.C. Wang Family, Gift of the Dillon Fund, 1973 (1973.120.8)

Learn more about the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368).

Jar, Ming dynasty, Xuande mark and period (1426–1435)
China
Porcelain painted in underglaze blue; H. 19 in. (48.3 cm)
Gift of Robert E. Tod, 1937 (37.191.1)

Learn more about East and West: Chinese Export Porcelain.
Learn more about the Ming dynasty.

Elegant Gathering in the Apricot Garden, Ming dynasty, ca. 1437
After Xie Huan (Chinese, ca. 1370–ca. 1450)
Handscroll; ink and color on silk; 14 3/8 x 94 3/4 in. (36.7 x 240.7 cm)
Purchase, The Dillon Fund Gift, 1989 (1989.141.3)

Learn more about the Ming dynasty.

Returning Home, Qing dynasty (1644–1911), ca. 1695; Shitao (Zhu Ruoji) (Chinese, 1642–1707); Album of twelve paintings; ink and color on paper; each painting leaf: 6 1/2 x 4 1/8 in. (16.5 x 10.5 cm); each album leaf: 8 5/16 x 5 5/16 in. (21.1 x 13.5 cm); W. of double page: 10 5/8 in. (27 cm); From the P. Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Family Collection; Gift of Wen and Constance Fong, in honor of Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Dillon, 1976 (1976.280)

Learn more about The Qing Dynasty (1644–1911): Painting.

The Kangxi Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour, Scroll Three: Ji'nan to Mount Tai, Qing dynasty (1644–1911), 1698
Wang Hui (Chinese, 1632–1717) and assistants
Handscroll; ink and color on silk; 26 3/4 x 548 1/2 in. (67.8 x 1393.8 cm)
Purchase, The Dillon Fund Gift, 1979 (1979.5)

Learn more about Wang Hui (1632–1717).
Learn more about The Qing Dynasty (1644–1911): Painting.

Astor Court
Gift of the Vincent Astor Foundation, 1981

Learn more about the Astor Court in Nature Within Walls: The Chinese Garden Court at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, A Resource for Educators.
Watch a video about the Astor Court.

Selected Resources

These and many more resources are available in Nolen Library in the Ruth and Harold D. Uris Center for Education.

Clunas, Craig. *Art in China*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Fong, Wen C., and James C. Y. Watt, eds. *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei*. New York: MMA, 1996.

Hammer, Elizabeth. Nature Within Walls: The Chinese Garden Court at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, A Resource for Educators. New York: MMA, 2003.

Hearn, Maxwell K. *How to Read Chinese Paintings*. New York: MMA; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

Leidy, Denise Patry, Wai-fong Anita Siu, and James C. Y. Watt. "Chinese Decorative Arts." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 55/1 (Summer 1997).

Leidy, Denise Patry, and Donna Strahan. *Wisdom Embodied: Chinese Buddhist and Daoist Sculpture in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: MMA; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

Murck, Alfreda, and Wen Fong. "A Chinese Garden Court: The Astor Court at the Metropolitan Museum of Art," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (Winter 1980/81).

Rawson, Jessica, ed. *The British Museum Book of Chinese Art*. London: British Museum Press, 1992.

Sullivan, Michael. *The Arts of China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.