

Interactive Activity Using an Artifact/Object in a Gallery

Find a cart object/artifact that fascinates you and that you think museum visitors will enjoy learning about!

Purpose: To engage adult visitors in your gallery talk or tour through inviting them to handle an artifact/object/material while they learn about the people, their culture, way of life, and beliefs.

Gallery Name: Ancient Arts of China

Docent Name: Jean Drum

Cart Artifact/Object/Approved Material:

Drawings by Sara Haase of five mudras (hand positions or signs). (See below.)

- The mudra of praying or greeting.
- The mudra of understanding (teaching and learning).
- The mudra of warning or threatening.
- The mudra of protection or fearlessness or blessing (“no fear”).
- The mudra of compassion or charity (“gift bestowing”).

The hand-out has simple drawings of the hand positions for each mudra and a short description of its uses. It may be shown or given to visitors to make it easy for them to remember these five mudras and form them with their hands.

Gallery Artifact/Map or Visual/Concept:

Wood statue of Guanyin (at back of gallery). The Bowers Museum interprets the statue’s left-hand gesture as “wish granting” and the right-hand gesture as “fear not.”

This activity will take place at the wood statue of Guanyin and focus on Buddhist mudras, or hand signs, and their role in Buddhist belief and Chinese culture. Guanyin is a bodhisattva, a deity who has attained the necessary Karma to be admitted to Nirvana, but who chooses to remain in the world to help alleviate the sufferings of others and help them to become enlightened.

The Sanskrit name for this bodhisattva, "Avalokiteshvara," means "the lord who looks upon the world with compassion." Translated into Chinese, the name is "Guan Shi Yin" or “Guanyin” — Guan: observe; Shi: the world/the region of sufferers; and Yin: all the sounds of the world, in particular, the crying sounds (verbal or mental) of beings seeking help.

In Buddhist art, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva is sometimes shown with eleven heads and 1,000 arms (Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva). The hands are often adorned with eyes that allow the bodhisattva to see the sufferings of sentient beings and allow him to reach each one to help them. In India, this bodhisattva is generally represented as a male figure.

In China, however, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, or Guanyin, may be represented in female or male form (depending on the need of the petitioner). Probably because of Guanyin's great compassion, a quality that was traditionally considered feminine, most of the bodhisattva's statues in China since the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618 - 907) have appeared as female figures.

Actually, anyone can be like Guanyin. You may say that you don't have a thousand eyes or a thousand arms, but it is your compassion that can transform you into a Guanyin. With your eyes and hands, you can help others. With your compassion, you can bring peace and tranquility to this world.

Connection: What is the relationship between the two items to be presented? Think about how they are made or used or the concept they illustrate. What do they tell you about the people, their culture, way of life, and beliefs?

Explain Guanyin so visitors understand who s/he is and what role s/he plays in Chinese culture. Then use him/her as an example of the role of mudras in Buddhist culture. The comparison of Buddhist mudras with Western hand movements provides a great way to engage people and help them see cross-cultural similarities.

Interactive activity description: Steps in presenting the activity.

1. What is a mudra? A mudra is a gesture or position, usually of the hands, that locks and guides energy flow and reflexes to the brain. By curling, crossing, stretching, and touching the fingers and hands, we can talk to the body and mind as each area of the hand reflexes to a certain part of the mind or body. Mudras have been in use in the East for thousands of years, particularly in Buddhism. Buddha statues often have the hands in certain positions. The positions have been used (and still are) as a spiritual practice on the path to enlightenment.
2. Present/demonstrate five mudras from the illustrations. Invite the audience to try them out.
3. Ask the audience about hand gestures used in American culture today.

Sample interactive questions (2-3) for the audience:

After demonstrating the five mudras, ask visitors for examples of hand gestures they use in their lives.

This will serve two purposes: 1) to give visitors a meaningful opportunity to participate actively in the presentation, since it will be easy for them to think of hand and body gestures; and 2) to demonstrate that hand and body gestures are present in societies world-wide, both past and present.

This will bring mudras out of the realm of “strange and ancient” and allow visitors to recognize that our American culture has much in common with the culture of China of many centuries ago. Visitors will be encouraged to look around them in daily life and notice hand and body gestures they see, to discuss them with family members of varying ages or with friends from cultures other than American or Chinese.

The docent could suggest that visitors try interacting with people *without* using any hand gestures (harder than you might think!) or, perhaps, that they invent some new gestures to fit their lifestyles. This might turn into an ongoing activity that would take what they learned at the Bowers Museum into their daily lives.

Cross-cultural connections or related folk tale to engage people further; or research or story books.

Use of hand gestures in our culture today.

Sources:

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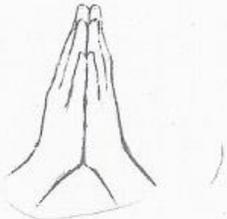
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BUDDHIST MUDRAS

Gesture of Praying or Greeting (namaskara) This mudra is also called the *Namaste* (meaning "I bow to you" accompanied by a slight bow of the head and upper body and as a gesture of prayer.





Gesture of Understanding. (cincihna) In this mudra the thumb and the index finger grasp a fine object as a grain of truth. This is a symbol of spiritual understanding.

Gesture of Warning or threatening. (tarjana) In horizontally or vertically and the other fingers are locked in the fist. This mudra is often used by a wrathful deity to warn humans of impending danger.





Gesture of protection or fearlessness or blessing. (abhaya)

This mudra is made with the palm outward and the fingers extended upward. The arm is elevated and slightly bent. The gesture of "No fear."

Gesture of Compassion or Charity. (varada) This mudra is also called the "gift bestowing gesture of compassion" or "conferring boon" or "grace" mudra. The arm is extended all the way down with the palm facing outwards. The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is often seen making this gesture.



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Hands drawn by Sara Haase