

Sun Xun: Mythological Time and Stories that animate us



Sun Xun, *Mythology or Rebellious Bone*, 2020 (detail), ink, gold leaf, natural colour pigment on paper,
Courtesy of the Artist and ShanghART Gallery

**TEACHERS' STUDY GUIDE
SPRING 2021**

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Vancouver Art Gallery

Teacher's Guide for School Programs

Your upcoming virtual gallery tour includes two artists' artworks, working in the medium of animation, from the exhibitions *Sun Xun: Mythological Time* and *Stories that animate us*.

Sun Xun: Mythological Time addresses the significant ways that human history has shaped the environment since the dawn of civilization. It proposes different histories and the possibilities of alternate realities. *Stories that animate us* speaks to the importance of storytelling and invites us to reflect on the question: what stories inspire you? What stories need to be told and which will you pass on to others?

Dear Teacher:

This guide will assist you in preparing for your virtual class tour of *Sun Xun: Mythological Time* and *Amabie* by Cindy Mochizuki from *Stories that animate us*. It also provides follow-up activities to facilitate discussion after the Gallery educators visit your classroom. Engaging in the suggested activities before and after your visit will reinforce ideas generated by the virtual tour and build continuity between the Gallery experience and your ongoing work in the classroom. Most activities require few materials and are able to be adapted easily to the age, grade level and needs of your students. Underlined words in this guide are defined in the Vocabulary section.

The virtual tour has three main goals:

1. To introduce students to artists Sun Xun and Cindy Mochizuki;
2. To consider key themes within the exhibition including animation and storytelling.
3. To explore individual artworks in terms of ideas, materials, techniques and inspiration.

Land Acknowledgement

Vancouver Art Gallery is situated on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the x^wməθk^wəγəm (Musqueam), Sḵwəxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples and is respectful of the Indigenous stewards of the land it occupies, whose rich cultures are fundamental to artistic life in Vancouver and to the work of the Gallery.

THE EXHIBITIONS

Sun Xun: Mythological Time

The exhibition *Sun Xun: Mythological Time* is the first solo exhibition in Canada for Chinese artist Sun Xun. Through the artistic mediums of ink painting and animation, Sun deals with the notions of time, history, fantasy and reality, and ideology and myth. In his highly imaginative video installation *Mythological Time* (2016), Sun takes viewers on a journey that begins in his hometown Fuxin, China. The history of Fuxin derives from being one of the coal-mining centres of the world, and Sun Xun's artwork incorporates the city's landmarks, historical sites, and the ruins of a shuttered industry. These images collide with mythical creatures during different historical periods.

Sun created a sequel to the animation *Mythological Time*, entitled *Mythology or Rebellious Bone* (2020), an epic 30-metre ink scroll painting. The artwork is comprised of Buddhist deities and fictional gods and presents a new world where humans have disappeared without a trace. This artwork scroll premieres for the very first time in the world at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

Organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and an initiative of the Institute of Asian Art, curated by Diana Freundl, Interim Chief Curator/Associate Director

Stories that animate us

Storytelling lies at the heart of *Stories that animate us*, an exhibition developed in conversation with *Sun Xun: Mythological Time*. Whether evoking the spirit world, delving into the depths of their imagination or endeavouring to make meaning from historical and current events, the featured artists reflect on such themes as culture, community, memory, morality and identity in order to speak to the past, present and future of our worlds.

Organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery and curated by Zoë Chan, Assistant Curator and Diana Freundl, Interim Chief Curator/Associate Director

ARTISTS' BACKGROUND

The following background information highlights some of the artists whose work may be explored in the school tour.

Sun Xun (b.1980)

Sun Xun is a Chinese contemporary artist best known for his animations composed of thousands of ink paintings, charcoal drawings and woodcuts. He was born in Fuxin, an industrial mining town in northeast China. His own personal memories from his childhood, such as the propaganda blared from loudspeakers, uniformed workers shuffling by and fluttering flags hailing the “New China”, play an important role in the stories Sun Xun tells in his artworks. Containing very little dialogue, Sun’s handmade films use combinations of pictures, sound and words to highlight his concern with how history can be manipulated, questioning the differences between “official” history told by governments and the media versus the personal accounts from ordinary people’s experiences. He studied printmaking at the China Academy of Fine Arts. In 2006 he founded Pi Animation Studio in Beijing, China, where he still lives today. In his artistic practice, he prefers to construct surreal and fantastic worlds and feels he has a responsibility to connect with people from all over the world to encourage them to ask questions about their own histories and think for themselves.

Cindy Mochizuki (b.1976)

Cindy Mochizuki is a Japanese Canadian contemporary artist based in Vancouver, British Columbia. She creates art in many different ways, including animation, drawing and sculpture. She explores how historical and family memories are passed down in the form of stories, folktales and rituals. Mochizuki’s curiosity is often sparked by moments in history that are remembered only in pieces, snippets or memory. Mochizuki is also interested in personal histories, especially her relatives and of other immigrants' experiences that make transpacific connections to Canada and Japan. Through her animations and artworks, Mochizuki shares thought provoking stories that ask viewers to visualize, imagine and ask questions about our own history. Mochizuki’s artwork has also provided an opportunity to understand her family history and community history and in doing so, understand more about her relatives and herself. It has also been a reminder of the importance to continue to share stories about Japanese Canadian history.

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: About the Artists (Intermediate and secondary students)

Objective:

Students read, research and share information about the artists represented in the *Sun Xun: Mythological Time* and *Stories that animate us* tour.

Materials:

- ❑ writing materials
- ❑ access to the Internet
- ❑ Artist Information Sheet (p. 7), Student Worksheet (p. 8)

Process:

1. Divide the students into small groups and assign an artist to each group.
2. Cut the Artist Information sheet (p. 7) and assign an artist to each group.
3. Give each student a copy of the Student Worksheet (p. 8) and ask them to transfer the information about their artist to the appropriate box.
4. Have students figure out what they need to know to complete the section on their artist, and search the Internet, either at home or at school. Older students can find more information, younger students, just the basics.
5. Ask each group to find/copy/sketch an artwork by each artist on a separate piece of paper.
6. Have each group present the information on their artist while the rest of the class adds the information to their worksheets

Conclusion:

Discuss:

- What were some of the most interesting things that students learned or discovered?
- Which artists and/or kinds of artwork made students curious about seeing the actual work in the exhibition?
- Are there any artists, ways of working or ideas that the students would like to know more about?

Artist Information Sheet

Sun Xun

- Born in Fuxin, an industrial mining town in northeast China. Now lives in Beijing, China
- Best known for his animations made up of thousands of ink paintings, charcoal drawings and woodcuts
- Founded Pi Animation Studio in Beijing, China in 2006
- His childhood memories play an important role in the stories he tells
- Questions how history can be influenced by others
- Encourages people to ask questions and think for themselves

Cindy Mochizuki

- Japanese Canadian contemporary artist who lives in Vancouver, BC
- Creates in a variety of ways, from animation to drawing to sculpture
- Explores how historical and family memories are passed down in the form of stories, folktales, and rituals
- Curious about how moments in history are remembered only in pieces, snippets or memory
- Asks viewers to visualize, imagine and ask questions about our own history
- Reminds us of the importance to continue to share stories about Japanese Canadian history

Student Worksheet

	Personal Information	Ideas, Influences and Interests	Known For	An Artwork
Sun Xun				
Cindy Mochizuki				

PRE- OR POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Scrolling (elementary and intermediate students)

Objective:

Students examine the tradition of scrolls in historical Chinese art and make their own contemporary handscroll.

Discussion:

Sun Xun uses Chinese legends, historical events, Western politics and his own mythical fantasies in scroll paintings that are the backdrops for his animated projections. *Mythological Time* (2016) is projected onto a screen embedded in an eight-metre-long scroll that Sun Xun created especially for the exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery and gifted to the Gallery for future screenings. Sun's animation, *Mythological Time* (2016), travels through the history of his hometown of Fuxin in a long scroll-like panorama.

Some characteristics of traditional Chinese scrolls:

- Handscrolls are usually between 9 and 14 inches high and around 10 feet long. Only one portion (usually a shoulder's width) is viewed at a time, each section presenting a new surprise visual image. Examining the handscroll is an intimate experience, not unlike reading a book: both contain a beginning, a middle and an end. When not being viewed, the scroll remains rolled up.
- A hanging scroll displays an entire painting at one viewing and typically ranges in height from 2 to 6 feet.
- Scrolls could be either landscapes or figure paintings. They could present a pastoral scene (usually displaying the passing of time, change of seasons) or a narrative, often depicting a journey.
- Some artists used colour washes, some brilliant colours, others only black ink.
- Landscape painting has always been regarded as the highest form of Chinese painting. Different styles of landscape paintings developed: some used strong black lines to depict towering mountains, while others displayed rolling hills and rivers in peaceful scenes with soft, rubbed brushwork.
- Scrolls often included calligraphy.

Materials:

- ❑ Paper and pencils
- ❑ Kraft paper cut in length of approximately 18 inches per student
- ❑ Black paint and paintbrushes (or black markers)

Process:

1. Introduce students to traditional Chinese scrolls using the information above and showing them examples from books or the Internet. For easy reference, see:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_painting

For a reference on Chinese ink painting, please watch Art At Home Lui Shou Kwan:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJR5Bw5elel>

2. Show students the installation of the 8-metre-long scroll Sun Xun created especially for the Vancouver Art Gallery, along with stills from *Mythological Time* (p. 11-12).

Discuss with students how Sun Xun has been inspired by traditional scrolls. What traditions has he held on to and what has he innovated to make contemporary?

3. Tell students that they are going to make a landscape handscroll. It will be about 18 inches across and will be kept rolled up except when being viewed, only a part at a time.
4. Tell them the scroll will be made using black paint (or black marker).
5. Have each student sketch out a landscape of their own choosing on a piece of Kraft paper. The landscape can be a real or an imaginary space. It might contain mountains, rivers, sea, skies or trees, and students may include figures if they wish.
6. After the sketches are complete, have each student practice different types of brushstrokes on a fresh piece of paper: thin and thick lines, light and hard pressure, small stipple strokes, long smooth ones.
7. Have students carefully unroll their scrolls and lay books or other heavy objects on the edges to keep them flat.
8. Have students make their images. Emphasize that this is an experiment and it takes years for a scroll-maker to perfect the craft. If a student makes a “mistake,” encourage them to be creative and turn it into something else.
9. When dry, the scroll can be rolled up again. Each student should write their name on an outside corner.
10. Have students look at each other’s work, gently unrolling and re-rolling the scrolls as needed.
11. Tie up each scroll with a piece of ribbon, making sure that all names are visible. Stack the scrolls in a container so that they can be removed and looked at.

Conclusion:

- What did students discover about painting scrolls?
- Was the activity challenging? Interesting? Fun? In what ways?
- Would students do it differently next time? How?
- Have students think about the format of the scroll. How is the experience of looking at it different from looking at an artwork hanging on a wall?

Works in Exhibition



Sun Xun, *Mythological Time* (screen for video projection), 2020, ink on traditional rice paper, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Gift of the Artist



Sun Xun, *Mythological Time*, 2016, 2-channel colour video animation with sound, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Gift of The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in connection with The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Chinese Art Initiative



Sun Xun, *Mythological Time*, 2016, 2-channel colour video animation with sound, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Gift of The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in connection with The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Chinese Art Initiative



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Sun Xun, *Mythological Time*, 2016, 2-channel colour video animation with sound, Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Gift of The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation in connection with The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Chinese Art Initiative

Examples of Student Work



PRE- OR POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Drawing Through Observation (elementary and intermediate students)

Objective:

Students are introduced to Sun Xun's process of working by drawing outdoors at school to create landscape artworks.

Discussion:

To create his animation work *Mythological Time*, Sun Xun spent over two weeks in Fuxin, the city of his youth. In his hometown he sat outside with a pad of paper to draw his observations of the landscapes of Fuxin, China, such as the factories and mountains. He also painted large works outside using ink on handmade bark paper to create a series of images for the animation. In the animation viewers are presented with a series of changing landscapes populated by strange creatures and symbolic architectures.

Sun Xun says, "Sketching in the field is different from using photos or other mediums. Because painting embodies the warmth of one's emotions."

Materials:

- ❑ Drawing pads or clipboards with sheets of blank paper
- ❑ Pencil, charcoal or black marker

Process:

1. Look at stills from Sun Xun's *Mythological Time* on p.11-12. Discuss what students notice about his landscapes. How has he used value (dark and light), pattern, line, texture and shape to create them? What elements has he included in the landscape? What is the perspective?
2. Have students go outdoors and choose one section of the landscape on the school grounds they find interesting. Have the students decide on a starting perspective, for example:
 - Close up, with an object from the landscape filling the page;
 - From a distance, including the grass, building, tree and sky;
 - Looking up, including the top of a building, tree or other object and an expanse of sky;
 - Or a single object.
3. Encourage students to look closely at the values (darks and lights), the patterns, textures and shapes that include all the elements in their line of vision.
4. Have students make a few sketches from different perspectives or angles, from close up and far away. Encourage them to fill the page with quick detail-broad strokes, paying attention to value, line, pattern, texture and shape.

Conclusion:

- Have the students choose one sketch and display the students' drawings together.
- Discuss the similarities and differences in compositions, line, pattern, texture, value and shape.
- Discuss the process, how easy or hard it was to create the work outside from observation.
- Discuss Sun Xun's quote, "Sketching in the field is different from using photos or other mediums. Because painting embodies the warmth of one's emotions." What do they think he means? Do they agree or disagree with Sun's opinion in the quote? Why or why not?

Examples of Student Work



POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Create a Mythical Creature Story (all grades)

Objective:

Students create a mythical creature and then create and write a story.

Discussion:

“Is it a real story? That’s what someone told me.” — Quote from *Amabie* (2020) by Cindy Mochizuki

A couple of the ways Vancouver artist Cindy Mochizuki explores how historical and family memories are passed down is through stories and folklore. Mochizuki’s latest animation *Amabie* (2020) tells the traditional story of the mythical creature, Amabie. This yōkai is a creature who appeared as a glowing green light with three fish-like legs, scales and a beak. She was said to have passed the message to those who spotted her: “Good harvests will continue for six years, but, if disease spreads, show a picture of me to those who fall ill, and they will be cured.”

Mythical creatures possess supernatural abilities that are beyond normal reality. They are often the combination of parts of two or more animals or a mix of human and one or more other creatures.

Students will create a mythical creature collaboratively playing the game Exquisite Corpse. It is a game in which each participant takes turns drawing on a sheet of paper, folding it to conceal his or her contribution, and then passing it to the next player for a further contribution.

Materials:

- ❑ 8.5 x 11” piece of drawing paper
- ❑ Pencil crayons, markers or crayons
- ❑ Writing paper
- ❑ Pen or pencil
- ❑ Large paper for mounting (optional)

Process:

1. Ask students what they know about mythical creatures from different mythologies around the world, cultures they have visited or identify with in their families. What role or lesson do students think mythical creatures play in stories? What role or lesson does Amabie play in the story?
2. Divide students into groups of three.
3. Give each student one piece of 8.5 x 11” drawing paper.
4. Ask students to fold the paper into three sections.

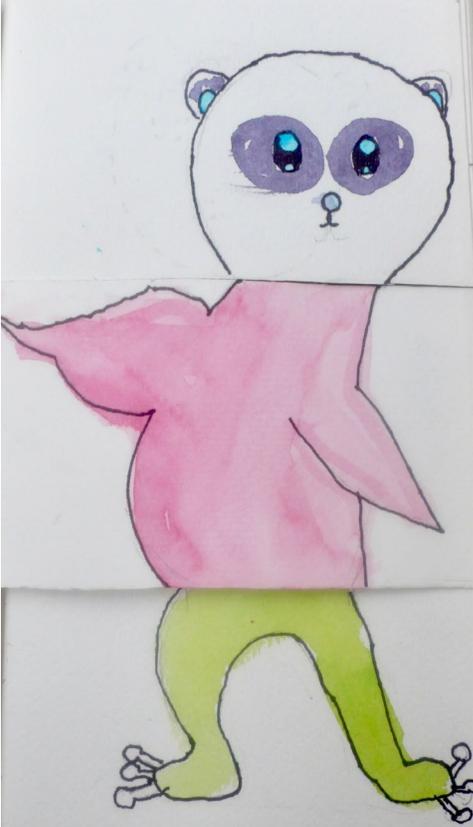
5. Have students unfold the entire paper.
6. Have each student write their name on the back of their paper in pencil.
7. Explain how to play Exquisite Corpse and set a time limit on how much time students will have to draw each section. Students should use their pencils to draw.
8. In the top section, instruct students to draw a head. It can be the head of anything at all! It can be from the student's imagination or what they know how to draw best. Make sure students include a neck and extend the neckline just over the fold so the next student will know where to start.
9. Have students fold the head drawing down backwards, behind the front of the paper so the next student cannot see what they drew. Have students pass their paper to the next student in their group.
10. The students should see two lines and that is where the torso is going to start. The torso is the body, the chest, and it stops at the waist. Have students think about what the arms of whatever creature they are drawing could be doing or holding.
11. Make sure students extend two lines from the waist over the next fold and then fold their drawing backwards, behind the paper, just like they did before and pass to the next person.
12. Now have the students draw the legs. The legs should start at the two lines at the fold. They could be a ballet dancer, a squid, a horse, merperson, anything at all! Students can even think about what the creature is standing on.
13. Now pass the papers back to the original person and unfold!
14. Let each student use their markers, crayons or colour pencils to finish their mythical creature, making any changes and adding any details they want.
15. Let students create a story about their mythical creature.
 - What is its name?
 - Where does it live?
 - What supernatural powers does it possess?
16. If you want, mount the students' artwork with their story about their mythical creature.

Conclusion:

- Have students share their mythical creatures with the class.
- What were the advantages of working collaboratively?
- Did they enjoy the random aspect of the game? Why or why not?

- Was it easy or more difficult than they expected to create a story this way?
- Discuss the process. What are some things they took into consideration while planning and creating their final story?

Examples of Student Work



POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Create an Amabie Postcard (This project is intended to be done after a virtual tour)

Objective:

During the virtual tour, Gallery Educators will lead students in a drawing activity to create their own Amabie. Students will use this Amabie drawing from the online tour to create a postcard to send to a friend or family member with a message of hope and good health.

For video reference, please see the Gallery's Digital Spring Break program where artist Cindy Mochizuki shows how to make an Amabie drawing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DhLTl59cpjI>

Discussion:

During the pandemic-related closure of Vancouver restaurants, shops and museums in March 2020, artist Cindy Mochizuki listened to a story of an old Japanese legend as told by her 78-year-old mother. In the first half of 1846, a glowing object had been spotted in the Sea of Japan, and the town's official went to investigate and spotted a mysterious creature in the water: a scaly, three-legged figure with long hair and a beak. It warned the official of a forthcoming illness and instructed him to draw and distribute the image of the Amabie for protection. A sketch was printed next to the account and distributed throughout Japan.

The creature in this legend is known as an Amabie, who in old Japanese stories, are referred to as *yōka*. There are thousands of yōkai, and they have mysterious, supernatural powers. The traditional story of Amabie was largely forgotten until the 2020 pandemic, when people took to social media creating their own illustrated versions of Amabie as part of the #amabiechallenge. Artists around the world are drawing and sharing their version of Amabie in hopes of spreading care, good will and finding community while social distancing.

Materials:

- ❑ 4 x 6" blank piece of card or thick paper
- ❑ Scissors
- ❑ Glue stick
- ❑ Markers, colour pencils or crayons

Process:

1. Share with students how the traditional story of Amabie has become popular during the 2020 pandemic. Explain to students how artists from around the world are now drawing Amabie to spread care and good will and they too will have the opportunity to create an Amabie postcard to send to a friend or family member.
2. Have students spend some time finishing the Amabie sketch they made during the online tour. Encourage students to:
 - Make any changes desired to their sketch,

- Add details and
 - Add colour to their sketch.
3. Students should carefully cut out their finished Amabie sketch.
 4. Hand out a 4x6 blank sheet of card/thick paper.
 5. Ask students to create a background for their Amabie on one side of the blank paper using their markers, coloured pencils or crayons.
 6. When students are satisfied with their background drawing, have them glue down their Amabie on the card. Remind them to make sure it is glued down well so it doesn't fall off in the mail!
 7. On the other side of the paper, have students draw a line down the middle. The right side will be for an address and stamp. The left side for a message.
 8. Tell students they can write a message of care or good will to a friend or family member and send the Amabie postcard in the mail.

Conclusion:

Display the students' artworks and ask them:

- What did they enjoy about the process? What did they find challenging?
- What aspects of the story did they take into consideration to create their Amabie and background?
- How are the artworks similar and different? Were they surprised by the differences? Why or why not?

VOCABULARY

Animation: The method of making a movie from many still images. The images are placed together one after another, and then played at a fast speed to give the illusion of movement.

Collaborative: When people work with each other to complete a task. It involves cooperation and teamwork and the sharing of ideas, knowledge and skills to reach the same objective.

Contemporary Art or Artist: Mostly art that is created in the second half of the 20th century. Many contemporary artists are still living artists.

Exquisite Corpse: A game in which each participant takes turns drawing on a sheet of paper, folding it to conceal his or her contribution, and then passing it to the next player for a further contribution.

Folktale: A type of story that gets passed on from generation to generation. True folktales do not have a single author. They develop as different people tell them over time.

Folklore: Made of two words: 1) folk, which means regional people, and 2) lore, which means stories. Therefore, folklore reflects stories told by people in a particular region and passed down orally through generations until they became part of a culture's tradition.

Installation: Art that is created from a wide range of materials and installed in a specific environment. An installation may be temporary or permanent.

Legend: An old story that is widely believed but cannot be proved to be true.

Mythology: The rich collections of traditional tales called myths from cultures all over the world. A myth is a story often describing the adventures of beings with more than human powers often written to explain natural phenomena.

Mythical: Existing only in the imagination.

Unceded: A term for a relationship between the Canadian state and some Indigenous people when no treaties have been established between the state and those people. In general, "unceded" is a way of describing a relationship to the land.

Yōkai: A creature in old Japanese stories. They have mysterious, supernatural powers.

RESOURCES

Articles

<https://www.cnn.com/style/article/sun-xun-chinese-artist/index.html>

<http://nikkeivoice.ca/exploring-secret-histories-with-artist-cindy-mochizuki>

<https://www.tvn.org/transcript/127651X/sun-xun-one-of-chinas-most-ambitious-young-artists>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/01/arts/sun-xun-a-chinese-artist-consumed-by-the-idea-of-inevitable-change.html>

Podcast

<https://thisispublicparking.com/posts/three-doors-to-the-past-present-and-future-in-conversation-with-cindy-mochizuki>

<https://www.canadaland.com/podcast/the-art-psychic/>

YouTube

<https://youtu.be/5sYMTnQ0gBo>

Websites

Guggenheim Museum

Museum of Contemporary Art Australia

Definitions

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms>

Kiddle.co

Kids.brittanica.com

Student Samples

Kudzu Studio

Crayola

Pinterest

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