

Theme Four: Spiritual Worlds

Theme in Life

We all seek meaning in our lives.

Theme in Art

Art leads many people to great mysteries, powers, and wonders.

Introduction to the Theme

For many people there are very real worlds that we cannot see or touch. These people believe that there are places beyond the physical world, such as heaven, hell, the land of the dead, or other worlds where god(s), demons, or other beings live. Some people find something very powerful within themselves when they pray, meditate, or sit in silence. For them, their spirit world is deep inside. Religions of the world help their believers understand and get in touch with spiritual mysteries, powers, and wonders. Some people find mystery or deep meaning in the world around them. For example, for some the grace and power of an eagle in flight or the awesome beauty of the Grand Canyon is spiritual.

Some religions are concerned that people may worship statues or pictures, treating images as idols. Therefore, some religions prohibit artists from showing living creatures in their art. Other religions make other decisions. Many believers throughout time have made artworks that express their deep spiritual beliefs.

*It is important to remember that when we study spiritual art, we learn about what some people believe, or used to believe, **not what we should believe.***

Key Inquiry Questions

Question about Artworks:

PATTERN: How is pattern used to organize elements within the artwork?

Question about Artworks in Context:

CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING: How was the artwork understood within the culture in which it was made?

Key Cultures

Medieval European
Historical and Contemporary Muslim



The Old Whistler

Little Bo sat crying on the back steps. When Ravak and Mawri tried to comfort him, he asked “Where’s Whistler? I want Whistler! Why can’t I find Whistler?” The tears poured down his face. The old tile worker, known to his neighbors as the Old Whistler, had died over two weeks earlier. Ever since the funeral, Bo had dragged himself from place to place but never played or even smiled.

Ravak and his sister, Mawri, were worried about their little brother. They too missed the Whistler and had cried at first, but the message of the funeral ceremony had helped them accept the old man’s death. They tried to explain the Holy One’s comforting words and actions at the funeral, but Bo didn’t understand. When they were twelve Ravak and Mawri had visited the Holy Man to learn the beliefs of their people, but Bo was only four, too young to understand the powerful words and ceremonies.

Words and ceremonies brought Bo no comfort as he moped on his way to the market with Ravak and Mawri. Once again, he broke into sobs as he passed the old tile worker’s house. It just wasn’t the same without the old man’s cheerful whistling when he set off to work on the palaces and buildings of the town. Bo could always find the old man on even the largest building site, just by listening for his cheery tune.

As they returned home with the things their mother had asked them to buy at the market, Ravak and Mawri decided to leave Bo at home and return to the center of town. This time they would walk on past the market to the holy building with its great dome, which stood on the hill just beyond.

They approached the holy place slowly. Ravak finally turned to Mawri and admitted he was a little afraid. “I’ve never been to this holy place except to learn the ceremonies and to pray on special days. Maybe the Holy Man will be annoyed to see us. Maybe he will think that we should be old enough to handle this problem ourselves.”

Mawri thought a moment and remembered one of their lessons. “Yes, we are supposed to use the beliefs of the people to help us in times of trouble, but the Holy Man is there to help us when we don’t understand. He has given his life to understanding the spiritual world and he can guide us.”

Ravak and Mawri grew silent as they climbed the steps to the entrance. Inside the holy building they felt as if they had entered a different world, a beautiful world filled with mystery and greatness. Before, when they entered the sacred place, it had been filled with sound, the joyous music of celebration, the voices of prayer, or the chanting of students repeating their lessons. This time, as they left the clamor of the market street, they heard nothing at first but the sound of their own shoes as their steps echoed on the tile floor. Then, as they grew accustomed to silence, they heard the low tones of the Holy Man speaking some of the very same words they had learned in their own lessons. As they moved toward where he stood, their eyes were drawn to the handsome carvings

and tile work that made the inside of the building as beautiful as the outside.

When the Holy Man finished his prayer he looked up at his visitors. Mawri spoke first. “Holy One,” she said, “We have come to ask for your guidance with a problem. May we speak?”

The Holy One gestured for them to be seated and nodded.

“Everyone in our family knew the Old Whistler and was very sad when he died, but Bo knew him best. He followed after him as he worked. They were good friends. At the funeral your words helped us understand what it means to die. We miss the Old Whistler, but not like little Bo. He does not understand. He can’t seem to get over his sadness. I know he’s young, but can you help him too?”

The Holy Man said “Yes. Bring Bo to the street in front of the tile maker’s house tomorrow morning.”

The next day, the Holy Man reached out to take Bo’s little hand as Ravak and Mawri arrived with him. Bo’s lower lip quivered. The Holy Man patted his head and said, “Bo and I are going for a walk. We will see you at home later.”

When Ravak and Mawri were gone the Holy Man said gently, “Bo, tell me about the Old Whistler.”

Bo looked up at the Holy Man and then at the tile worker’s house and began. “The Whistler lived right here in this house that he made himself a long time ago. He told me that he made all the tiles himself and fitted each tile into place around the doors and windows and up there under the roof.”

“Show me,” said the Holy Man.

Bo pulled him closer to the front wall and pointed to a row of tiles. “See how he put them together. First a big red one, then two little yellow ones, and then the long blue one. Aren’t they wonderful?”

“Yes,” answered the Holy Man. “I’d never noticed the order before. What a clever boy you are to notice such a thing all by yourself.”

Bo looked down shyly and up again, and then said, “The Whistler showed me how he repeated the tiles in an order to make a pattern. He showed me lots of patterns.”

“I’d like to see them. Will you show them to me?” asked the Holy Man.

“Sure,” answered the little boy and started off up the street.

Bo and the Holy Man visited the new market buildings, the addition to the royal palace, the houses of several of the town’s wealthiest families, and at last the great

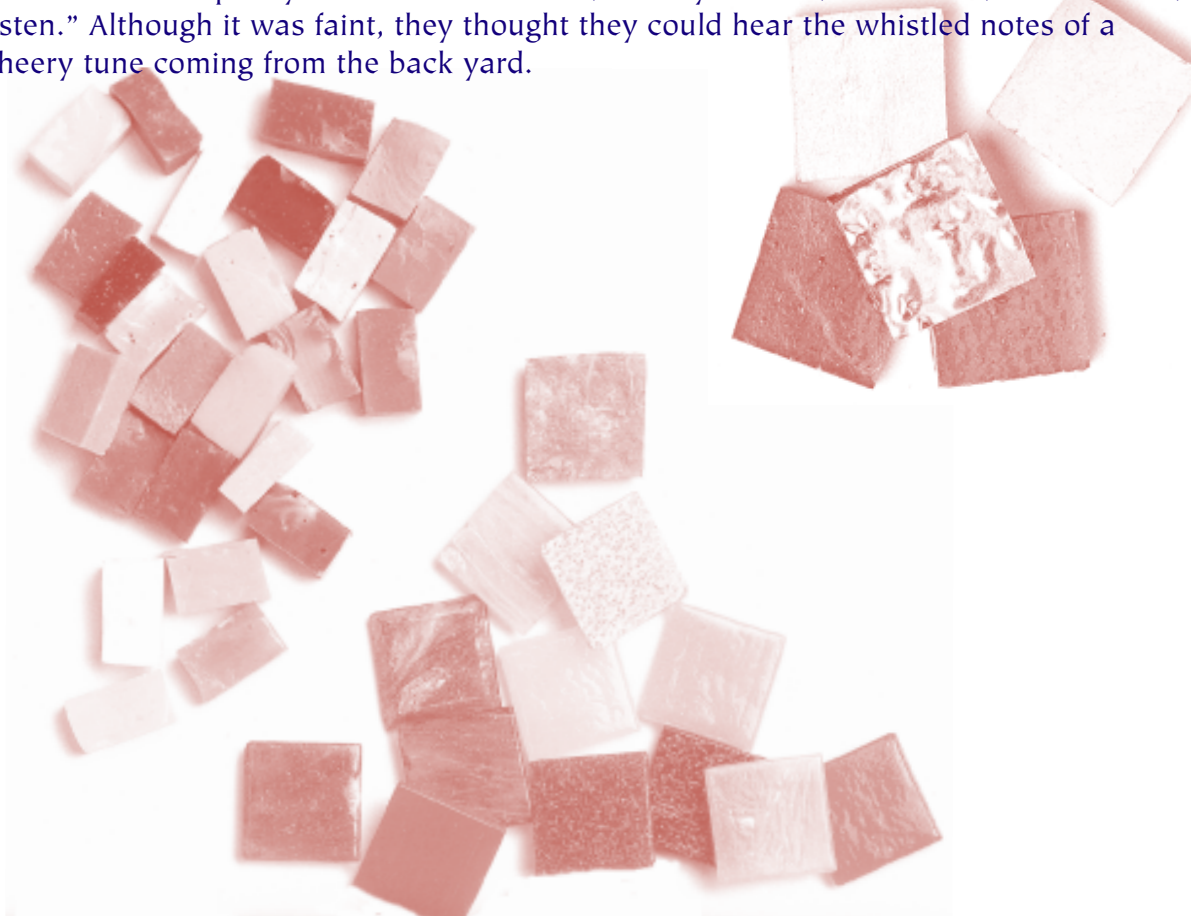
holy place on the hill. At each building, Bo pointed out the tile patterns. Some were simple and some were fancy. At each building, he had a story to tell of how the Whistler explained his work or how he told of the days when he was a boy or how he played with Bo, teased him, and made him laugh. By the time the Holy Man brought Bo back to his home, they were both ready to sit. They were tired.

* * * * *

Ravak and Mawri beamed with delight when they saw their little brother smiling and talking with the Holy Man. They showed their respect by offering him food and drink and did not sit until he asked them to. When they were all refreshed, the Holy Man took Bo on his lap and said, "One day when you are older you will come to the holy place to learn about life and death and about powers beyond your understanding. Until then, remember that even though you will never again see the Whistler in his house or working with tiles, he is still with you in your memories. He is gone from this world, but his spirit is with you whenever you remember him, when you remember how you laughed and played together, and when you see his beautiful tile work and remember all he taught you."

After the Holy Man had left and Ravak and Mawri were busy again with their chores, they noticed that Bo was not in the house. Mawri asked, "Where has Bo gone?"

They found Bo in the yard. He had collected many small stones and had sorted them into piles according to size. He was busily removing stones from the piles and laying out an orderly pattern of small and large stones on the ground before him. Ravak and Mawri returned quietly to their chores. Later, as they worked, Ravak said, "Shh. Mawri, listen." Although it was faint, they thought they could hear the whistled notes of a cheery tune coming from the back yard.



Activities

Unit Orientation

Introduce students to the Theme Title, the Theme in Life, the Theme in Art, and the Key Inquiry Questions to help focus their attention as you (or they) read the story.

Story

Present the Story:

- Read or ask students to read *The Old Whistler*.

Discussion of Theme and Key Questions

Discussion of the Story's Theme:

Discuss how the story relates to the theme.

- Where did Ravak and Mawri go for spiritual help?
- Who did they talk with there?

Students' Experience with the Theme:

Help students identify how the theme relates to their own lives.

- Are there spiritual or religious places in your community?
- What are spiritual leaders called in different religions?
- Besides at the end of life, at what other special times in a person's life are spiritual ceremonies sometimes held?
- Other than through religion, have you ever heard of ways that some people find spiritual meaning through mystery, wonder, or power?

Inquiry into the Story:

Use the key questions to further analyze the story.

- What visual elements do you think the Old Whistler used to make patterns in tile (for example, color or shape)?
- Can you imagine and describe how one of the Old Whistler's simple patterns might have looked (for example, around a shop window)?
- Can you imagine and describe how one of the Old Whistler's complex patterns might have looked (for example, on the floors or ceiling of the domed holy place)?
- What repeated patterns of sound did Ravak and Mawri experience when they visited the holy place (shoes echoing as they walked, music, and chanting students)?
- Where else might Ravak and Mawri find repeated patterns on their visit to the holy place (carvings, Holy Man's clothing)?
- Why do you suppose the holy place was built on the highest spot in the city?
- How were spiritual beliefs passed on in Ravak and Mawri's culture?

- Besides tile making and spiritual service, what do you suppose are the trades and occupations of other people in Ravak and Mawri's culture?
- What do you suppose happens in the royal palace?
- Why do you suppose some people in the city are wealthier than others?

Inquiry into Students' Experience:

Use the key questions to help students make connections to their own experiences.

- How many visual patterns can you find in your classroom?
- Can you list some visual patterns you see in your home or on the way to school? What parts (or motifs) are repeated?
- What is/are the most important building(s) in the center of your city, town, or village?
- What kinds of activities go on in that/those building(s) (economic, political, social, spiritual)?
- What sorts of trades and occupations do people in your community do?
- How does work in your community fit into the United States economic system?
- What levels of government are part of the United States system (local, county, state, and federal)? How does government work in your city, town, or village?

Transfer to Diverse Cultures



The following instructions are written for students who are able to work independently. If you teach younger students, the instructions offer helpful guidelines as you gather and present information in order to optimize transfer potential for your students. Depending on the grade level of your students and their access to appropriate library and Internet sources, you can choose to build transfer across cultures either 1) through student investigation or 2) through your own investigations and presentations to students.

Inquiry about Artworks:

- Assign a team of students to locate reproductions of artworks made in Europe during the Middle Ages with repeat patterns (churches, manuscript illuminations, altarpieces, reliquaries). Have them display the reproductions and describe the repeat patterns in the work to their classmates. Assign other teams to similarly investigate artworks from historical and contemporary Muslim cultures.

Inquiry about Artworks in Context:

- Assign a team of students to research Medieval culture. Ask them to focus specifically on religious beliefs and ceremonies. Ask them to share their findings and, when possible, explain how religious beliefs and ceremonies influenced the production of artworks. Assign other teams to similarly investigate art of Muslim cultures and the effects of Muslim beliefs and ceremonies on Muslim art.

Transfer to Studio

Review the unit themes and key questions to help students transfer what they have learned to their own art making.

Thematic artwork:

- Challenge students to relate the theme to their own experiences or an imaginary experience to develop an idea for their own artwork. Ask students to design and produce a pattern using motifs (colors, shapes) that symbolize their own spiritual beliefs or a value that is very important to them. Have students identify two or three symbolic colors (such as blue, white, and gray for the ocean) and design two or three simple symbolic shapes (such as the shapes of a wave, a gull, or a seashell). Use photo copying, stencils, or tagboard templates to help students create repeating patterns.

Story Illustration:

- Since *The Old Whistler* is not illustrated, you might consider asking students to use their imaginations to make their own illustrations, focusing on the Old Whistler's house, the royal palace, the domed holy place on the hill, or tile patterns in the market place, palace, or holy building.

Exhibition:

- Display student artwork with Unit Information (Theme Title, Theme in Life, Theme in Art, and Key Questions), sample student reports, and reproductions of artworks from diverse cultures. If your students make story illustrations, display a copy of *The Old Whistler*.

Interdisciplinary Transfer

Social Studies:

- Systems that make up a culture (religious, economic, political, social)

Mathematics:

- Predictable patterns

Life Science:

- Cycles in nature

The Arts:

- Patterns in music, dance, and poetry