Sacred Realm: Blessings and Good Fortune Across Asia

Exhibition on view February 2016 – March 2017

Since the beginnings of human culture, people have sought blessings and good fortune from the sacred realm. Whether that realm is believed to include certain deities, gods, spirits, or other forces, a sense that both harm as well as great fortune may emanate is universal among humans everywhere. Despite vast differences in culture and across millennia, people have sought and found ways to connect with these powers to bring stability to their lives, to divert ill-will and harm, and to attract love, fertility, prosperity, longevity, and safety ... essentially, to harness protection, blessings, and good fortune for themselves, their loved ones, and their communities.

This exhibition—in many ways highlights of the Museum’s Asian collection—presents objects thematically: “Amulets and Talismans,” “Divine Communication,” and “Ritual Performance” and invites visitors to explore some of the ways in which people seek and secure blessings and good fortune in Asia. This set of Lesson Plans focuses on one type of amulet found in the Middle East, the khamsa, and one ritual of communication with the gods from Japan, the ema. Though reflective of wide-ranging practices of belief, at the same time, they illustrate the common human desire to attain balance and harmony in the physical and spiritual realms of life.

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Hands have always been symbols of strength and power. *Khamsas* are amulets, or good luck charms, in the form of a hand. They are commonly found throughout North Africa and the Middle East, in a variety of forms, but all used for a similar function: for protection from bad and to bring in good. *Khamsas* are believed to ward off negative energy, whether a malicious stare (the “evil eye”) or harmful thoughts. In addition, they are regarded as able to invite blessings and good fortune.

The word *khamsa* (also spelled Hamsa, Khamsah, or Chamsa) comes from the Arabic language and means “five.” The number five is believed to hold protective powers. Additionally, the anthropomorphic form of the hand is supposed to have special beneficial powers. (This is also true of the form of the human eye, which is often included in designs on *khamsas.*)

Dating to ancient times, the *khamsa* form can be found on jewelry (most commonly as a necklace pendant), clothing pins, hung above entrances to homes, and incorporated into other art forms such as paintings, tile, mosaic, prints, and wall hangings. In the present day, they can even be seen hung on keychains or cars. The fingers may be pointing either up or down.

*Khamsas* may be depicted realistically or stylized—sometimes so much so that it is hard to recognize them as hands. A *khamsa* might be represented as five circles (fingers) placed around a central circle (palm), or a simple dome shape with the five fingers only implied. They are usually decorated with geometric, vegetal, and or animal designs. *Khamsas* that are worn as pendants are frequently made out of silver. Some have precious stones and gems set into the metal.
Details of Amulets and talismans from Morocco, Girard Collection, Photo by Polina Smutko, MOIFA.

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How to Make a Khamsa

New Mexico Educational Standards: Art 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8; Social Studies II

Objectives:
1. Students will understand the way that khamsas are used. (Historical and cultural understanding.)
2. Students will describe and discuss the process of making a khamsa, including the use of symbols and imagery, their meaning and the materials that are used. (Perceiving, analyzing and responding.)
3. Students will explore 2- and/or 3-dimensional design elements, shapes and forms, decorative motifs, materials and symbols when making their own khamsa. (Creating and performing.)

Materials: pencils, ballpoint pens, scissors, glue sticks, metallic foil, metallic foil paper, card stock or construction paper cut to 6 ½” x 10”, decorated papers, sequins, plastic gems (optional), foam or newspaper to use as a cushion, hole punches, ribbon or string.

Motivation
1. Look at images of khamsas or show the real thing. (See images on p. 3 and/or do a Google image search: “Khamsa” or “Khamsa amulet.”)
2. Explore the diversity of the khamsa form and the many cultures where it can be found.
3. Talk about what hands can symbolize, and the significance of the number five in the cultures where khamsas are found.
4. Explain that each student will be making their own khamsa. They can think about pushing negative things away from them, averting bad things, or drawing good things towards them. Have the students to brainstorm together some negative things they would like to push away or
bad things they would like to avert. Then brainstorm positive things they would like to draw towards themselves. After the lists have been generated, invite the students to take a few moments to decide individually which positive or negative thing they would like to make their khamsa to help with—either a negative to push away or a positive to draw towards them.

**Procedure**

1. Have the students select their foil or paper.
2. Have each student place their hand on the foil or paper, making sure that it fits within the edges. They can position their fingers in a way that they like—either fingers separate for a more realistic depiction of the hand, or fingers together for a more abstract shape.
3. Students trace around their fingers, hand and wrist.
4. Then they cut out the shape of their hand.
5. If the students are using foil, have them place their khamsas on a piece of foam or a small pile of newspaper for a cushion. Use the ballpoint pens to press designs into the hand form. Remind them that they can press into each side of the khamsa.
6. They can draw designs and cut out different shapes from pieces of scrap foil and decorative papers and then glue them onto their khamsa.
7. Glue on sequins and/or gems.
8. Let dry.
9. If the students want to hang their khamsas, they can use a hole punch to make a hole in the top and then thread a piece of ribbon or string through. They may want to hang it up on a wall or a door, or wear it around their neck or wrist.

**Evaluation**

Create a khamsa bulletin board, or a group display (à la Alexander Girard!). Have a discussion with the students about the designs and decorations that they chose to use.

Have the students talk in small groups about what they were thinking about when they were making their khamsas. Using their conversation as a starting point, have them write individual or group short stories or poems about the negatives they would like to avert and the positives to welcome in.
In ancient times, people in Japan believed that elements of nature—such as certain mountains, trees, rocks, etc.—possessed divine power, or *kami*. Once Buddhism came to Japan from the Asian continent in the sixth century, this indigenous set of beliefs and practices associating nature with the sacred came to be known as Shinto, “The Way of the Gods” and was established as one of the official religions in Japan. Shintoism, Buddhism and other religions co-exist peacefully in Japan. Today, Japanese people practice various ceremonies and rituals associated with both Shintoism and Buddhism.

The practice of writing a personal wish or prayer on a wooden plaque, called *ema*, usually takes place at Shinto shrines throughout Japan. This practice dates back to the Nara period in the 8th century, when members of the aristocracy and later the military elite would donate horses (believed to be vehicles of the gods) to the local shrine along with wishes for protection from some negative force. Eventually, painted plaques with horse images came to replace the actual animals as the offerings, and by the Muromachi period (14th – 16th centuries), the subject matter of the plaques expanded beyond just horse images—though the name *ema* remains (*e* means “painting or picture;” *ma* means “horse”). By the 17th century Edo period, making such offerings at shrines became common among everyone in society to receive blessings and good fortune. In contemporary Japanese society, this is most commonly done during certain times of year, like the New Year and during exam season. People purchase their *ema* at the local shrine and write their prayer on the back and then hang it at a designated place—usually under the exterior eaves of the shrine roof or around a sacred tree—for the gods to receive. Nowadays, the kinds of wishes most often seen are for good health, marital bliss, childbirth, success on school exams or at work, and traffic safety.

*Ema* today are recognizable as a small wooden plaque with an image painted on the front, often accompanied by the word *gan-i* (meaning “wish”), and a string through a hole at the top for hanging. The traditional roof-shaped top edge is meant to evoke the pitched roof of a horse stable, harkening back to *ema*’s origins. Today, a wide variety of *ema* shapes can now be seen: other animals like the face of a fox (*inari*), or characters from pop culture such as *rilakkuma* and Hello Kitty. Even on the traditionally shaped *ema*, a broad range of images are available—everything from the 12 zodiac animals (especially popular during the New Year season), to images heroic warriors or auspicious symbols. Of course, the original picture of a horse can also be found.
How to Make an *Ema*

National Visual Arts Standards: Creating 1,2,3 / Performing 4,5,6 / Responding 7,8,9 / Connecting 10,11

**Objectives:**
1. Students will understand the way that *ema* are used in Shinto shrines in Japan. (Historical and cultural understanding.)
2. Students will describe and discuss the process of making an *ema*, including the use of symbols and imagery, their meaning and the materials that are used. (Perceiving, analyzing and responding.)
3. Students will explore the Japanese tradition of *ema*, create their own wishing plaque and then hang it up in a designated place. (Creating and performing.)

**Materials:**
- pencils, permanent markers, paper for drawing drafts,
- 4”x6” wooden plaque (cut to resemble a house with a hole drilled into the top for hanging),
- acrylic paints, paintbrushes, water, ribbon or cord for hanging.

**Motivation:**
1. Look at images of *ema* or show the real thing. (See images on p. 7 and/or do a Google image search: “Japanese ema.”)
2. Explore the different animals and symbols used on the *ema* and discuss what they represent.
3. Talk about what it is to make a wish and how to express this with a drawing. Explain that each student will be making their own *ema*.

**Procedure:**
1. Give each student a piece of paper and a wooden plaque.
2. Have each student place their plaque on the paper and trace around the edge. They can then use this tracing to sketch their ideas. Once they have their idea for the image, have them decide what wish or thought they are going to write on the back of the *ema*.
3. Have the students write their wish on the back of the wooden plaque with a permanent marker. Remind them to write their name and the date on it as well.
4. Give each student a piece of ribbon or cord and have them thread this through the hole in the *ema* and then tie a knot to create a loop for hanging their plaque.
5. The students can now paint their images on the front of the plaque. They can draw first with a pencil or paint directly on the wood.

**Evaluation:**

Have a discussion with the students about the image they chose to use and how it represents the wish they are making.

Establish an area where the *ema* can be hung. Leave them up for a period of time, and then look at them again to see if any of the wishes have come true.