Lesson Plan: Signs of the Zodiac
Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

Suggested grade level: 4–8
Estimated time: 1.5–2.5 hours

Introduction
Chinese art often incorporates animals that symbolize traits or characteristics. One of the most prominent ways that animals have been used symbolically in Chinese culture is in the Chinese zodiac.

In ancient China, dating methods were cyclical. One way that time was recorded according to this cycle was the 12 Animal Signs. Every year is assigned an animal according to a repeating pattern: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Boar. Every 12 years the same animal sign would reappear.

According to Chinese legend, these 12 animals argued as to who was to start the cycle of years. They decided to have a contest: whoever was to reach the opposite bank of the river first would begin the cycle, and the rest of the animals would receive their years according to their finish.

All 12 animals gathered at the bank of the river. Unknown to the ox, the rat jumped upon his back. As the ox was about to jump ashore, the rat jumped off the ox’s back and won the race. The pig ended up last. Each animal is assigned a set of years in the pattern, and each animal symbolizes characteristics that people born in that year theoretically share.

Lesson Objectives
• Recognize the use of animals as symbols in works of art
• Introduce the ideas of symbols and personification in visual art

Key Terms
• zodiac
• symbol
• personification
• characteristic
Instructional Materials

- **Large Plate** ([http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/Chinese/Plate](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/Chinese/Plate))
- **Cloud-Shaped Pillow** ([http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/Chinese/Pillow](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/Chinese/Pillow))
- **Chinese zodiac** ([http://www.artic.edu/taoism/diag-zodiac.php](http://www.artic.edu/taoism/diag-zodiac.php))
- Pen or pencil
- White paperboard plate
- Crayons or colored pencils

Procedures

Discussion

- Read to students the introduction on the Chinese zodiac. Define **symbol**, **personification**, and **characteristic**. Use the Chinese zodiac link for more information on the Chinese zodiac. Click on each animal to find out its attributes and characteristics. Using the Internet, review the information regarding **Large Plate** and **Cloud-Shaped Pillow**. If the Internet is available in class, take advantage of the close-up view.

- As a class or in small groups, have students describe the animals featured on these two works, including what the animals are, what colors are used, and how the animals look. Using the object pages of these two works, guide a discussion and make the following observations about the **Large Plate** and **Cloud-Shaped Pillow**:
  - Each work of art uses animals and, often, colors to represent or personify something. **Large Plate** uses both the dragon and the color yellow to personify the emperor. **Cloud-Shaped Pillow** shows a carp, a type of goldfish, which is revered for its perseverance because it swims upstream.

- Using the information in the introduction and the Chinese zodiac, introduce the legend of the Chinese zodiac. As a class or in groups, list the 12 animals in the Chinese zodiac and each animal’s characteristics.

Activity

- In groups, have students list three or four animals other than the 12 used in the zodiac. Students may list pets, animals they have seen in zoos, or magical creatures (such as unicorns). Then, ask students to list characteristics associated with the new animals. Have students explain why they would attribute those characteristics to each animal.

- Once students have a list of animals with characteristics, have students design their own plate, using an animal that represents the student’s personality. Students may use the attributes of the animals in the Chinese
zodiac as well as attributes they listed for their new animals. Students may also use one animal to represent themselves or create a composite animal.

- Students should color their plates with markers or colored pencils, thinking about how colors can symbolize different attributes. Students may create a border on their plates that incorporate several different animals and draw the most significant animal in the center, or they may incorporate animals into the overall design of the plate.
- Ask them to think about the colors they want to use as well.

**Evaluation**

Base students’ evaluations on their understanding of symbol, characteristic, and personification as expressed through brainstorming activities and their finished plates.

**Follow-up Activities:**

Have students look for animals used in advertisements in magazines and in newspapers. What products are those animals representing? Why do you think those animals were used in the ads? Ask students to present their findings to the class or in a short essay.

**Glossary**

- **characteristics** *(n, pl)*
  features that help to identify or distinguish; distinctive marks or traits

- **personify/personification** *(v/n)*
  to represent a thing as having human qualities; the act of personifying

- **symbol** *(n)*
  an object, person, pattern, shape, etc., that stands for or represents an idea, person, culture, nation, etc.; of, relating to, or serving as a symbol

**Illinois Learning Standards**

- English Language Arts: 1C, 2A, 3B
- Social Science: 18A