Family Activity: Design a Robe!
Provided by the Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education

Materials

- robe template
- paper
- colored pencils, markers, and/or crayons

Optional:
- paint (watercolor or poster paint) and paintbrushes
- construction paper
- scissors
- glue
- magazines or newspapers

Introduction

About 250 years ago, a man wore this Robe (Jifu) in China. It is made of silk, which was a highly valued fabric made from the fibers found inside a silkworm’s cocoon. During this time in China, silk robes were often decorated with symbolic images, which represented an object or idea. For example, along the hem of the robe there are mountains that rise from ocean waves, possibly symbolizing the ability of the Chinese ruler to tower over his subjects. Dragons were often used to show the energy of the universe, and dragons with five claws symbolized the emperor and his imperial court. This robe displays many symbols, including images that are related to Buddhism and Taoism.

Discussion Questions

This robe displays images of the Eight Buddhist Symbols. Click on the image above and scroll over the robe to find the following images. (Use the zoom function to see the images more closely.)

- Conch shell
- Dharma wheel
- Victory Banner (also known as the Banner of Spirituality)
- Treasure Vase
- Parasol (Umbrella)
- Pair of Fish
- Lotus
- Endless Knot

Look at what you are wearing right now. What do you think people living 250 years in the future might know about you only by looking at these clothes?

Think about the people and things that are important to you, such as family members, hobbies, pets, or favorite foods. What symbols would you use to represent these important people and things?

**Activity: Design a Robe that Displays Who You Are!**

**Steps**

1) **Brainstorm!**
   - Make a list of the things that you want others to know about you, such as your hobbies, favorite subjects in school, or your family.
   - Choose the things on your list that you find most important. These are the ideas you will use to decorate your robe.
   - Create a symbol (picture) that represents each of these things. For example, if you like basketball you may want to draw a picture of a basketball or if you like reading you may want to draw your favorite book. Or cut out your symbols from magazines or construction paper.

2) **Create!**
   - Print out the robe template.
   - Select a background color for your robe. If you plan to draw your symbols, color in the background at the end. If you plan to glue your symbols, make sure to add your background color first.
   - Decorate your robe with the symbols you created. Notice that many of the symbols on this *jitō* appear in the exact same location on the right side. This kind of arrangement is called bilateral symmetry, or mirror symmetry. Try to arrange your symbols in the same way.
3) Share!

- Show your finished robe to a friend or family member and explain what the symbols say about you.

Glossary

**Buddhism** *(n)*

major religion based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, a sixth-century-B.C. prince who became known as the Buddha, or Enlightened One. In its philosophical teachings, Buddhism seeks the liberation of the individual from the suffering inherent in life, a goal known as enlightenment or nirvana. As Buddhism spread from India to South and Southeast Asia and finally to China, many diverse forms of the religion developed. In China, Chan Buddhism developed in the 6th and 7th centuries A.D. This type of Buddhism combined the doctrines of Indian Buddhism with native Chinese ideas. Chan Buddhism stresses the importance of the enlightenment experience and the usefulness of rituals while encouraging intellectual analysis of the doctrine.

**symbol/symbolic** *(n/adj)*

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

**Taoism** *(n)*

a philosophical system and an organized religion based on the Tao, or "Way." Religious Taoism developed between the 2nd and 5th century A.D. and built on earlier philosophical foundations. Religious Taoism incorporated new ritual practices and religious institutions into the earlier, philosophical Taoism.