In Transparency 1.2A we see Portrait of Emperor Tang Taizong, ink and color on silk, by an unknown artist, undated but probably from the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618–906).

- In dynastic China, figure painting was not considered the best kind of painting for self-expression, and the names of portrait painters were generally unknown. Portraits, such as this one, were usually rendered in a meticulous manner, with the individual brush strokes blending into smooth lines or shading and coloring. The figure often stands against a blank ground, and attention is devoted to the details of the costume, which provides information about the figure’s rank and era. Particularly in the case of a portrait of a long-deceased figure such as Emperor Taizong, the costume may say more about the figure than the facial features, which would largely have been invented.

- Taizong was a famous emperor of the Tang Dynasty, one of China’s golden eras, a prosperous and culturally significant period. Some time after his death, someone in the imperial court may have asked a court artist to make this depiction of the famous emperor to serve as inspiration or as a model for behavior. Emperor Taizong is depicted against a blank background, which makes him seem detached from the world and timeless. The artist was careful to show the details of the emperor’s robe, including the embroidered imperial dragons, since these details are what identifies the figure. The court hierarchy was clearly ranked, and a person’s rank within the imperial court was always indicated by the court dress. It was important in traditional Chinese society that each person knew his standing in regard to others.
In Transparency 1.2B we see *Portrait of Mao Zedong*, oil painting, by an unknown artist, mid–twentieth century.

- This portrait is anonymous. At the time it was painted, the identity of the artist would not have been considered important because the artist’s aim was not self-expression: his or her goal was to serve the state. The painting style is Socialist Realism, a highly realistic style of oil painting in which the brush strokes tend to be smoothly blended together. The figures in Socialist Realist paintings are made to look heroic.

- *Mao Zedong* (1893–1976), the subject of this painting, was the most powerful Chinese leader of the twentieth century. He led the peasant army that united China under communist rule, and he controlled the government from the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 until his death. When the Chinese communists first established control of China in 1949, they looked to the Soviet Union for guidance in establishing a communist government and culture. Socialist Realism was imported from the Soviet Union at that time and dominated Chinese painting for about 10 years.

- In this painting, Mao is made to look heroic by having his figure fill the center of the canvas. His placement above and in front of an endless landscape makes him seem to dominate the world in a timeless fashion. He wears a “Mao jacket,” a new kind of costume worn by Chinese communists and supposedly devoid of any indicators of rank, because the communists wanted everyone to be equal.

In Transparency 1.2C we see *Landscape*, ink and color on silk, by Mao Dan, 1588.

- Mao Dan was a minor artist of the late Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). During this period, landscapes were considered the most elevated genre of painting. Upper-class men enjoyed painting them in their leisure time, and if an artist painted them for money, he tried to de-emphasize that. There are two important characteristics of landscapes from this period. First, they tend to idealize the landscape. Second, the kinds of brush strokes used for objects such as trees, rocks, and water had become formulaic. Artists relied on tried-and-true brushwork and forms of past artists to ensure successful results as they
developed their own individual styles. Connoisseurs enjoyed such references to past artists, as they provided an opportunity for the connoisseur to make use of his knowledge, guessing on which past master a particular tree or rock form was based. The contemplation of a peaceful landscape could be a kind of Daoist meditation, and an idealized landscape painting could substitute for the real thing if the connoisseur was confined to the city.

- This painting presents an idealized view of peasant life, with people planting rice on the left, a figure carrying buckets on a shoulder pole in the upper left, another figure riding a water buffalo on the right, and others. Typical of landscapes from this period, Mao Dan’s _Landscape_ makes use of repetitive, formulaic brush strokes drawn from the past for foliage and rocks. The buildings, boat, and figures also resemble those in earlier works. This interest in art forms of the past reflects the general interest in history found in many aspects of Chinese culture and society. Mao Dan’s _Landscape_ also exemplifies Chinese culture’s idealization of peasant life, based on a respect for agriculture as the basis of society.

**In Transparency 1.2D we see Don’t Depend on the Gods**, poster, by an unknown artist, 1975.

- This is a peasant painting that belongs to a class of paintings produced by peasants during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). China’s leaders sought to recharge the country’s revolutionary fervor during this period, and they relied on art to contribute to this end. Jiang Qing (Chairman Mao’s wife and a member of the Gang of Four) promoted peasant painting as naturally filled with the proper revolutionary spirit. Peasant paintings tend to be colorful and patternistic, and a large group of them are characterized by flat color applications with little shading. The bright colors and patterns are derived from such peasant arts as paper cuts and batik cloth printing; the flat colors are related to the art of folk painting. There had been no recognized tradition of folk painting before Jiang Qing promoted it, and as a result few peasant artists had received professional training. Therefore, professional artists were secretly brought in to help peasant painters achieve a competent, polished product.

- In _Don’t Depend on the Gods_ we see peasants busily planting rice during the spring, which is revealed by the mass of pink blossoms among the fruit trees. Everything looks prosperous and tidy. In contrast to the dynastic era, the landscape ideally depicted here is
reformed and controlled by humans. The title, *Don’t Depend on the Gods*, exhorts peasants to depend on themselves rather than on the many popular Buddhist and Daoist gods to achieve a good harvest. The extent to which the peasants have labored to reshape the earth to gain the greatest harvest possible is indicated by the layers of fields fashioned on the steep mountainside. The painting exhibits the bright colors and flat tones typical of peasant painting, and the layers of rice paddies and the receding rows of trees demonstrate the typical patternism. Overall, the painting’s composition is quite complex, with a dramatic heightening through space as well as a deep recession under the bridge. This indicates that the unskilled peasant artist was aided by a professional. This work fulfills all the requirements for a good communist painting: it portrays the masses, it was (theoretically) created by the masses, and it contains a valuable message for the masses.

In *Transparency 1.2E* we see *Scene of a Chinese Official*, lithograph, by an unknown artist, nineteenth century.

- In the late nineteenth century, printing techniques imported into China from the West made it possible to produce news sheets for wide distribution. Lithography was most useful for this because it was inexpensive and many more copies could be produced than with woodblock prints. With woodblock printing, the images carved into the wood wore down after a while so that lines were no longer crisp, but with lithography no carving was involved, so lines remained crisp. The news sheets tended to contain stories of the interesting or bizarre.

- The inscription accompanying *Scene of a Chinese Official* informs us that the man seated in the middle has 8 grandsons, and that 57 people came to pay their respects to him. The setting is a formal reception hall in the official’s mansion. The superior status of the main figure is emphasized by his placement in the center of the room, with furnishings arranged symmetrically behind him. Furthermore, he is the only seated figure and is larger than all the other figures. Behind him is a painting of a crane, the symbol of longevity. Most of the people wear court robes, with the embroidered square on the front indicating their rank. The congratulations are offered to the official in a ceremonial manner, with guests presenting him with cups of wine. This picture reflects traditional Confucian values in its emphasis on rank and on the respect due those of superior rank. Social interactions often were formal or revolved around ceremony, as in *Scene of a Chinese Official*, and Chinese believed in many superstitions, as indicated by the inscription’s emphasis on the number 8—considered to be lucky. It also shows the
inferior status of women in dynastic China—not a single woman is present, and girls
were not perceived important enough to be included among the grandchildren. The fine
lines that compose this work, combined with its curious subject, suggest that it was part
of a lithographically reproduced news sheet.

In Transparency 1.2F we see Peasant Couple Registering
Their Marriage, poster, by an unknown artist, 1950s.

- Early in the twentieth century, young artists who supported the principles of the
Communist Party adopted woodblock printing as an effective medium for mass-
producing images that conveyed the misery of the Chinese people, who suffered poverty,
starvation, and other effects of bad government and war. Woodblock printing was used
in China for over a thousand years, but in the hands of the young artists it became a
revolutionary medium. As Mao Zedong proclaimed at the Yenan Forum on Literature
and Art, “we [do not] refuse to utilize the literary and artistic forms of the past, but in
our hands these old forms, remolded and infused with new content, also become
something revolutionary in the service of the people.”

- In this picture, a man and a woman stand before the desk of the local official to register
their marriage. Behind them hangs a poster of Chairman Mao. Curious people and well-
wishers crowd the small room and peer in through the door and window. That everyone
is casually posed reflects the Communist Party’s desire to have everyone equal in status,
with no particular deference accorded the officials. The official’s clothes, although a
uniform, are of quality comparable to everyone else’s, again reflecting equality of status.
The official is a woman, which was unheard of in traditional China. When reproduced as
a poster and distributed, the painting promoted the revolutionary concepts of equality of
the sexes and equality of officials and commoners. Like all art reproduced as posters for
the peasants in the People’s Republic of China, this work is very colorful. Its flat tones
are typical of woodblock prints.
In Transparency 1.2G we see Whiling Away the Summer, hands scroll, ink and light color on silk, by Liu Guandao, late thirteenth century.

- Liu Guandao was a court painter during the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368) and was given an honorary court post as Keeper of the Imperial Wardrobe by Khubilai Khan. The two key elements of his style are the use of calligraphic brush strokes, modeled after Chinese calligraphy, and references to art of the past. In Whiling Away the Summer, calligraphic lines are used to convey a sense of three-dimensionality in the folds of the main figure’s robe and in the banana leaves. The artist referred to art of earlier dynasties by rendering the landscape painted on the screen behind the main figure in an eleventh-century style. The idea of painting a screen on a screen in a painting (called a double-screen painting) comes from a tenth-century tradition.

- Education has always been revered in China. In traditional Chinese society, any man could achieve a position of importance in the government through studying and passing a series of three exams. These exams allowed the government to identify intelligent men to run the empire. In addition, scholarship was appreciated for its own sake, not just as a means to obtaining a good job. To be a real scholar in traditional Chinese society demanded that a person devote himself (women were rarely encouraged) to studying the ancient classics from a very early age. Having mastered the vast body of knowledge that was required, a scholar would then take the exams and serve the government. In his spare time, however, he would enjoy the scholarly arts in a leisurely fashion in beautiful, peaceful surroundings.

- Whiling Away the Summer depicts a scholar reclining on a platform bed, idly toying with the scroll in his left hand. Behind him is an array of items appreciated by the traditional Chinese scholar: musical instruments, a vase, other ceramics, and more scrolls. Two female servants stand by to aid him. The scholar portrayed on the screen behind the first figure is only slightly less relaxed and is likewise surrounded by servants and articles of scholarly enjoyment. This painting was meant to be viewed by an educated person: only such a viewer would appreciate the antiques surrounding the scholar and enjoy the references to art of the past. Two passages from a description of the scholar written at the end of the hands scroll give an idea of how removed from the everyday world such people felt themselves to be.

  Shunning the world, his person found ease;
  Through study, his mind deepened ever more.

  A temperament as dispassionate as ice and snow,
  How can he mingle with the common lot?
In Transparency 1.2H we see an untitled painting by an unknown artist, 1960s or 1970s.

- Artists working on behalf of the Chinese Communist state in the 1960s and 1970s often sought to blend Chinese styles with western realism, which was considered "modern." They believed that Chinese art, like China itself, needed to maintain its "Chinese-ness" while modernizing. Their works portrayed the people and made them appear heroic by magnifying all gestures and emotions. Usually these paintings had a didactic, or educational, purpose and were reproduced for a mass audience. This painting is an example of the blending of Chinese brush painting, in the outlines of the clothes and of the old man's head, with shaded facial features modeled in the western manner.

- This painting shows an old man holding a pipe and gazing off into space, while placing his arm protectively on a young girl's shoulder. The girl is dressed in her school uniform, the red scarf symbolizing her communist schooling. She reads the People's Daily. The communist government believed in equality of the sexes, and therefore sought for the first time to educate girls. Since theoretically there are no classes in a communist society, everyone is eligible to receive an education. In the 1960s and 1970s, China emphasized educating the young and stressed political education in communist ideas because the children were to be future leaders. This painting uses dramatic gestures—the girl reads joyously and intently, the old man's protective gesture is almost theatrical—to emphasize its message: children shall be educated, and their elders should encourage and aid them in their studies.

- Both the subject and the style contribute to a general message that a modern new China will grow out of the old China. The old man, as well as the use of some traditional brushwork, symbolize the link to the past. But the dominance of western painting techniques and the placement of the girl in the foreground show that the hope of the country lies with educating the young.