

Google Arts & Culture

Ancient Traditions: The World of Asian Puppetry



in association with



General Frog, Wang Tianxi, 2007, China Intangible Heritage Industry Alliance

How to Make the Most of This Lesson

This lesson serves as a **roadmap** for your journey through a rich and exciting collection of online content made available by **Google Arts & Culture's partners**. You will explore photographs, slideshows, voice recordings, and more. The images in this lesson are just a sample of what's available to you via the **Google Arts & Culture** website.

You can complete this lesson independently or with fellow students, a teacher, or another adult. The content is accessible to a wide range of ages, but it's especially geared toward students ages 11 to 15.

Your journey in this lesson will take you through three major topics:

Chapter 1: The Art of Puppetry

Chapter 2: Explore Different Kinds of Puppets

Chapter 3: Modern-Day Artists at Work

You'll see some helpful signs along the way:



Estimated time for completing the chapter



Audio recording or video



Link to more online content



Learning activity

Tools for Learning

Below are tools for learning that you may need for Digital Discovery lessons:



A device that connects to the Internet (a computer or tablet)



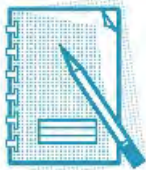
A tool for writing your responses and big ideas (pen, pencil, computer, etc.)



Art supplies (markers, crayons, paint)



Scissors



A notebook



Scrap paper

Explore! Google Arts & Culture pictures are **big**. If you want to explore a picture in greater detail, click on the magnifying glass symbol and zoom in with the zoom slider. By dragging the white box around, you can see even **tiny** details.

Welcome to *Ancient Traditions: The World of Asian Puppetry*

Have you ever seen a puppet show? You may not know that there are many types of puppets and puppet theater. In this lesson, you'll learn about some puppetry traditions of Asia. Many of them date to ancient times. In fact, some are so old that scholars don't really know when they began. They came before writing! This lesson will give you an up-close look at some of these puppets. It will show you how they are used in theater and how they have influenced other art forms. At the end of the lesson, you'll use what you've learned to create your own puppet.

What Will You Do?

1. Learn what makes puppet theater different from other kinds of theater.
2. See the most popular types of puppet theater in Asia.
3. Understand how the art of puppetry has influenced other art forms.



Dhola Maru in puppetry, Banglanatak

What's in this lesson?

1. Learn about some of the common elements of puppet theater.
2. Find out how shadow puppets are made.
3. See other types of puppets and their puppeteers.
4. Watch videos of different kinds of puppet theater.

By participating in this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Identify common types of puppetry in some Asian countries.
2. Explain materials used for puppets.
3. Understand how puppetry has influenced other art forms.

Vocabulary

art form, universal, impersonal, literary, puppeteer, shadow puppet, Hindu, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, folk art

Need help with some of these terms? See the glossary at the end of this lesson.



The Art of Puppetry



What is this chapter about?
Common elements of puppetry



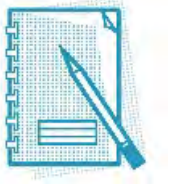
How long will this chapter take?
1 hour

Chapter 1: Warming Up

Before you explore, answer the questions below in your notebook.

Consider

1. Can you name any other kinds of puppets besides hand puppets, string puppets, and finger puppets?
2. Have you ever attended a puppet performance? If so, what did you see?



Discover

3. What did people do for entertainment before they had television, radio, movies, and video games? What kinds of performances might have entertained them?

Why Is Puppetry Popular?

There are many theories as to why puppetry was and is a popular **art form**. One theory is that audience members must use their imaginations to fully experience the story and its details. Another is that, unlike dramatic plays with human actors, puppets play **universal** and **impersonal** character types. Human actors bring their own personalities to their roles. This affects how the audience experiences the characters. Another reason puppet theater is popular is that it is both dramatic and highly visual.



In many cultures, puppetry traditions have been interpreted in new ways over time. Take, for example, the Thai tradition of Khon. Today, it involves both puppets and human actors like those shown here.



Read more about the Thai tradition of Khon, and see more of its beautiful costumes, in [this exhibit](#).

Dramatic Subject Matter

Subject matter for puppet theater differs widely depending on the culture. In some cultures, content comes from religious ceremonies or texts or from cultural legends. Others find inspiration in ancient **literary** traditions. Music is common to most puppet theater. It creates the mood and rhythm for the puppet characters.

Music is part of wayang, a type of puppet theater from Indonesia. Gamelan, a type of ensemble music mainly performed with percussion instruments, accompanies wayang.



[Learn more](#)
about gamelan
instruments.



Een gamelan orkest als begeleiding van een wajang voorstelling, Kassian Cephasc. 1867 - c. 1910, Rijksmuseum

Many Kinds of Puppets

There are many different types of puppets and puppet theater. Each type plays an important role in the cultures in which it is popular. The artistic skills required to design, create, and move the puppets are very involved. Some puppets can be moved by just one person. Others take as many as three people to operate. Puppets can be moved using strings, sticks, or rods. They can also be worn on the **puppeteer**'s hand like a glove.



Puppeteer Arabindo Ghoroi, Atasi Nanda Goswami, Daricha Foundation



See some of the many puppetry traditions mentioned above in [this story](#) about puppet traditions from West Bengal, India.

Many Different Materials

Puppets can also be made of many different materials. Some are made of clay. Others are made from carved wood or fabric. Still others, like the one the artist is working on in this photograph, are made from animal or fish hide. The puppet this artist is working on is a leather **shadow puppet**.



Leather Puppet Making: Making the puppets, 2017, Dastkari Haat Samiti

Shadow puppets are usually flat, colorful puppets meant to be viewed through a see-through screen. Puppeteers move the puppets behind the screen. You will learn more about shadow puppetry traditions in the next chapter.



Find out more about the making of Indian leather puppets in [this exhibit](#).

Chapter 1: Wrapping Up

Now that you've read the chapter, reflect on what you've learned by answering the questions below.



- Why do you think the making of puppets remains popular today?
- How is puppet theater different from other forms of popular entertainment?



Villager Puppet, unknown, Republic of Korea/Since the Liberation of Korea, National Folk Museum of Korea

Chapter 2:

Explore Different Kinds of Puppets



What is this chapter about?

Shadow puppets, rod puppets, string puppets, and more



How long will this chapter take?

1 hour

Chapter 2: Warming Up

Before you explore, answer the questions below in your notebook.

Consider

1. Think about the sets, costumes, and performers of a theater production. How might puppet theater differ from theater with live actors? How might it be similar?



Discover

2. How might the artistry behind creating the puppets for puppet theater contribute to the lasting nature of puppetry traditions?

Shadow Puppets

As you read in the last chapter, a popular form of puppetry in Asia is shadow puppetry. A shadow puppet play typically involves a see-through screen and flat, highly decorated puppets. The puppet masters move the puppets behind the screen. The audience sees the shadows of the puppet figures.

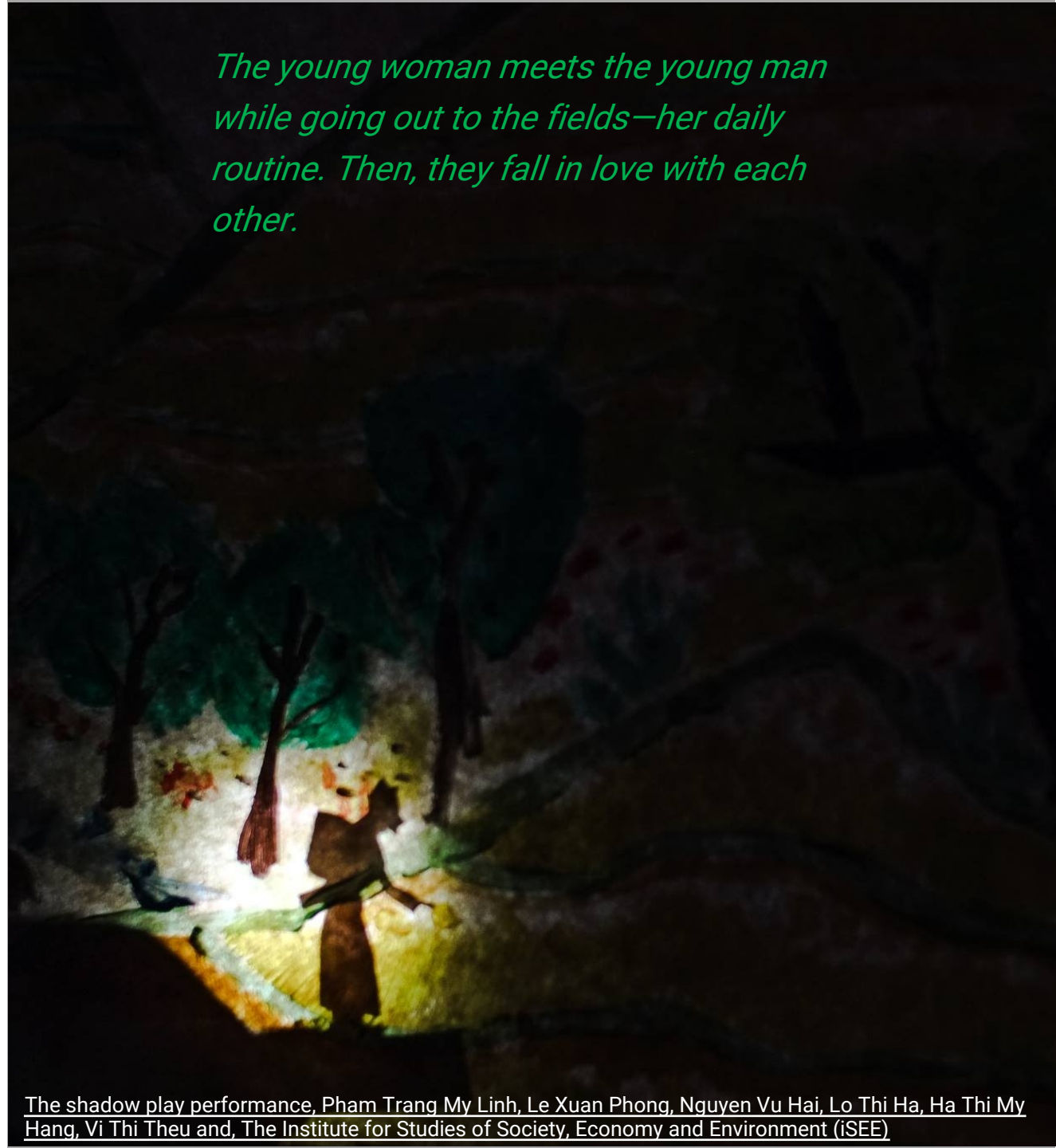
If you're looking at only a shadow, how do you tell the difference between one character and another? Shadow puppets tend to have exaggerated shapes and features. This is so that each one looks different. In some traditions, there are repeated characters. Each has its own unique look. As you learned earlier, the puppet characters are "universal" types. Anyone in the audience should be able to identify each character.



Learn more about the shadow play shown here in [this exhibit](#).

This photograph shows a scene from a shadow play put on by Thai migrant children in Vietnam.

The young woman meets the young man while going out to the fields—her daily routine. Then, they fall in love with each other.



The shadow play performance, Pham Trang My Linh, Le Xuan Phong, Nguyen Vu Hai, Lo Thi Ha, Ha Thi My Hang, Vi Thi Theu and, The Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE)



Wayang

Wayang is a shadow puppetry tradition from Indonesia. There are eight different styles of wayang. The oldest and most popular is Wayang Purwa. A Wayang Purwa puppet is shown here. Wayang stories are typically drawn from the **Hindu** epics the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.

Wayang performances typically start in the evening and last all night long. They are accompanied by gamelan musicians. In some wayang styles, audience members sit both in front of the screen and behind it, where they can see the puppeteers.

A typical wayang performance has around 500 puppets. Most wayang puppets are flat and made of leather. Each character is represented by around 8 to 10 puppets, depending on the scene.

Wayang puppeteers are trained at special schools. They study how to hold the puppets and how to move them to best tell the story and work with Gamelan music.



Learn more about the history of wayang in [this story](#).



Watch a wayang puppet being made in [this video](#).

Indian Leather Puppets

India also has a shadow puppet tradition. It, too, often depicts stories from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* and blends them with local customs and legends. The availability of television and movies has meant that shadow puppet performances aren't common in India today. However, the artistic tradition continues. The style of art has been used in ways other than puppet making as well.



See how religious traditions may have influenced Indian puppetry and watch a performance [here](#).



Leather Puppet Making: Leather puppets, Sindhe Sriramulu, 2010/2017, Dastkari Haat Samiti

Chinese Shadow Puppets

Chinese shadow puppets are also typically flat leather plates dyed in colorful patterns like those shown here. The colors can be seen through the screen during a performance because of the light that shines on them from backstage. Shadow puppetry in China began during ancient times, possibly during the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) or Tang (618–907 CE) dynasty. Shadow puppet plays remain popular in many areas of China today.



Shadow puppet head, Wang Biao and Wang Fang, 2007/2009, Wang's Shadow Museum



Read more about the history of shadow puppetry in China [here](#).



See how the puppet's headgear tells more about its character in [this exhibit](#).



Chinese shadow puppets are often made of dried and stretched cow or donkey hides. The hides are cut, carved, and dyed.

These artists are hand painting the carved figures with dye.



See more about the puppet-making process in northern Sichuan, China, [here](#).



View an exhibit on Shaanxi puppet making [here](#).

Many Chinese shadow plays are based on Chinese literary traditions. This photograph is from a play that tells the story 'Warrior on a Thousand-Mile Journey,' from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a classic of ancient Chinese literature. This story is commonly used in shadow plays.



Find out more about this shadow play in [this exhibit](#).



Read a story about another classic shadow play [here](#).



[Warrior on a Thousand-Mile Journey, Li Tianshe, 2011, Wang's Shadow Museum](#)



Japanese Bunya-Ningyo and Bunraku

In Japan, there are several puppet theater traditions. One, on the island of Sado, is called Bunya-Ningyo. Bunya puppets are carved from wood and controlled by the puppeteer using rods. The puppeteer is part of the body of the puppet.



Watch a Bunya-Ningyo performance [here](#).

Another type of puppetry in Japan is Bunraku. This ancient Japanese tradition involves puppets up to five feet tall. The stories performed are based on short fairy tales or historical legends. Each puppet is moved by three puppeteers dressed entirely in black. Only the face of the “grand master” puppeteer is visible.



See an artist’s adaptation of Bunraku [here](#).

Zhangzhou Gloved Puppets

Another type of puppet from China is from the Zhangzhou province. The heads of these gloved **folk art** puppets are carved and elaborately painted.

You read earlier that puppets are universal types so that the audience can easily understand the story line. What do you think the role of this character is?



Find out more about this tradition from Zhangzhou in [this exhibit](#).



Vicious Women (puppet head). Xu Zhuchu, 1992, China Intangible Heritage Industry Alliance

String and Rod Puppets from West Bengal

Taarer Putul, or string puppets, from West Bengal, India, are another type of folk art. These puppets are typically moved by six strings.



Watch a puppeteer give a Taarer Putul performance [here](#).

Rod puppets are wood puppets operated from below with a rod that runs the length of the body. They are also common to the area.



See a video of a rod puppet show [here](#).



Puppetry of Korea

Baltal is an unusual form of puppet theater. The puppeteers lie on their backs and control the puppet heads with their feet. Baltal literally means “foot-mask.” Performances generally involve music, a narrator, and dialogue between the characters, the narrator, and the musicians.

Korea has many other traditions of puppetry besides baltal. Many relate to religious rituals. Others are strictly for entertainment.



See an example of a simple hand puppet made by a Korean villager [here](#).



Baltal (feet-mask) by Park Jeong-Im, Baltal (feet-mask) by Park Jeong-Im, National Theater of Korea Theater of Korea

Chapter 2: Wrapping Up

Now that you've read the chapter, reflect on what you've learned by answering the question below.



What puppetry traditions most surprised you in this chapter, and in what ways?



Leather Puppet Making: Sindhe Sriramulu's family portrait, 2017, Dastkari Haat, Samiti

Chapter 3:

Modern-Day Artists at Work



What is this chapter about?

How puppetry as an artform has continued



How long will this chapter take?

1 hour

Chapter 3: Warming Up

Before you explore, answer the questions below in your notebook.

Consider

1. What does it take to carry on an artistic or other type of tradition? Think about what must be present for traditions to continue.

Discover

2. How and why might artists take traditions and make them their own?



Indian Puppetry Traditions, Alive and Well

In this chapter, you'll learn about some of the artists keeping the traditions of puppetry in Asia alive. You will also see how puppetry has influenced other art forms.

This photograph is from a performance in India called 'About Ram.' This experimental piece uses not only puppets but also dancers, projected images, and masks.

This show focuses on excerpts from the writings of Bhavabhuti (c. 700 CE), who wrote plays about the main events in the *Ramayana*.



Read about this show and see scenes from it [here](#).



Still from the 'About Ram.' Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust



These puppets are part of a tradition known as Chitrakathi. Chitrakathi is a combination of art and storytelling. It originates in the Indian state of Maharashtra. Narrators sing or tell a story using painted pictures, music, and puppets. Both traditional and contemporary Chitrakathi performers have revived this art form in Maharashtra.



Learn more about Chitrakathi and see it performed in [this exhibit](#).



View [this exhibit](#) to see new products made using these skills.



Indian leather artisan Sindhe Sriramulu has adapted the traditional skill of leather puppet making to a new way of telling traditional stories. He creates leather scrolls that depict scenes from the *Ramayana*.



See how Sriramulu has transformed traditional leather puppetry skills into narrative art [here](#).

Chinese Traditions Passed to the Next Generations

The tradition of shadow puppetry in northern Sichuan, China, has been passed down through the centuries. Shadow puppet master Wang Wenkun, shown here (left), combined traditions from Weinan and northern Sichuan to come up with his own style of puppetry. He passed this “Wang” style on to his descendants. They became the next generation of Wang puppet masters.



Learn more about Wang shadow puppetry in [this exhibit](#).



Contemporary Chinese artist Wu Jian'an has incorporated the techniques of Chinese shadow puppet creation into beautiful and complex works of art. This image is from a series that tells the folktale 'Tale of the Green Herring.'



See the series of paintings from 'Tale of the Green Herring' in [this exhibit](#).



Find out more about this artist's work [here](#).

Wayang in Modern Art

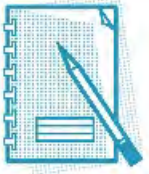
This painting is by Hendra Gunawan, who was skilled not only in painting but also in wayang orang and dance. The frenzied scene in this painting portrays the staging of a show. All of the many elements of a performance are shown—masks, performers, audience members, set, and lighting.



See paintings inspired by a different wayang tradition—wayang kulit—[here](#) and [here](#).

Chapter 3: Wrapping Up

Now that you've read the chapter, reflect on what you've learned by answering the question below.



You saw how puppetry traditions have been carried into the modern era by dedicated artists and performers. Why is it important that later generations learn and understand these historical traditions?

Digital Learning in Action

So, what did you learn? Read the questions and complete the learning activities below to extend your learning based on what you just experienced.



Reflect: Answer these questions:

- What are some of the materials used for the puppets you've read about in this lesson?
- Which puppet traditions are common in the Asian countries mentioned?
- How long have puppetry traditions been in existence?



Summarize: Select a puppetry tradition from the lesson and write down eight things you learned about it. Then, write a summary paragraph describing that tradition and its elements.



Create: Go to the [Wayang Shadow Puppets](#) theme page and revisit the different styles of puppets and their characteristics. You might want to use the zoom feature [here](#) to see the details up close. Also check out the Accessories section to see some of the typical accessories found on a wayang shadow puppet. Then, gather some craft materials, such as stiff paper, sticks, glue, tape, and paint. Create your own wayang shadow puppet, inspired by those you've seen on the Google Arts & Culture site.

Glossary

- **art form:** a means of expression recognized as fine art
- **folk art:** the traditional decorative art that is often the expression of life in a particular community
- **Hindu:** relating to the religion of Hinduism, the main religion of India
- **impersonal:** without human personality or emotions
- **literary:** relating to books
- ***Mahabharata*:** one of the two great epic poems (lengthy poems that tell stories) of ancient India that provide information about the development of Hinduism
- **puppeteer:** one who moves puppets
- ***Ramayana*:** the shorter of the two great epic poems of ancient India that provide information about the development of Hinduism
- **shadow puppet:** a flat, colorful puppet meant to be viewed through a see-through screen
- **universal:** occurring everywhere