

Shefali Khanna

Library Award for Undergraduate Research

Reflective Essay

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From Darkness to Light

Since the time I was in high school, the word “research” always sounded too abstract to me. Yet, that ambiguity made it seem special and exciting as well. I felt inspired by learning about researchers who were on the cutting edge of discovery. However, the time I truly found out its meaning for myself was when I was assigned a research paper for my Arts of Asia course last semester.

I commenced this project in October 2010 when I visited the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. The gallery is home to the two hanging scrolls I had decided to compare and contrast: *Bodhisattva Guanyin of the Water Moon* (a 10th century Northern Song painting from China) and *Bodhisattva Kannon Flanked by Monkeys* (a 15th century Muromachi painting from Japan). After sketching the two works on my paper, I made a list of questions, comments and concerns on their distinctive features, historical and cultural contexts and on how they fitted into the theme of cross-cultural connections. Over the next week, I looked up some books on the two scrolls using the libraries’ online WorldCat database. I checked out about three to four relevant books including *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara* by Chun-Fang Yu and *Buddhist Art in its Relation to Buddhist Ideals* by M. Anesaki. After picking out certain key chapters and pieces of information from the books, I realized I knew less about the scroll from Japan than I did about the scroll from China. Subsequently, I visited the libraries’ online Research Port and found some interesting JSTOR and Oxford Art Online articles on the politics and social structure that shaped art in the Muromachi Period in Japan as well as the reception of

Chinese painting models at that time. The sources I used, notably the academic journals, had not only been approved, but recommended by my professor beforehand.

Once I had all the necessary information from my sources in place, I was ready to prepare an outline. In order to do that, I needed to come up with a thesis statement, an idea that captured what I wanted to prove. After some deep deliberation, it was ready! Next, I organized my paper into three main paragraphs in which I would be comparing the scrolls using the three parameters I stated in my thesis respectively. Taking into account the list of guidelines my TA had provided to me such as ensuring I use proper sentence structure and grammar, I systematically fashioned three body paragraphs. Since this paper was to be written in Chicago style, I used the online style guide to help me with in-text citations, footnoting and a formal bibliography. For my conclusion, I tried to leave the reader thinking of the extent to which the interaction between Chinese and Japanese culture influenced each of their artworks.

Having completing my paper approximately a week before it was due, I took it to the Writing Center and asked a reviewer to go through it with me. She provided me with helpful suggestions on how I should improve my transitions and shorten my paragraphs. Taking note of what she said, I went back and divided each body paragraph into two separate paragraphs by painting. For instance, I examined the visual aesthetics of the first scroll in one paragraph and that of the other in the following paragraph. This greatly enhanced the clarity of my paper. After having a friend read through the paper one last time, I kissed it goodbye and handed it to my professor the next morning.

The significant aspects of doing academic research that I learnt from this assignment involve devoting time and effort to reading and developing a strong knowledge base on the topic, evaluating each source for credibility, making note of any questions or comments that come up

during the process, formulating clear and concise research questions, drafting a logical thesis statement, producing interesting, factually-correct and well-cited body paragraphs, wrapping up with a conclusion that leaves an impression on the reader and clarifying any doubts with a professor, librarian or writing professional. Since I intend to pursue a career in professional research in economic policy, I think all of these skills will prove to be highly beneficial to me in the future. More than just completing the paper, it was really writing it that has been one of my most prized experiences in college so far.