I knew nothing about my topic when I first approached my Art of Japan research paper last fall. I felt a little overwhelmed at first, but the library was my friend every step of the way. I began with two reference books suggested by my professor, cross-referencing artists’ names on the Artstor database. Artstor’s high-resolution scans and LMU’s quality computer monitors gave me an exciting introduction to the variety and beauty of Japanese art. When I had narrowed my choices to three different artists, I looked at more of their work in the library’s oversized section.

I decided upon the artist Sesshu Toyo, and spent several days with Jon Covell’s *Under the Seal of Sesshu*, located in LMU’s collection. It is the most detailed Sesshu source in English, though it was published in the mid 1940s. In fact, I soon found that it is one of the only Sesshu sources published in English, among four or five other articles and books, a few of which were too generalized for my purposes. I was surprised because Sesshu Toyo is considered the ‘father’ of Japanese Sumi-e, and perhaps the most famous painter in Japanese history. When I had decided upon my topic, spiritual exposition in Sesshu’s paintings, I made an appointment with Jamie Hazlitt, the Art History reference librarian. Over the course of a few hours we tracked down every English-language Sesshu source and a lot of other pertinent information about Zen Sumi-e painters of Muromachi period Japan. I had some experience with interlibrary loans in high school, but had never realized just how many Link+ books were at my disposal at LMU. I had also never used the OneSearch to quickly search all of the databases. The OneSearch is now an invaluable tool in many of my research projects, and I often request Link+ books as well.

I found success by scouring footnotes for leads and by using very specific search terms. Fortunately the name ‘Sesshu’ is rather uncommon. Less specific search terms, such as “water AND Japanese art” or “Japanese Landscape Painting,” were far less successful, though sometimes necessary when searching for more general sources. In evaluating the accuracy or reliability of my Sesshu sources, I tried to compare the information from my basic ‘context’ sources—Cheng, Suzuki, Watts, et al.—to the methods and assumptions of those speaking specifically about Sesshu.

The various authors often took profoundly different approaches to their topic. Studies bridging such a profound cultural gap often become very subjective, and I found that interpreting the intentions of a centuries-dead painter from a completely alien culture was perilous indeed. My greatest challenge was negotiating a working grasp of the cultural context and applying it appropriately. In fact, in many instances, I found I had to directly analyze the artwork itself, inferring what I could from my broader sources about the tradition of zen painting and teaching. I wanted my paper to be pertinent and significant without overstepping my limited knowledge of the field. The project may have been overly ambitious, but it forced me to grow as a scholar.

Ultimately I learned that starting early is essential to any sizeable research project. It was crucial that I make small steps forward every week of the semester because it allowed my ideas to germinate until they were mature enough to be expressed. My paper required the exploration of new and complex concepts that cannot be ingested hastily. I
also found that writing throughout every step of my researched helped me develop my ideas and cement my understanding of my topic. Regular and continuous research and writing made a seemingly insurmountable task manageable. This knowledge already proves itself invaluable as I lay the groundwork for my senior thesis, which I will focus upon a topic in Japanese art. As it turns out, my Sesshu Toyo paper led me to the realization that I could devote my entire academic career to Japanese art. I plan to spend next year in Japan pursuing my new passion and the greatest research adventure of my undergraduate career.