Art of China
A Resource for Classroom Teachers

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Introduction

The Philadelphia Museum of Art is home to one of the oldest collections of Chinese art among public institutions in the United States. The founding of the museum (as the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art) coincided with the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, where millions of Americans were introduced to—and captivated by—the material culture of China. Twenty objects purchased by the museum from the Centennial Exhibition formed the core of a collection that today numbers over seven thousand objects. The collection includes sculpture, paintings, textiles, architecture, and decorative arts spanning more than six millennia of Chinese history.

This teaching resource highlights fifteen works of art that reflect the diversity of the museum’s collection and exemplify five important historical themes: religious beliefs, belief in the afterlife, exchange between China and the West, reverence for the natural world, and auspiciousness. These themes and the objects that represent them do not exist in isolation but are deeply interwoven in the fabric of Chinese history and culture.

We hope that you and your students enjoy exploring these works of art and making meaningful connections, both among them and to other things you learn. We also invite you and your students to the museum to see firsthand the artworks featured in this resource along with many more.

How to Use This Resource

This booklet provides an introduction, background information about selected artworks, and suggested curriculum connections to classroom teachers. The digital presentation included on the enclosed USB card is designed as a teaching tool. The presentation includes additional images and text that will help you engage your students in looking closely at and responding to the selected artworks. All materials are also available for download at philamuseum.org/teacherresources.

Acknowledgments

Art of China: A Resource for Classroom Teachers was developed by the Division of Education at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. We are grateful to our colleagues who contributed their expertise, insight, and support to the creation of this teaching resource, especially Hiromi Kinoshita, the Hannah L. and J. Wellis Henderson Associate Curator of Chinese Art, and the Editorial and Graphic Design team. Finally, we thank the Philadelphia-area educators who provided us with essential guidance and feedback: Daniel Lai, Erica Mandell, Graham Martin, Natalie Miller, and Eileen Smythe.

The reinstallation of the museum’s galleries of Chinese Art was made possible by the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation Hannah L. Henderson, Marguerite Lenfest, Maxine de S. Lewis, June and Simon K.C. Li, Joan F. Thalheimer, Andrea Baldeck, M.D., Sueyun and Gene Locks, Peter A. Benoliel and Willo Carey, Barbara B. and Theodore R. Aronson, The Women’s Committee of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Cynthia L. Johnson, Frank S. Bayley, Suzanne F. Boda and George W. Grindahl, Dr. Alan M. and Deena Gu Laties, Peggy Wachs, two anonymous donors, and other generous donors. (Credits as of December 18, 2018)
The Silk Road

China's cultural, religious, and political history cannot be separated from what is known today as the Silk Road. The Silk Road is a term used to describe a network of some 5,000 miles of trade routes. For more than 1,500 years, this network facilitated the movement of people, goods, cultural practices, and artistic styles throughout the empires of Asia and Europe. Trade between China and the West officially opened under Han dynasty rule in 130 BCE, but the roads and networks themselves were established hundreds of years earlier. They brought everything from raw materials to religious beliefs into China, while the most admired products of Chinese workshops flowed out, paving the way for centuries of cultural exchange.

The Three Teachings

China's social, cultural, and political history have been profoundly shaped by the teachings of three main belief systems: Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Known as The Three Teachings, the beliefs associated with each religion or philosophy are recognized as distinct but complementary.

Daoism

The Chinese word dao (DOW) can be translated as “the way,” as in a way of life or thinking. Daoism (DOW-ism) is an ancient Chinese belief system that emphasizes the way of the natural world. Daoist practices seek harmony between humans and the natural order and cycles of the universe.

Confucianism

Confucianism is a system of social norms and ethics that has influenced Chinese familial, cultural, and political institutions for more than 2,000 years. The philosopher Confucius (551–479 BCE) is credited with codifying ancient Chinese customs into rules governing correct social behavior and relationships. According to Confucius, the most important human relationships were between ruler and subject, parent and child, older and younger sibling, husband and wife, and friends. Social order and harmony came from individuals accepting and conforming to their proper role.

Buddhism

Buddhism is a system of beliefs and religious practices developed around the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha (about 563–about 483 BCE). He was born a prince in modern-day Nepal but left his kingdom to seek enlightenment into the causes and relief of human suffering. Buddhist monks from India introduced Buddhism to China via the Silk Road trade routes. Eventually, Buddhist practices were assimilated into ancient Chinese traditions. The Buddha's teachings emphasize compassion for all living things and non-attachment to the material world. The end of suffering is achieved through meditation and following the Noble Eight-Fold Path: right views, right intentions, right speech, right actions, right livelihood, right efforts, right mindfulness, and right concentration.
Connections to Educational Standards

Common Core State Standards

English Language Arts/Literacy Standards College and Career Readiness
Anchor Standard for Reading
Standard 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing
Standard 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
Standard 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
Standard 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

English Language Arts Standards History/Social Studies
Standard 1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
Standard 2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source, provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
Standard 2: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

National Visual Arts Standards

Responding: Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning
Anchor Standard: Perceive and analyze artistic work.
Anchor Standard: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
Anchor Standard: Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

Connecting: Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context
Anchor Standard: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.
Anchor Standard: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

National Council for the Social Studies

C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards
Standard D2 Geo.7: Explain why and how people, goods, and ideas move from place to place.
Standard D2 Geo.11: Explain how the consumption of products connects people to distant places.
Standard D2 His.2: Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.
Standard D2 His.4: Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.
Standard D2 His.10: Compare information provided by different historical sources about the past.
For more than 2,000 years, Chinese society and culture have been influenced by three main systems of belief. At some points in time, Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism have coexisted in harmony rather than competed. The teachings of each belief system are understood to be compatible and integral to ethical and humane conduct.

Elementary/Language Arts, Social Studies
Many religions consider specific animals to be sacred, like white cranes in Daoism. Find other examples of animals that are sacred or symbolic to a religion. What special qualities are they believed to have? What do they symbolize? Draw a picture and write about the animal.

Middle and High School/Language Arts, Social Studies
Research and write about other historical examples of places and times when different religious beliefs have blended harmoniously. For instance, ancient Romans incorporated the worship of deities from Greece, Egypt, and the Near East into their pantheon. In present-day Mexico, the Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebration is a mixture of indigenous and Christian traditions.
Pillow with Confucian Scholar, Buddhist Monk, and Daoist Priest

The scene on this ceramic headrest depicts three men gathered around a Chinese chess board. A Confucian scholar sits on the left, his hand raised thoughtfully to his chin. On the right, a Daoist priest gestures, preparing to make his next move. And in the center, a Buddhist monk, distinguished by his shaved head, serenely observes the action.

According to Chinese tradition, Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism were The Three Teachings, or sanjiao (sahn-JEEOW). One ancient scholar referred to these distinct but complementary belief systems as the Sun, the Moon, and the Five Planets. Each belief system was separate but equally essential to Chinese social and cultural practices. Like the celestial bodies, they were also considered to be integral elements of the natural world, working together in reciprocal harmony.

The Three Teachings were a popular theme in Chinese painting and tomb decoration from the 900s to the 1200s. This design, outlined in a dark glaze, adorns a pillow made for the occupant of a tomb. It was common for both the living and the dead to use pillows made from hard materials like ceramic, jade, and stone.

What explains the popularity of hard pillows in imperial China? Ceramic, jade, and stone were believed to have cooling properties and other health benefits. The support of a rigid headrest may also have encouraged good posture while sleeping, or even preserved women’s complex hairstyles. Perhaps most importantly, the scenes and symbols decorating Chinese pillows were thought to have the power to influence dreams and promote ethical thought and behavior.

Let’s Look
Describe the scene painted on this ceramic pillow. Who are the characters? What are they doing?
What material do you think the pillow is made of? How do you imagine it would feel to sleep on a material like this?
What do you think the game of chess might symbolize in this scene? What does it suggest about the characters who are playing?
The scenes and symbols decorating ceramic pillows were thought to have power over dreams. What might you dream of if you slept on this pillow?

1976 | Made in China
Stoneware with underglaze slip decoration (Cizhou ware)
3 7/8 × 10 15/16 × 7 11/16 inches (9.8 × 27.8 × 19.5 cm)
Gift of Mrs. Carroll S. Tyson, 1957-26-1

RELIGION & BELIEFS 13
Guanyin Seated in Royal Ease

This wooden sculpture depicts Guanyin (KWAN-in), one of the most popular and widely worshipped Buddhist deities in China. She can be identified by the small Buddha of the Western Paradise seated within her headdress. Guanyin is a bodhisattva (bo-dee-SAHT-vah), an enlightened being who delays her own entry into paradise to help relieve the suffering of humans. She is the embodiment of compassion and can take many different forms depending on the needs of the devotees, geographical area, and historical period.

In this incarnation, she is Water-Moon Guanyin, or Guanyin of the Southern Seas. The name comes from a Buddhist text, or sutra, that describes Guanyin seated on a rocky cliff overlooking the sea. She sees the moon reflected in the water and meditates on the emptiness of the reflection, a metaphor for the impermanence of the material world. In a Buddhist temple, a central sculpture of the Buddha is commonly flanked by two bodhisattvas such as this one.

Guanyin’s serene and compassionate nature is expressed in this sculpture. She sits comfortably in a posture of “royal ease.” One leg hangs down while the other is drawn up, supporting her elegantly outstretched right arm. Her relaxed posture is emphasized by the light, flowing garment draped around her waist and legs. A scarf and chunky necklace encircle her slim shoulders. Guanyin’s round face reminds us of the full moon. Her downcast eyes and gentle smile express a sense of calm. Look closely at the drapery around the figure’s left leg and you will see traces of color, indicating that this Guanyin was once vibrantly painted. The hole in her forehead might have held a stone or precious gem symbolizing the light that emanates from her and illuminates the world.

Avalokiteshvara, early 700s, made in Thailand (Purchased with the W. P. Wilstach Fund, W1965-1-1)

Let’s Look

Describe the pose, facial features, and expression of this figure. What three words would you use to describe it?

How did the artist create a realistic feeling of life and movement in this wooden sculpture?

Do you think the figure in this sculpture is human or divine? Look closely at the figure’s face and hair. What clues are there that this might be a god?

What do you think the hole in the sculpture’s forehead originally held? What might it symbolize?

The sculpture was originally painted in bright colors and gold leaf. Imagine what it would look like painted and gilded. How does your impression change?

Compare and Connect

In other parts of Asia, the bodhisattva of compassion is known as Avalokiteshvara (ah-vah-lo-kih-TESH-va-rah). Compare the sculpture of Guanyin to this representation of Avalokiteshvara from Thailand.

Find more detailed images and looking prompts in the digital presentation.

1287–1368 | Made in China
Yellowwood with traces of painted and gilded decoration
49 x 32 x 20 inches (124.5 x 81.3 x 50.8 cm)
Gift of Charles H. Ludington from the George Crofts Collection, 1925-53-11

RELIGION & BELIEFS 15
Daoist Priest’s Robe

This elaborately decorated robe would have been worn by a Daoist priest presiding over religious ceremonies. The symmetrical designs embroidered on a fiery orange background are like a cosmic map representing the realm of the gods. Wearing this garment symbolized the priest’s powerful role in communicating with the divine.

A tower representing the celestial home of the gods occupies the central circle on the robe’s back. Above it, three half-circles resting on clouds represent the most important constellations, or lunar houses, in traditional Chinese cosmology. These, together with the surrounding multicolored dots, symbolize the constellations where the moon rests on its monthly journey around the earth. Symbols of the sun and the moon at the top left and right complete the central design. Below the celestial realm, along the robe’s hem, dragons dive through the waves of the universal ocean, a metaphor for the vast and timeless dao (see page 7) that surrounds and flows through everyone and everything. Other symbols, such as cranes, phoenixes, butterflies, and attributes of Daoist immortals convey wishes for harmony and longevity.

Trigrams, the sets of three lines decorating the sleeve borders of the robe, are taken from the ancient I Ching, or Book of Changes. The trigrams represent different combinations of yin and yang, the dynamic of opposites, or dualities, that describes all relationships in the natural world. These designs on the priest’s robe symbolize the unity of heaven and earth, the sun and the moon, male and female, and other dualities found in nature.

A Deeper Dive

Daoist immortals were mythological beings thought to have achieved immortality through their devout practices. Each immortal is associated with an object, or attribute, that symbolizes their supernatural powers. Look for all the attributes of the immortals in the design of this priest’s robe.

Let’s Look

The designs on this priest’s robe are very complex. Choose one section to look at closely. Describe that section in as much detail as you can: What colors do you see? What shapes do you see? What patterns do you see? How many different animals can you find? Why do you think these animals are associated with worshipping the gods and the heavens? What other motifs from nature do you see? Can you find all the symbols of the Daoist immortals? Use the diagram in the digital presentation to identify them. What do you think this robe communicates about the person who wears it?

About 1850–1900 | Made in China
Silk satin embroidered with floss silk in satin and chain stitch, with couched silk cord and gold leaf on paper-wrapped thread, gold leaf on paper appliqué
Center Back Length: 53 inches (134.6 cm)
Purchased with the George W.B. Taylor Fund, 1967-144-1

RELIGION & BELIEFS 17

Find more detailed images and looking prompts in the digital presentation.
Belief in the Afterlife

Early Chinese burial customs grew out of a deep sense of reverence for ancestors and a belief in the afterlife. Underground tombs were eternal homes for the souls of the deceased. Living relatives honored the dead by filling their burial chambers with figures representing the necessities and comforts of earthly life. These objects were believed to provide protection, nourishment, and entertainment for the deceased in an ideal afterlife. Because tomb figures reflect the world of the living, they are important clues about life in ancient China.

Curriculum Connections

Elementary and Middle School/ Language Arts

Heavenly Horses were legendary for their strength, speed, and beauty. They were widely celebrated in art and literature of the Han dynasty. Write and illustrate your own story about an animal with supernatural qualities. What characteristics make this animal exceptional? Where does it live? How did you discover it?

Middle and High School/Art

Create 3D figures representing the parts of your daily life that you would want to enjoy forever in an ideal afterlife. What is important to you? What do you imagine you might need or want?

Create an animal figure out of clay. How can you make the figure look and feel lifelike? Experiment with different ways of animating the clay figure.

Middle and High School/ Social Studies

Research other cultures that expressed a belief in the afterlife through their burial customs. Compare and contrast works of art and objects associated with the afterlife.
Horses in a tomb signified the high status of the tomb’s occupant and were meant to provide transportation into the afterlife. This example from a Han dynasty tomb seems to charge forward with both grace and intensity. Its head is held high, ears pricked and mouth open, suggesting alertness and vigilance. The large figure’s expressive features and muscular legs are expertly modeled, investing the earthenware sculpture with life and movement. Its short, raised tail may indicate that it was part of a team of horses pulling a chariot that carried the deceased.

During the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), horse-riding nomads from the central Asian steppe constantly raided and harassed China’s northern borders. Their superior horsemanship gave them an advantage over the Chinese, who at that time only used horses to pull chariots. The Han emperor Wudi (141–87 BCE) heard tales of western tribesmen who possessed the fastest, strongest, and most beautiful horses in the world. They were believed to be descended from mythical Heavenly Horses. According to one ancient account, they moved like snakes, looked like dragons, and sweat blood when they galloped.

Wudi became obsessed with forming his own cavalry of these extraordinary animals. He sent envoys on diplomatic and military missions to the West, to make allies among the horse-riding tribes and return with Heavenly Horses. The resulting trade of Chinese silk for horses created a foundation for the Silk Road trade routes. Heavenly Horses became a ubiquitous status symbol for the Han elite, both in life and in death.

The descendants of Heavenly Horses are still bred in China and western Asia today. Scientists have confirmed that at least one part of their legend is true. Tiny parasites living under the horses’ skin cause them to bleed, creating the illusion of sweating blood when they run.

Let’s Look

Describe the features of this horse sculpture. What adjectives would you use to describe it?

Although it is a sculpture, the horse seems to be in motion. How would you describe the way the horse is moving?

What did the sculptor do to give the horse a realistic sense of movement?

Heavenly Horses were said to move like snakes. Describe or draw the kind of line a snake makes when it moves. Can you trace a line like this in the horse’s body?
Musicians on Horseback

This animated group of musicians on horseback belonged to the tomb of a Tang dynasty aristocrat. Each of the musicians is dressed similarly, in a long-sleeved tunic, boots, and a fengmao (fung-MAOW) cap that protects the rider’s ears and back of the neck from the wind. The earthenware figures seem to bend and move with the beat as they play their instruments. Some instruments, like a horizontal flute, a vertical flute, and pan pipes, remain intact with their figures. Others are missing, but the distinctive poses of the musicians suggest what they might have played. The figure who holds his right arm high originally had a long horn, while the figure with raised, clenched fists would have held a type of percussion instrument. Traces of red pigment indicate that the lively characters would also have been brightly painted.

The Tang dynasty (618–907) was a time of great economic prosperity and cultural vitality in China. Tang rulers secured peace and safety on the vast overland trade routes connecting China to the West. The free movement of people and ideas created a fascination with foreign culture, including music and dance, among the Tang elite.

Similar groups of mounted musicians have been found in the tombs of wealthy officials. The figures were intended to provide the deceased with the kind of entertainment they would have enjoyed in life. Perhaps these were made for the tomb of a wealthy merchant. The caravans that traversed the Silk Road were known for their circus-like atmosphere, transporting exotic animals and performers to aristocratic clients. Or perhaps this group belonged to the tomb of a military official. Musicians served on horseback to signal battle orders. Mounted musicians may also have accompanied funeral processions.

Let’s Look

Describe these figures on horseback. What do you think they are doing? How can you tell?

Two of the musicians are missing their instruments. Look closely at their arms and hands. What kind of instruments do you think they used to play?

These musicians were found in a tomb in ancient China. Why do you think someone would be buried with objects like this?

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The movement of people and products along the Silk Road relied on camels. Known as “ships of the desert,” they were ideally suited for traveling long distances under harsh conditions. Standing seven feet tall at the hump, camels can carry great weight, walk on uneven terrain with their large feet, and store fat in their humps, converting it to energy or water on long journeys.

The large size and fine modeling of this figure suggest that it was made for the tomb of a high-ranking member of the Tang nobility. The ferocious animal arches its neck back and opens its mouth as if to bray. A water flask, a rack of dried meat, and a saddlebag with a fanged guardian face are attached to the camel’s saddle. The smooth, shiny glaze decorating the camel’s body and legs contrasts with the realistically textured hair of its neck, head, and humps. This distinctive mix of green, amber, and cream is known as sancai (sanzhai), or three-color, glaze. Sancai, a lead-based glaze, seems to have been reserved solely for burial and ritual objects. The glaze is applied on this camel in a characteristically loose way, allowing the colors to drip, pool, and flow into each other.

A small number of kilns in northern China produced large numbers of earthenware figures such as this one. It was constructed in two halves, using separate molds for the head, body, and legs. The separate pieces were then joined together before the figure was glazed and fired. Details added by hand and applied in colored glaze gave each of the similarly modeled figures a distinctive, unique look.

Why would a nobleman be buried with a sculpture of a beast of burden? Bactrian camels, introduced to China from central Asia via the Silk Road, symbolized the wealth and status required for access to exotic, expensive foreign goods.

**Compare and Connect**

This guardian warrior is another type of figure that has been found in the tombs of wealthy people. Compare the guardian warrior to the figure of a camel.

**Let’s Look**

What textures and colors do you see in this sculpture?

Describe the pose and expression of the camel. How would you describe its behavior? How has the artist made it look lifelike?

Look closely at the camel’s saddle. What is it carrying?

What clues does this camel give you about life in ancient China?

What kind of animal would you want to take with you to the afterlife, and why?
For more than 2,000 years, trade between China and the West has been a driving force of cultural exchange. Overland and maritime trade routes facilitated the movement of people, goods, knowledge, and beliefs throughout China, central Asia, Europe, and beyond. Exchange with the West brought new religious ideas, cultural practices, exotic materials, and technological innovations to China. The popularity of goods unique to China, like porcelain, spread the country’s cultural influence throughout the Western world.

**Adaptable for all grades/Art**

Try making your own dish in the style of blue underglaze porcelain. Draw and color a design on a white paper plate or circle of white construction paper. How can you create a design that utilizes the whole space of the dish? How can you create contrast between the blue design and the white background?

**Middle and High School/Social Studies**

The Silk Road connected China to the West for thousands of years. Find out more about the history of the Silk Road. Where did the network of trading routes go? What kinds of goods were traded across the network? How did people and goods move along the Silk Road?

**Middle and High School/Science**

The technique for making porcelain was a closely guarded secret for hundreds of years after its discovery. What makes porcelain so unique and special? Learn more about the process Chinese artisans used to create porcelain.
Architectural Tile from Xiudingsi Pagoda

This heavy ceramic tile is just one of thousands made to decorate the exterior of a pagoda, a type of Buddhist temple. Buddhist priests and their teachings traveled the Silk Road to China, along with other foreign ideas and influences. The dancer adorning this tile embodies the energy of central Asian music and dance styles that were greatly admired by the Tang dynasty (618–907) aristocracy.

The dancer is modeled in high relief, standing out from a dynamic background filled with curving lines. He seems to be captured mid-twirl, his lower body and crossed legs rotating to the left while his upper body and arms twist in the opposite direction. His loose garments are indicated by flowing lines, rippling out from his arms and legs. Even the dancer’s boots suggest sinuous movement.

It is not only the dancer’s clothes and boots that identify him as foreign. His large eyes, prominent nose, rounded cheeks, and full beard are characteristic of Tang dynasty depictions of Westeners. The designs on other architectural tiles from the same pagoda include different foreign dancers and exotic animals, like elephants and lions. The decoration of the pagoda reflects the cosmopolitan interests and influences of Tang society.

Let’s Look

Look closely at the figure on this tile.
Describe his appearance in as much detail as you can.
What is the figure on this tile doing? How can you tell?
What kinds of lines stand out in this design? Describe where you see them.
How did the artist use lines to create a sense of movement and energy?
Try to recreate the dancer’s movement with your own body. How does it feel?
Dish with Dragon

A serpentine dragon writhes on the surface of this large white plate. The dragon has bulging eyes, an open mouth, wavy whiskers, and a mane. The creature’s enormous claws reach out powerfully in different directions. Though the dragon looks fierce, it is a benevolent and auspicious creature in Chinese myth.

The plate is made of porcelain, a high-fired ceramic derived from a mixture of clay stone and a unique clay called kaolin, which occurs naturally in China. The deep blue color of the dragon comes from a pigment called cobalt. Although the best cobalt was brought to China from Persia (present-day Iran) via the Silk Road, it was mined locally as well. To make blue-and-white wares like this dragon dish, Chinese potters painted designs in cobalt directly onto a white porcelain base. The entire piece was then covered in an opaque glaze that turned transparent after firing, revealing the blue design.

This plate was probably made in Jingdezhen (jing-duh-jen), the site of imperial porcelain workshops and the center of Chinese ceramics for the past thousand years. Porcelains with more colorful decoration were preferred by Chinese consumers, but this example was most likely made for export to Europe. Blue-and-white wares were sturdier than other styles of porcelain and better suited for surviving shipment overseas.

The technique for making blue-and-white porcelain developed from unique local circumstances and resources in China. When the first blue-and-white porcelain arrived in Holland around 1600, it became so popular that European potters tried to imitate it. The influence of the underglaze blue style is seen as far abroad as the Spanish colonies in Mexico. Europeans started calling porcelain “china,” as we do today, after its place of origin.

Let’s Look

What words would you use to describe the dragon on this dish? Why?
Can you find parts of nine different animals in the dragon? Look for the body of a snake, the head of a camel, the ears of a cow, the mane of a horse, the antlers of a deer, the belly of a clam, the scales of a fish, the paws of a tiger, and the claws of an eagle.

What lines did the artist repeat to make the dragon’s long body fit inside the round shape of the plate? What feeling does this give the dragon?

Compare and Connect

This more colorful plate was made in China for a Chinese audience. How does its decorative style compare to the designs on the dragon dish?

Find more detailed images and looking prompts in the digital presentation.
Enamel Saucer

During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Christian missionaries from Western Europe traveled to the imperial court at Beijing with the goal of spreading Christianity to China. They brought enamels—objects decorated with intensely colored, glassy pigments—as gifts. The Kangxi emperor (ruled 1662–1722) was fascinated by this new material and decorative technique. He established workshops, led by missionaries with knowledge of the arts and sciences, to produce enameled objects in China.

The colorful designs seen on the interior of this copper saucer reflect the influence on Chinese artists of European techniques, subject matter, and style. An idyllic scene in the center of the saucer is framed by a profusion of flowers in soft pinks and blues. Two women with European features are depicted against a western architectural setting. The billowing fabric of the women’s clothing and its orange, blue, and rose hues are also reminiscent of European artwork. The rolling hills and trees in the background recede into the distance with a realistic sense of scale and perspective. This technique, as well as the use of light and shadow, is not characteristic of Chinese painting, and was developed through contact with European artisans in the imperial workshops.

The scene depicted in the center of the saucer also has European origins. One woman kneels and offers a wreath to the other woman, who rides in a chariot drawn by two lions. The women are characters from Roman mythology, the goddesses Cybele and Proserpina. Lions are sacred to Cybele, the great mother of the gods. She is also associated with forests, mountains, and nature, as the landscape in the background suggests. Proserpina, the goddess of spring, is identifiable by the sheaves of wheat set beside her. Perhaps the Chinese artisan who designed this saucer was inspired by images from western porcelains or prints.

Let’s Look

Describe the design of this saucer.
What do you see in the center?
What kind of decoration frames the center scene?
What colors do you see that tie together the border and center decoration of the saucer? Describe where you see them.
What is the setting of this scene?
Who are the characters? Describe the action that is taking place.

The characters depicted on this Chinese object are from Roman mythology. Their clothing and the setting are European. How can this object help you make inferences about contact and exchange between China and the West?
Looking Inward: Nature & Self-Cultivation

In traditional Chinese culture, painting, writing poetry, and other artistic activities were not only forms of self-expression, they were also a means of cultivating personal qualities that would bring the human spirit into harmony with the natural world. Influenced by the ideals of Daoism and Confucianism, the scholarly class, called literati, favored a refined and subtle aesthetic. They engaged in artistic pursuits celebrating the simplicity and elegance of nature and venerating models of scholarly virtue from the past.

Curriculum Connections

Adaptable for all grades/Language Arts
Chinese scholars sometimes painted and wrote together on one scroll, creating a collaborative artwork. Try collaborating with friends on a scroll of poems and images. Choose a theme to connect your contributions.

Adaptable for all grades/Art
Explore the style of traditional Chinese ink painting. Choose a natural subject like a flower, leaf, or rock. Experiment with dry and wet brushes, heavier and lighter brushstrokes. Try creating free-form shapes by letting your ink splash and spread on the paper. Or experiment with making marks using different parts of your brush.

Middle and High School/Language Arts and Art
Xu Wei is often compared to the Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh. Find more paintings by Xu Wei and learn more about Vincent van Gogh’s artwork. Write a poem to go with a painting by Xu or van Gogh. Can you capture the theme or the mood of the painting in writing?

Middle and High School/Science
Find out more about jade. Where does jade come from? How is it obtained? How do artists work with this material? What makes jade so valuable?
Flower-Form Cup

The design of this cup mimics a six-petal flower blossom. It is carved out of nephrite jade, a hard mineral native to China. Its form is understated but elegant, with perfectly proportioned curves and ridges, celebrating the natural shape of a flower blossom. The translucent, greenish-white color of the jade is subtly mottled but free of any other embellishment. The artist who created this cup skillfully emphasized the simplicity and purity of natural forms, materials, and textures.

The jade cup epitomizes the Chinese reverence for the natural world cultivated by the educated elite of the Song dynasty (960–1279). Literati, as gentleman scholars were known, also followed the doctrines of Confucianism in pursuing the “right” way toward an idealized society. Since Confucius (551–479 BCE) had praised the physical properties of jade and likened them to gentlemanly virtues, it was an especially revered material.

Confucius described many ways in which jade was similar to the character of a virtuous gentleman. The rough stone can be polished to a soft sheen that is like a gentleman’s benevolence. Jade is hard and strong, but with a fine texture, like intelligence. Jade is translucent, allowing one to see its flaws without detracting from its beauty. This is like the honesty and sincerity of a gentleman. A carved piece of jade has angles and edges, but they are not sharp and cannot hurt. This quality is like a gentleman’s sense of justice. Even the way in which a jade pendant hangs down suggested to Confucius the important virtue of humility.

Let’s Look

Look closely. What colors do you see? What do the colors remind you of? Describe the shape of the cup. What does it remind you of? Imagine that you could touch this object. How do you think it would feel? What three adjectives would you use to describe this cup? What do you think an object like this says about the person who owns it? How do you think this object was made?
Sixteen Flowers

Painting and poetry are complementary forms of self-expression in Chinese culture. Both art forms were traditionally practiced by scholars as a way of cultivating desirable personal qualities and outwardly manifesting one’s interior thoughts and character.

Xu Wei (SHUUE-way; 1521–1593), the artist and author of this scroll, is remarkable not only for his exceptional talent, but also for his personal struggles. He was a child prodigy who began writing prose at the age of nine. Despite his intelligence, he failed eight times to pass the civil service examinations required to rise through the ranks of government bureaucracy. Xu eventually found work as a general’s aide and went to war against Japanese pirates. Xu’s experience of war and its aftermath took a toll on his mental health. He committed acts of violence for which he was imprisoned. After serving a seven-year jail term, Xu spent the remainder of his life painting and writing in solitude.

Today, Xu is considered the founder of an expressive, gestural approach to painting called xieyi (HSIEH-yee), or “writing the feelings.” This style is characterized by spontaneous, loose brush strokes and wet splashes of ink that create a free-form, abstract effect. On this eleven-foot-long scroll, Xu depicts a profusion of flowers of all four seasons gathered around a rock formation. Spring is represented by the peony and hydrangea; summer by the daylily, pomegranate flower, lotus flower, and plantain lily; autumn by the chrysanthemum, gumbo, and hibiscus; and winter by the plum blossom, narcissus, and camellia. Bamboo and a banana tree, which are not associated with a specific season, rise tall along the left side of the scroll. Two additional types of flower are unidentified.

Flowers were a favorite subject of scholar-artists for their symbolic association with the season in which they bloom. They also embodied auspicious qualities like purity, longevity, and wealth. In the poem that accompanies his painting, Xu writes that flowers of “twelve months are blooming on the surface of the paper” in a moment of fleeting perfection. His composition suggests both the beauty and the sadness of natural cycles of life and death.

Orchids and Rocks, 1606, by Chen Dao, Cao Xi, and Zhou Shichen (Purchased with the J. Stogdell Stokes Fund, 1968-9-1)

Let’s Look

Describe the flowers painted on this scroll. How many different kinds do you see? How can you tell them apart? Compare and contrast two different flowers.

Where do you see light brushstrokes? Where do you see dark brushstrokes?

Where do you see tall, thin plants? Where do you see short, broad plants?

What kinds of lines and shapes are repeated? How do you think the artist used a brush and ink to create them?

What mood or emotion do you think this painting expresses, and why?

This painting and poem portray sixteen different flowers of all four seasons blooming at the same time. Imagine a place where this might happen. What is that place like? What does it feel like to be there?

Compare and Connect

Orchids and Rocks is a painted scroll created by a group of literati painters and poets working together. Compare Orchids and Rocks to Sixteen Flowers.

Find more detailed images and looking prompts in the digital presentation.
The decorative motifs used in Chinese art were often carefully selected for their symbolic meaning. Certain plants and animals convey auspicious, or favorable, wishes because of associations with their intrinsic qualities. Others are auspicious through their association with characters in ancient myths. In some cases, symbolic meaning is derived through word play or the use of homophones. At the imperial court, Confucian ideals of order and harmony were present in every aspect of design. Materials, colors, and decorative motifs symbolized status and helped maintain a strict hierarchy.

Ordering the Universe: Auspiciousness & the Imperial Court

Curriculum Connections

Elementary and Middle School/Language Arts
Dragons, or creatures like dragons, are common in myth and legend around the world. So are stories about immortal beings, like the Queen Mother of the West. Read stories from China and from other cultures about dragons or immortals. Compare and contrast the ways they are portrayed. Write your own story about a dragon or an immortal being. Why do you think these characters are so common in myths from around the world?

Middle and High School/Language Arts
Immortality is a common theme in fantasy and science fiction literature. Read a contemporary novel that deals with life, death, and the idea of immortality. Why do you think humans are drawn to this theme? What questions and problems does it raise?

Middle and High School/Art
Collaborate with your classmates to design a badge expressing your classroom or school identity. Include symbols from the natural world that represent your shared values or characteristics.

Middle and High School/Social Studies
Make a list of examples, from modern times and from history, of the use of clothing to identify a person’s status or place in society. Discuss the ways this custom can be both good and bad for individuals and society.
Reception Hall from the Palace of Duke Zhao (Zhaogongfu)

This magnificent room was once the main reception hall in a palatial compound belonging to a high-ranking official of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Reception halls were formal spaces where the ruling elite would greet important guests, celebrate family occasions, and perform religious ceremonies. In a room designed to impress, the most elaborate architectural element is the carved and painted wooden ceiling. Sixteen wooden columns support the ceiling, allowing it to rise nearly thirty feet above the stone floor and create a sense of grandeur.

The reception hall was built in Beijing around 1640, but the tradition of decorating roof beams with painted designs has been in practice for over 2,000 years in China. Like the architecture of this reception hall, the ceiling decoration is typically symmetrical, reflecting order and harmony. The decorative motifs convey auspicious messages that would have been read and understood by visitors to the residence.

Peony blossoms grace one of the huge tie beams in the center of the room. Peonies are symbols of spring, the season of renewal. They also express wishes for wealth and rank because of their association with Tang dynasty rulers, who favored the flower. The main tie beams are also decorated with chrysanthemums. The chrysanthemum, a hardy plant that blooms in autumn and has long-lasting flowers, conveys wishes for longevity. A black lacquer plaque hanging across from the main entrance to the room is decorated with five fu (foo) characters. The Chinese word fu means good fortune. When repeated five times, it conveys the blessings of wealth, long life, health, love of virtue, and a peaceful death.

Let’s Look

Describe the painted decoration in this room. What colors, shapes, and designs do you see?

What do you think was the purpose of this room? How was it used, and how can you tell? What can you infer about the room’s owner?

Symmetry was very important in the design of Chinese buildings. Can you find and describe examples of symmetry?

What animals, plants, colors, or symbols would you use to decorate your home, and why?

First half of 1600s | Made in China
Wood with painted decoration
18 feet 4 1/4 inches x 46 feet 4 1/4 inches x 35 feet 2 1/2 inches (548.6 x 1412.9 x 1073.2 cm)
Gift of Edward B. Robinette, 1929-163-1
Lobed Cup Stand

This silver dish was made to hold a small wine cup, but the designs incised on its surface have their own function. The images are auspicious, communicating good wishes to the user. The Chinese language is full of homophones, words that sound the same but have different meanings. Ming and Qing dynasty artists used this feature of the language to create visual puns, or rebuses, that could be read together as words or phrases.

On the right, a monkey clings to a tree trunk. It reaches up with a stick to poke at a hive, home to a large bee that hovers under its arm. Opposite the monkey, two scholars converse as one of them points up toward the sun. A magpie swoops down just above the scholars' heads. At the bottom of the design, a spotted deer emerges from the rocky hillside. In Chinese, the words for magpie (que), deer (lu), wasp or bee (feng), and monkey (hou) can be combined to create the phrase juelu fenghou (CHEUH-loo fung ho), or “may you receive high rank and salary.” The word for “pointing to the sun,” describing the action of the scholar, sounds like the word for “soon.” Together, the images convey the auspicious message, “may you soon rise in rank and wealth.”

A peach tree bearing enormous fruit occupies the top of the design, while a woody fungus grows from the ground below the monkey. The peaches are associated with the Daoist immortal, the Queen Mother of the West, whose magical trees were believed to bear fruit that granted immortality. The fungus, commonly called ruyi (ROO-yee), or “as you wish,” was also thought to have this magical property. These two motifs add a wish for longevity to the auspicious message conveyed by the cup stand’s intricate designs.

Early to mid 1600s | Made in China
Silver alloy with gilding
3 3/4 x 6 1/8 inches (9.6 x 15.6 cm)
Purchased with the John T. Morse Fund, 1969-260-1a

A Deeper Dive

The images on the cup stand form a rebus, a puzzle in which pictures stand in for words. Can you read the message these plants and animals are sending? Can you use pictures of animals, like a bee or a deer, to make your own rebus?

Find more detailed images and looking prompts in the digital presentation.

Let’s Look

Describe the shape of this object. What does it remind you of?
Describe everything you see in the scene decorating this cup stand. What do you think is going on?
Many of the animals and plants in this picture are symbols of good fortune. Can you think of animals or plants that symbolize, or stand for, something? For instance, many people believe that four-leaf clovers are signs of good luck.
Insignia Badge for an Imperial Noble or Military Officer

Confucian ideals were embedded in many aspects of imperial Chinese culture. Civil and military officials of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, as well as members of the nobility, wore rank badges like this one to signify their status. The watercolor painting to the right shows how prominently these badges were displayed on the front and back of official robes. Different categories of real and mythical creatures symbolized the position and status of nobles and bureaucrats.

This badge would have been worn by a military officer of the first rank or a member of the nobility of the ninth rank. The fantastic creature embroidered in the center of the badge is called a qilin (chee-lin). The qilin was one of four auspicious beasts, along with the phoenix, dragon, and tortoise, celebrated in ancient China. It has a scaly body, the hooves of a deer, and a dragon’s head. The power and strength of the qilin is evident, but it is a benevolent creature, believed to be a good omen brought about by wise rule. This colorful example is surrounded by clouds in the shape of the auspicious ruyi (ROO-yee) fungus, a symbol of longevity. Together, the designs on the badge suggest the long, benevolent leadership of its wearer.

Let’s Look
Describe what you see. What colors, shapes, and lines are repeated in this design?
What do you think the animal is doing, and how can you tell? Describe the movement of its body and its facial expression.
The animal on this rank badge is a mythical creature, called a qilin, made up of parts of other animals. Look closely and describe the different parts.
What can you infer from the design about the person who wore it?

1662–1722 | Made in China
Silk gauze embroidered with floss silk in satin stitch; couched gold leaf on paper-wrapped thread and peacock-feather-wrapped thread
14 3/4 x 13 3/4 inches (37.5 x 34.9 cm)
Purchased with the John T. Morris Fund from the Carl Schuster Collection, 1940-4-731

Compare and Connect
Compare the uniform of a Chinese government official to clothing you wear in your everyday life.
Find more detailed images and looking prompts in the digital presentation.

1662–1722 | Made in China
Silk gauze embroidered with floss silk in satin stitch; couched gold leaf on paper-wrapped thread and peacock-feather-wrapped thread
14 3/4 x 13 3/4 inches (37.5 x 34.9 cm)
Purchased with the John T. Morris Fund from the Carl Schuster Collection, 1940-4-731
Emperor’s Dragon Robe

The dragon symbolized Chinese imperial power from the founding of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) until the end of the empire in 1912. The first Han emperor claimed that his father was a dragon and had imparted extraordinary powers to him. But the significance of the dragon in Chinese culture has even more ancient roots. According to Daoist beliefs, the dragon is the king of the mythical beasts. He represents qi (chee), the essential life force of the universe. Dragons are also associated with the life-giving properties of water. Each spring, they are said to rise from their homes in rivers, lakes, and oceans to send storm clouds and rain down to earth, causing crops to grow.

This brightly patterned robe is decorated with nine golden dragons. Robes such as this one were worn only by the emperor during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). The motifs and colors in its design convey the supreme power of the ruler and his rightful position of authority.

The nine dragons are embroidered against a rich yellow background, a color that was strictly reserved for use by the imperial family. Each dragon chases a magical flaming pearl that represents wisdom. Nine, the highest single digit number, was associated with the emperor’s status. In Chinese the word “nine” (jeoh), sounds the same as the word for “long-lasting,” creating an auspicious wish for the emperor’s longevity. Even the number of claws on each dragon is symbolic. Only members of the imperial family were allowed to have clothing and other objects decorated with five-clawed dragons. At the bottom of the robe, a geometric mountain rises out of swirling waves. This symbolizes the emperor’s power, like that of a dragon, over life-giving clouds and rain.

A Deeper Dive
The designs on this imperial court robe contain many symbols of the emperor’s power and authority. Find more detailed images and looking prompts in the digital presentation.

Let’s Look
Describe the colors, lines, and patterns decorating this robe.

What kinds of lines make up the dragons’ bodies? What do they remind you of? Describe how they are moving.

In Chinese myth, dragons are believed to send rain down from the heavens to rivers, lakes, and oceans. Can you find places in the design of this robe that connect the dragons to water? Describe what you see.

Use your imagination. How do you think it would feel to wear this robe?

About 1840 | Made in China
Silk slit tapestry weave (kesi)
Center Back Length: 61 inches (154.9 cm)
Purchased with Museum funds, 1951-29-7