

LESSON PLAN

Connecting China and the Near East: Cross-cultural Influences in Art



Subjects: Visual Arts, Social Studies

Grade Level: Middle School/Junior High, High School

Duration: at least three 45-minute sessions including an extension activity

Dynasty: Ming (1368–1644)

Object Type: Ceramic, Vessel

Themes: Cultural Interactions; Technology and Production

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Canteen

Syria or Northern Iraq

Ayyubid period, mid-13th century

Brass, silver inlay

17 13/16 x 14 7/16 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1941.10



Canteen

China, Jiangxi province, Jingdezhen

Ming dynasty, early 15th century

Porcelain with cobalt pigment under colorless glaze

18 7/16 x 16 7/16 x 8 3/8 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1958.2

Objective

Students will be able to explain how two objects (canteens F1941.10 and F1958.2) show the movement of artistic styles and ideas between the Near East and China.

Essential Questions

- How do objects communicate cultural beliefs and values?
- Why and how is meaning attached to images and symbols?
- How do artistic ideas spread across cultures?

Background Information

The decoration of each canteen tells a story about what was important to the cultures they came from. The canteens also reveal the movement of ideas, products, and designs.

The elaborately designed metal canteen was made in Iraq or Syria in the middle of the thirteenth century and is the only known example of its kind. However, canteens could also be made out of leather and were commonly used for carrying liquids. Religious pilgrims also used them to hold holy water and oil. The canteen is decorated with Christian imagery, including Mary and baby Jesus in the center and scenes from the life of Christ in the surrounding panels. The Christian themes on the canteen signify the religious diversity of Syria and Iraq at this time.

During the reigns of the Ming dynasty emperors Yongle (reigned 1402–24) and Xuande (reigned 1425–35) in China, potters in the famous Chinese ceramic-producing town of Jingdezhen quickly absorbed artistic ideas from imported foreign goods. They experimented with shapes and decorations modeled after silver, gold, and brass vessels from the Near East. The Ming dynasty blue-and-white porcelain canteen, unusual in China in terms of its form and painted designs, was possibly made as an ornament for the Chinese palace or possibly traded or given as a diplomatic gift to someone in the Near East.

The hybrid decoration on the ceramic canteen combines waves (a common Chinese motif), Chinese floral scrolls that seem to reflect awareness of Islamic vine/vegetal designs, and an Islamic eight-pointed star in the center. It exemplifies the dynamic flow of ideas and objects between the Near East and China that invigorated the artistic traditions of both regions.

Vocabulary

canteen: a vessel or container to carry water or other liquids.

glaze: a thin, glass-like coating made of powdered rocks, minerals, ashes, and water. Applied correctly, it makes a clay body impervious after firing. The colors of glaze are determined by the mineral oxides used and various aspects of the firing conditions.

Islamic vegetal/vine design: an ornament depicting an interlaced pattern of floral or abstract motifs. It is an essential characteristic of Islamic art.

porcelain: a type of white ceramic ware fired at a high temperature. Porcelain originated and was perfected in China before being exported throughout the world.

Silk Road: an ancient network of land and sea trade routes established during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) that existed until the middle of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). These trade routes stretched from China across Asia to the Near East, the Mediterranean, and East Africa.

symbol: a shape or design that is recognizable and has a meaning associated with it.

Procedure

Day 1

1. Divide students into small groups of 2 to 3. Each group will work together to view and interact with one of the objects using the website.
2. Have students complete the Looking at Objects graphic organizer of your choice as they view the object online.
3. Jigsaw the groups to have students pair up with someone who investigated the opposite object and present what they have learned to each other.
4. Engage the whole class in a discussion about both objects using the Discussion Questions.

Day 2

1. Provide students with a Compare and Contrast graphic organizer.
2. Have students work in small groups to share their notes from the discussion as well as their observations.
3. Students should collaborate on completing their Compare and Contrast graphic organizer.
4. Ask students to individually highlight aspects in their organizer that connect to the Near East object and to Chinese ideals and traditions.

Discussion Questions

Describe

- Describe the overall shape of the object.
- What shapes, colors, and other details can you find?
- What do you notice about the images and decoration on the object?

Analyze

- What type of an object do you think it is? What might it have been used for? How do you know?
- What messages or ideas do you think this object represents?

Interpret

- Who do you think these objects belonged to? What about them makes you think that?
- Have you seen any objects that are used for similar purposes?
- How do aspects of these objects communicate the relationship between different cultures and religions?

Inquire

- What are some other objects that were influenced by another culture?

Extensions

Visual Arts

Ceramics or Drawing Project: Design a ceramic vessel for either use or display that commemorates an important milestone.

- Think about a time in your life that was significant or special to you.
- Brainstorm symbols that represent this moment or milestone.
- Utilize two to four symbols to plan a design for the outside of your ceramic vessel.
- Hand build or throw a pot on a wheel and execute your planned design.

English Language Arts

Suggested Writing Prompt

- What do these two objects tell us about how ideas spread across cultures? Discuss these objects along with one or two other examples of interaction between China and another culture.

Social Studies

- Research trade between the Near East and China along the Silk Road. Where were the travel routes and how long did it take to travel? What kinds of goods and ideas were exchanged?
- Write an essay that explains how Islamic art, architecture, and imagery influenced Chinese art. Use at least three artworks or buildings as examples.

Resources

Podcast: Gallery Highlights—Freer Canteen. <https://asia.si.edu/podcast/freer-canteen/>

View these objects online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1941.10/> and <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1958.2/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>



