

LESSON PLAN

Symbolism in Cloisonné



Subjects: Visual Arts, Social Studies

Grade Level: Middle School/Junior High, High School

Duration: One to three 45-minute sessions with an extension activity

Dynasty: Ming (1368–1644)

Object Type: Cloisonné, Vessel

Themes: Animals and Nature; Technology and Production; Cultural Interactions; Daily Life and Folkways

Contributed by: Anjali Wells, Montgomery County Public Schools, MD

Li (tripod)-shaped cloisonné incense burner

China

Cloisonné vessel: Ming dynasty, Hongzhi or Zhengde reign, 15th or early 16th century; Wooden lid and gold fittings: Qing dynasty, undated; Jade knob: Yuan dynasty, 14th century
Enamels, brass, wire (cloisonné); with later wooden cover, gilt metal handles, and jade knob.

H x Diam (assembled): 7 1/4 × 7 5/8 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1961.12a-b

Objective

Students will be able to interpret the significance of the *li* (tripod) incense burner, both in its design and function.

Essential Questions

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

Background Information

Cloisonné is a French term describing a technique for decorating metal vessels. Making cloisonné is very time-consuming and expensive. The craftsman would first outline a design in wires that are fused onto the metal body. Then he would fill the enclosures, or cloisons, with colored glass paste and fire the object. The glass paste, or enamel, shrinks when fired. Usually four or five rounds of adding enamel and refiring are required to finish an object.

Cloisonné is thought to have been introduced to China during the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) through Islamic influence. It was fully developed during the Ming dynasty in the early fifteenth century when the rich and vibrant color effects suited the imperial taste.

This *li* incense burner is one of the earliest examples of cloisonné in China. This decorated metal vessel was made to be used as an incense burner, holding sticks of solid incense or perfume to burn and add scent to a space. Incense burners were used in front of portraits of ancestors or religious paintings as a sign of reverence; the smoke symbolized a connection between the heavens and earth. Additionally, in Buddhist ceremonies incense is burned to purify the temple or monastery and to show respect for the deities. The burning of incense played an important role in Chinese culture since ancient times, but increased trade along the Silk Road brought foreign fragrances such as sandalwood, camphor, benzoin, and frankincense into the country.

On this object, colorful floral and leaf decorations lie on a beautiful turquoise background. The high quality of the lotus pattern along with the jade knob on the wooden cover suggests it was used in the imperial palace. The jade knob dates to the Yuan dynasty. Underneath the burner there are three symbols signifying luck: a peach for immortality, a pomegranate for numerous heirs, and an orange for good fortune. The incense burner is executed in the tripod *li* shape: a squat, rounded body supported on three short legs like those of a goat or cow. It is modeled on *li* ceramic and bronze vessels used in the Shang (ca. 1600–1050 BCE) and Zhou (ca. 1050–221 BCE) dynasties for offerings of food at ritual ceremonies and therefore recalls previous eras in Chinese history. This type of incense burner became very popular during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties.

Vocabulary

cloisonné: a decorative method that uses small metal wires to outline shapes/designs on a piece of metal. The shapes (cloisons) are then filled with enamel that, when fired in a kiln or heated to a very high temperature, turns into a glass-like medium and creates bright and opaque areas of color.

enamel: an opaque (dark) paste that is used to add color to hard surfaces like metal. It turns into a glass-like texture, which also provides protection, when heat is applied.

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.

incense: a material created from spices, flowers, and other natural elements that release scents (smells) when burned.

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). Trade routes stretched from China across Asia to the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and East Africa.

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

Procedure

1. Divide students into small groups. Provide students with the Looking at Objects graphic organizer.
2. Provide access to multiple images of the *li* Incense burner in order for students to complete the graphic organizer in their groups.
3. Then, provide students with the Chinese symbol guide and the object description for the *li* incense burner.
4. Using this information, have students engage in a small group discussion to answer the questions below.

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

- How are colors used in the design? What purpose do they have?
- What messages or ideas do you think this object represents?
- What type of an object do you think it is? What might it have been used for? How do you know?

Interpret

- Who do you think this object belonged to? What about it makes you think that?
- Have you seen any objects that are used for similar purposes? Does this object remind you of anything? What aspects and why?
- What does the medium and design of this object tell us about this time in Chinese history?

Extensions

Visual Arts

Draw a design for a cloisonné artwork that has personal meaning.

- Think about what is most important to you. Brainstorm a list of images and symbols that represent those things.
- Plan a design that features at least two to three of those images or symbols. You can use drawing paper, graph paper, or a digital design program to create either a 2-D or 3-D design.
- In order to mimic cloisonné, your design should have small repeated patterns all over, be made up of solid color shapes with no space between them, and each shape should have a thick dark-colored or metallic outline around it.

Personal object display/gallery display: Create a personal exhibition.

- After exploring what one can learn from objects by examining the *li* incense burner, consider what objects could represent the different parts of your life, such as family history, hobbies, interests, and accomplishments.
- Plan and prepare an exhibition of objects from your home that demonstrates aspects of your life.
- Create wall labels for each object and prepare a short talk about your collection.

Social Studies

Suggested writing/research prompts

- How does the *li* incense burner demonstrate the influence of Islamic culture on Chinese art?
- How did advances in technology in the Ming dynasty affect the production of this object?
- Students generate and research a question of their own in relation to the *li* incense burner.

Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1961.12a-b/>

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

