

LESSON PLAN

Technology and Tea Culture



Subjects: AP World History: Modern

Grade Level: High School

Duration: 90 minutes

Dynasty: Song (960–1279)

Object Type: Ceramic, Vessel

Themes: Technology and Production; Daily Life and Folkways

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Bowl with “oil spot” glaze

China

Northern Song or Southern Song dynasty, 12th century

Stoneware with iron glaze

3 7/16 x 7 9/16 in

Gift of Charles Lang Freer. Freer Gallery of Art, F1909.369

Objective

Students will be able to identify, explain, and analyze the technique behind producing the tea bowl with “oil spot” glaze and relate this work to the cultural and historical context of tea culture in the Song dynasty as well as the Song’s Commercial Revolution.

Essential Questions

- How were tea bowls manufactured during the Song dynasty?
- What is special about oil spot glaze?
- What does this object and its method of production reveal about tea culture in the Song dynasty?

Background Information

This bowl is larger than a typical tea bowl, and its exact use remains unclear. The material is stoneware with iron glaze. Some teas of this period were prepared with scallions, ginger, orange peel, jujubes, and other solid ingredients that may have made a larger bowl desirable. Tea was often prepared in the bowl by whipping a spoonful of powder in boiling water using a bamboo whisk. The white froth contrasted with the dark color of the bowl.



The piece has been dated to the twelfth century during the Song dynasty (960–1279). This period saw a shift from wood- to coal-fired kilns for producing ceramics, mainly in northern China. Each ceramic reflects its raw materials as well as its potter's techniques. Profound differences in the geological makeup of northern and southern China contributed to each major kiln producing a signature “brand ware” influenced by available resources. At the same time, flourishing trade during the Song dynasty promoted kilns across the empire to develop ways to mimic other popular wares.

This bowl is significant for its “oil spot” glaze. In their book *Hare's Fur, Tortoiseshell, and Partridge Feathers: Chinese Brown- and Black-glazed Ceramics, 400–1400*, Mowry, Farrell, and Rousmaniere write, “The so-called oil spots formed when iron compounds segregated themselves from the iron-saturated glaze during firing and crystallized on the surface during cooling” (1996, 33). They add, “Oil-spot glazes may well have been invented at the Jian kilns in Fujian province.”

Mowry, Farrell, and Rousmaniere continue, “During the late Northern Song, when Jian tea bowls were at the height of their popularity, connoisseurs of tea naturally used bowls made at the Jian kilns. After the

fall of Northern Song in 1127 and the subsequent partitioning of China into Jin in the north and Southern Song (1127–1279) in the south, commerce between north and south was seriously curtailed. Inheritors of Northern Song culture, the citizens of the Jin state no doubt found their beloved Jian tea bowls unavailable on the market, since they were produced in the southern province of Fujian. Within that context, the various Cizhou kilns likely found a market for high quality imitations of Jian tea bowls in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries—a market that would have been unthinkable just a few decades earlier” (33).

Vocabulary

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.

iron glaze: ceramic glaze composed of iron and oxygen chemical compounds that produce warm colors ranging from tan to dark brown.

Jian ware: ceramics produced at the kilns in present-day Jianyang, Fujian province

kiln: a type of oven for firing clay or porcelain to make ceramic ware.

oil spot glaze: a ceramic glaze with iron compounds that segregate upon firing and cooling to produce a translucent rainbow-like color pattern.

stoneware: an opaque ceramic fired between 1100°C and 1300°C to a “stony” hardness that may be buff, gray, or brown in color.

Procedure

1. Have students view the object “Bowl with ‘oil spot’ glaze” and answer the Discussion Questions.
2. Have students review two later paintings related to tea culture: “[Making tea and enjoying plum blossoms](#)” (F1911.160f), dated to the Ming or Qing dynasty, and “[Landscape: tea sipping under willows](#)” (F1909.247e), dated to the Qing dynasty.
3. Have students evaluate the Qing paintings.
4. Have students return to the bowl, reviewing it once again in light of the landscape paintings and responding to the **Inquire** questions. What makes this bowl particularly useful to the tea culture of the Song dynasty? Why is the dark color and oil spot finish significant?
5. Following this inquiry, present background on the bowl.
6. Have students study how this ceramic was produced in south China during the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) and link this process to the development of manufacturing as an important feature of economic life in Song dynasty China and of commercial activities in the northern Jin dynasty (1115–1234).

Discussion Questions

Describe

- What is the shape of the object?
- What is the color of the object?
- What is the material of the object?
- What is unique about the glaze of the object?
- What else do you notice?

Analyze

- What type of bowl is this?
- What makes this bowl unique?

Interpret

- Who do you think this object belonged to?
- What are the possible uses of this bowl?

Inquire

- Considering the role of tea in Song dynasty culture, how might this bowl have been used?
- How was the bowl manufactured? Did that process promote tea culture in China?

Extensions

Social Studies

- View other tea vessels—from Japan, India, Britain—and compare them to this one. Reflect on the role of tea in societies over time and place. How do tea vessels reflect these feelings and functions? What is our current attitude toward tea reflected in contemporary vessels like the paper cup or generic mug. How does this compare to the specialized glass vessels that people use today for alcoholic beverages like the martini glass, wine glass, or beer pint?

Resources

The Minneapolis Institute of Art. *The Art of Asia: Guide to Chinese Ceramics*. <http://archive.artsmia.org/art-of-asia/ceramics/early-chinese-ceramics-teabowls.cfm.html>

Mowry, Robert D., Eugene Farrell, and Nicole Coolidge Rousmaniere. 1996. *Hare's Fur, Tortoiseshell, and Partridge Feathers: Chinese Brown- and Black-glazed Ceramics, 400–1400*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museum.

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1909.369/>

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

