

OBJECT IN FOCUS

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

Describe

Look at this interestingly shaped ceramic object made of porcelain produced in Jingdezhen. By the thirteenth century, the potters there had developed a recipe for a compound clay, which when fired to an extremely high temperature, created a stunning white ceramic material. The object is in the shape of a canteen, or water carrier. It has a circular body. On a functional canteen, the loop and ring handles on each side of the neck would have held a leather strap to make it easy to carry the vessel over one's shoulder; however, this canteen seems too

heavy to use in that way. The short, cylindrical ribbed neck would originally have had a cover or stopper. The front of the body is decorated with intricate blue patterns on a white background: a ring of waves encircles the edge and, inside the ring, a floral scroll fills the surface. The center of the canteen has a dome with a central, wave-like pattern surrounding an Islamic eight-pointed star, leaves, and a lotus scroll. Each point of the star contains a single leaf. The side of the body is covered with a continuous scrolling design of lotus and other flowers. The back is undecorated and unglazed porcelain (without color).

Analyze

Canteens were common objects used by ordinary people to carry liquids. Religious pilgrims in the European Middle Ages (fifth to fifteenth century) also used them to hold holy water and oil. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, artists in the Near East created elaborate metal canteens ([see F1941.10](#)) that seem to have inspired this Chinese example. The eight-pointed star in the center, for example, is a symbol often found in Islamic art. However, the technique used to create this canteen reflects its origin in China. The material of white porcelain decorated with cobalt (blue) designs was a Chinese invention. The heavy weight of the canteen seems to suggest that it was made for a decorative or ornamental purpose rather than for actually carrying water. It may have been hung on the wall or placed on a flat surface in a wealthy patron's residence.



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

Interpret

During the reigns of the Yongle and Xuande Emperors (1403–35) in the Ming dynasty, potters at the famous Chinese porcelain-producing town of Jingdezhen quickly absorbed artistic ideas from imported foreign goods. They experimented with many shapes and decorations modeled after Islamic silver, gold, and brass vessels. The ceramic canteen, with its unusual shape and decoration, was either made to be exported to the Near East or was made for a follower of Islam living in China. It exemplifies the dynamic flow of ideas and objects between the Islamic world and China that invigorated both artistic traditions.

Inquire

- What do you notice about the shape of the blue and white ceramic canteen? Based on what you see, how do you think it might have been used?
- What details do you notice about the decorative designs on the surface of the canteen? Do you think these designs have any special meaning? What might the meaning be?
- Who do you think this ceramic canteen was made for? What can you infer about this person based on what you have noticed about the object?
- What are some other objects that were influenced by another culture?

Resources

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