

# Chinese Art

A guide for teachers

based around objects displayed in the

Joseph E. Hotung Gallery of Oriental Antiquities, Room 33



Blue-and-white porcelain fish dish

From Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, southern China

Yuan dynasty, 14th century AD

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## **Materials and techniques**

These notes are intended to give some general guidance on some of the materials and techniques used by Chinese artists and craftworkers whose work can be seen in the Hotung Gallery (Room 33).

The first part on **Materials and techniques** focuses on materials which demand different working methods.

The second part on **Decorative techniques** examines the production of different colour effects.

Suggested activities are included at the end of these notes, which allow students to explore some of the numerous techniques used within the gallery. Topics for discussion help students to consider the relationship between design, function and form.

Before visiting the gallery, explore with students the relationship between the nature of materials and how they are used to make objects. Are they soft and malleable or hard and rigid? Can they be carved, moulded or cast? Is the object large or small, curved or flat, and what is its function? In the gallery, ask students to scan the objects to find as many different materials and techniques as possible.

For further information regarding the Oriental Collection at the British Museum, see the *British Museum Book of Chinese Art* edited by Jessica Rawson.

## **Bronze**

Chinese bronze metal casting preceded that of any other civilization and is noted for its artistic sophistication and technical virtuosity. In the ancient Chinese world, bronze conferred power and signified social status and influence. The early development of bronze-casting methods reached their zenith during the Shang (c.1700-1050 BC) and Zhou (c.1050-221 BC) Dynasties, when elaborate ritual vessels and weapons were produced. Whilst swords and armoury ensured military success in this world, ritual vessels played an important role in maintaining a good relationship with gods, ghosts and ancestors. Ritual food and drink offerings were made in vessels decorated with animals, birds, dragons and strange mythical beasts. Expressive geometric designs characteristic of this period form intricate symbolic patterns that tell much about the cosmological views and lives and of the early Chinese people. This fine decoration and elaborate shapes necessitated a complicated process of moulding and casting.

Initially, a clay mould was formed around a replica of the piece to be cast. The clay wrapper was then cut away in sections like orange peel, retaining the imprint of the piece. Before the moulds were used for casting, a core was placed at the centre ensuring that the vessel would be hollow. The core was then fired. A liquid alloy of copper and tin was then poured into the recess between the mould and the core.

The distinctive Shang and Zhou styles became emblematic of the first great Chinese dynasties, and recur in the design of porcelain and metalwork of later centuries.



Bronze *zun* (ritual wine vessel)

Possibly from Hunan province, southern China

Shang dynasty, 13th-12th century BC

## Jade

*Jade, as a stone, has five virtues. Its glossiness and warmth is like benevolence. Because inside and outside is the same, so that knowing the outside one knows the inside, this may be likened to righteousness. Its far-reaching sound (when struck) may be heard from afar, like wisdom. It is not easily bent, but can be broken, which may be likened to courage. Jade can be sharpened, but not to the point where it can injure people; this quality is like self-regulation or restraint.*

Xu Shen: *Shuo Wen*, Eastern Han Dynasty

No stone has held such long standing symbolic importance, been more valued or so closely associated with a culture than jade. Revered at every level of Chinese society, it is considered to be the most beautiful of all stones and to this day is regularly used as a metaphor for virtue, strength and superiority. By tradition, a family was considered fortunate to bear a son, and were congratulated on acquiring 'a fine piece of jade'.

The physical properties and spiritual powers of jade were thought to bring strength and protection in life and death. Jade ornaments and pendants were seen as a clear indication of social standing and jade weaponry indicated the power of physical force. In death, jade burial suits were thought to guard against malign spirits and evil forces.

The term 'jade' is commonly used to refer to nephrite or jadeite, which share the same physical properties. The luminous translucence and toughness of the material provided the aesthetic appeal and determined the subsequent form which jade working would take. Abrasive sands ground against the surface with tools of wood, bamboo or hemp cords were used to gradually erode the hard stone, like pebbles on a beach. Flat slices of nephrite were worked in early Neolithic or Shang periods, and rotating tools were developed in order to cut and decorate the surface. The remarkable toughness and durability of jade has provided a challenge to sculptors throughout time, ensuring its survival to this day.



Jade pendant in the shape of a dragon  
(Modelled on an ancient pendant)

From China

Qing dynasty, 18th-19th century AD

## **Lacquer**

The use of this distinctly Chinese material can be traced back to the Neolithic period (c. 5000-3000 BC). The sap of the lac or sumac tree was distilled to form a natural polymer, then applied to woven baskets and containers to make them water- and insect-resistant. Natural pigments, such as red cinnabar and black carbon, created vermilion and black designs.

From the Eastern Zhou (770-221 BC) and Han (206 BC- AD 220) Dynasties, decorative lacquer became increasingly popular and was praised for its power to protect and preserve. The humid climate of southern and western regions of China was ideally suited to lacquer crafting, preventing the material from drying out or cracking. Layers of lacquer would be applied, sometimes in their hundreds, onto a wooden or cloth base, each coat taking weeks to properly harden and dry. The long process of production was divided between a number of craftworkers, each working simultaneously on numerous pieces, and represents a fine example of mass-production in early China.

Inlay techniques used in the manufacture of bronzes were transferred to lacquer making, incorporating materials such as silver, gold or mother-of-pearl from the Near East. Refined carving techniques depicted increasingly detailed scenes. The ongoing development of lacquer arts brought increasingly complex designs rendered in deep relief.



Lacquer dish

(Decorated with a famous scene on the front and a poem on the back)

Possibly Gansu province, Western China

Ming dynasty, dated AD 1489



## **Porcelain**

In the Shanghai dynasty, China became the first country to produce white stonewares similar in composition and properties to what we call porcelain. At this time, ceramics played a secondary role to bronze and jade. Occasionally used for ritual, they performed a largely utilitarian function in everyday life. During the Tang Dynasty, manufacturing techniques and skill reached the refinement necessary to produce the fine quality porcelain so prized in the West. The dense, white, hard and translucent properties of the material were attractive, hard-wearing and more suited to eating and drinking vessels than lower fired pottery.

Porcelain proper is the product of south China's abundant porcelain stone deposits. With affordable, ample raw materials and adaptability to mass production, porcelain was readily produced for the export market.

The widespread use of the word 'China', generally designating Chinese porcelain, is indicative of the tremendous acclaim such works attracted in the West. The Chinese appreciated the qualities of this material in the home market too, where porcelain was collected by emperors, scholars and officials.

Since the earliest discovery of porcelain, a vast range of styles and techniques of decoration have been employed to manufacture objects, from the everyday rice bowl to Imperial ritual vessels. With the expansion of foreign trade, porcelain also represented one of China's most lucrative export products.

For centuries, China was the only country able to produce fine quality porcelain so prized abroad. And it was not until the early eighteenth century that Europeans began to master the art of porcelain manufacture for themselves.



Stemcup with sea creatures

From Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, southern China

Ming dynasty, Xuande period (AD 1426-35)

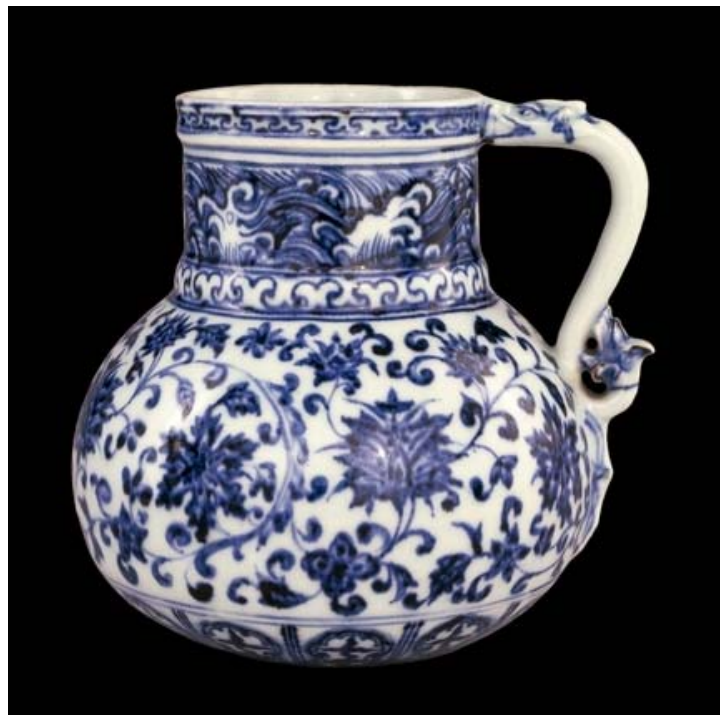
## **Decorative techniques**

Chinese decorative arts are notable for the diverse range of techniques which have been used, facilitating the use of a multiple of colours, textures and styles. The following are the three of the most well known techniques, and are each notable as demonstrating a distinctly different visual effect.

## **Blue-and-White**

Blue-and-white decoration has become the most popular and easily recognisable form of ornamentation of Chinese ceramics in the West. Originally manufactured for export to the Middle East and South East Asia, early blue-and-white was less popular in the home market, and possibly regarded as gaudy. From the fourteenth century, cobalt ore was imported from Iran and Afghanistan.

The viscosity of the Yuan porcelain glaze prevented the cobalt diffusing during firing, making possible the clear and intricate designs for which early blue-and-white is renowned. The later technique of painting over the glaze, broadened the possibilities for painted decoration. The subsequent range of ornamentation and designs were tailored to suit both Chinese and foreign tastes.



Blue-and-white porcelain jug  
(Tankard with a dragon-shaped handle)  
From Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, southern China  
Ming dynasty, early 15th century AD

**Sancai**

During the Tang dynasty, techniques of lead-glazing were developed in the North of China which produced the exuberant *sancai* or 'three-colour' wares. Huge quantities of these highly prized ceramics were produced to furnish the tombs of the noble and rich. The characteristic green and amber colours were produced when copper and iron oxides were added to a lead glaze, then fired on a cream background. The tendency of the glaze to run dictated several stylistic features. Flat, open forms retained detailed decoration well, and resists of wax or powdered kaolin were used as a means of controlling the glazes to produce geometric patterns, stripes and florets. Glazes were sometimes applied in pairs to give a mottled effect, or splashed together. Vertical forms, such as statues, proved more difficult, and detailed decoration was generally avoided. However, the tomb figures in the gallery are a fine example of this type.



Stoneware figure of Budai ('Laughing Buddha')

(Glazed in sancai)

From Henan province, northern China

Ming dynasty, dated AD 1486

## Cloisonné

The technique of cloisonné was carried across Central Asia from Byzantium during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when the Mongols dominated Asia. At first regarded as vulgar and tasteless, the Chinese grew to like the shiny, multi-coloured decoration and adopted this style for temple and palace purposes. Cloisonné ornamentation is produced on metal vessels when powdered glass pastes are dissolved in water and heated to produce an enamel. The colours are separated by 'cloissons', or small metal strips which act as walls or enclosures. As the metal vessel is repeatedly heated, the paste melts and contracts until finally each section is full. The whole vessel is then polished revealing the 'cloison' walls, which are then gilded. The precision of the technique enabled craftsmen to create highly detailed decoration in bright reds, blues, yellows and greens.



Cloisonné jar

(Decorated with a dragon and carrying the imperial mark)

From China

Ming dynasty, Xuande period (AD 1426-35)

## Activities

Although the techniques in the gallery are highly developed, all of them can be adapted for use with commonly available materials in the classroom.

### Casting

Cast bronze vessels were used in ancient China for religious, court and burial rituals, and symbolised political order and status. This casting technique may be used to reproduce typical geometric Shang designs, or any other image. This method is best used with relief, rather than 3-dimensional form.

Materials- Plasticine modelling clay (non-hardening clay), simple carving tools, plaster of Paris, a plastic tub or container, paint and brushes.

Procedure- Flatten out the plasticine clay to about ½" thickness, and cut into the desired shape. Carve the design into the clay. Alternatively students could build up the design and borders with pieces of clay, creating a concave effect. Pour the plaster into the mould and allow to set. The clay may now be peeled away, revealing the plaster cast, which can now be painted.

### Carving

Lacquer was highly prized in early China, and intricate patterns and designs were carved into its surface. This method enables students to recreate the technique of lacquer-making, and explore the effects of the traditional red and black or coloured designs.

Materials- Plain or coloured wax, strearin mix (anti-flammable agent), wax dye if required, simple carving tools.

Procedure- Melt the wax, strearin mix and dye together in a bowl, over boiling water. When the mixture is molten, pour a thin layer onto a flat surface or container as required. Once the first layer has hardened, build up layers of wax to the depth of around ½". (Alternate layers of red and black may be used to create an interesting decorative effect). The surface may now be carved.

## **Points for discussion**

### **Containers**

Discuss the form and function of containers in the Hotung Gallery. Consider shape and decoration, material and size (is it angular or curved?). Can you find the middle of the design? Is it symmetrical? Are there repeating patterns or motifs? Are there inscriptions? Does the design fit the form of the containers?

Design a container for a specific function, justifying the features you have chosen. Try the same surface decoration on a different shape- what happens? What is the relationship between decoration, function and form?