



Materials & Symbolism
Elementary Tour
(Suggested Grade level 3-8)

Tour length: 30-45 minutes

Goals:

1. Provide students with a greater understanding of Chinese art and culture.
2. Introduce students to the various materials throughout the collection.
3. Identify prevalent symbols which appear on different artworks and how symbols are used to express certain ideas.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

1. Recognize specific symbols and their meaning on different works of art in the collection.
2. Distinguish materials and explain the differences between them.

Vocabulary:

The following is a list of vocabulary terms that are frequently used during museum tours. It may be helpful to introduce them to your students before their visit and to reinforce the terms they have learned after the tour.

The **emperor** is the male sovereign or supreme ruler of an empire (often compared to a King).

A **dynasty** is a succession of emperors from the same family or line.

The **Qing Dynasty** (pronounced Ching) began in 1644 and ended in 1911. It was the last imperial dynasty of China, and a great deal of art in the museum was made during this time.

Jade is a popular material in Chinese art. It is often used for carvings and jewelry. Jade is a very hard substance and must be carved with diamond-tipped tools. It comes in two forms: jadeite and nephrite.

Silk is a durable and luxurious material which was developed in China around 2600 BCE. The thread comes from the cocoon of silk worms. Silk is still used today to produce fine garments. The Chinese were attributed with the creation of silk and traded it via the Silk Road.

Ivory is a white material that comes from elephants' tusks or other mammals' bones. It was generally obtained through trade.

Pagodas are tiered towers often built near Buddhist temples and have religious significance. A pagoda must have an odd-number of floors.

Calligraphy is one of the four great art forms in ancient China. Chinese calligraphy characters are derived from pictures. Brushes and black ink are used to write Chinese characters in an artistic manner, similar to the idea of cursive-writing in English.

Chinese dragons are powerful, legendary creatures that were once used to symbolize the emperor. Dragons are mostly associated with agriculture. One myth is that the sound of thunder comes from dragons playing in the clouds with a ball.

Temple lions are found in pairs; male and female. The male has a ball under his paw; the female has a cub under hers. In imperial China, temple lions guarded palaces, bridges, and important buildings from evil spirits.

Cloisonné is a French word to describe the Chinese art form that combines metal and enamel (glass) to create jewelry, statues, fish pots, and other decorative items. It is usually very colorful with interesting patterns.

Confucius was an ancient scholar who lived in China 2,500 years ago. His teachings turned into an important belief system known as Confucianism.

Screens are made from several panels of wood hinged together to function like walls within a house. Screens often have calligraphy or landscape sceneries engraved onto them.

Cinnabar is a popular bright red color of lacquer in China, consisting of multiple layers which is used to paint, waterproof, and protect furniture and other objects.

The Monkey King was a character created by a Buddhist Monk named Xuan Zang (602-664). He traveled west to India to attain the Sutras, or Buddhist holy books. His adventures became the subject of many stories that were later rewritten into the Chinese classic, "Journey to the West".

A **symbol** is something that represents something else by association or resemblance.

Peaches are ancient Chinese symbols and often represented in art; they represent long-life and immortality.

Fish, especially carp, symbolize wealth and prosperity. According to legend, the carp is noted for its strength and bravery when it swims against the current. Some say when it makes its final leap over the rapid, it turns into a celestial dragon.

Lotus blossoms symbolize creative power and purity amid diverse surroundings. They sprout from the mud under ponds yet retain their purity and beauty. Generally, the lotus is associated with Buddhism.

Classroom Discussion:

Jade was a very important and highly valued material to the Chinese. After viewing the jade pieces in the Belz Museum, what are some of the characteristics of jade which make it special and highly prized?

Jade was valued for its hardness, translucence, luster and ring. Jade was also valued in daily life. It signified wealth, virtue, and honor.

Why is the material an object is made of an indicator of its value to the society for which it is made?

The material an object is made of may be difficult to extract, requiring time, energy, and skill to obtain. The amount of labor involved in obtaining the material usually affects the value of an object.

If an object is made of a scarce material, that material is often in limited supply and the object made from the material is therefore rare.

If an object is made of a material that is difficult to work and therefore requires a skilled artist to execute the work, the object is usually considered valuable.

Activities:

Symbols in art are forms, images, subjects or characters which represent a meaning other than the one with which it is usually associated. Introduce the idea of “symbol”. Ask students to identify common symbols in our culture.

In small groups, have students create a symbol for the class and display them in the room.

Examples: Heart-Love, Dog-Fidelity, 4-Leaf Clover-Luck, Horse shoe-Luck, Cross-Christian Faith, Star of David-Jewish Faith.

The Chinese dragon is made of nine different parts; the head of a camel, the ears of a cow, the horns of a deer, the belly of a frog, the neck of a snake, the scales of a fish, the paws a tiger, the claws of an eagle and the eyes of a rabbit.

Divide the class into small groups and have each group research, design and create a dragon using the characteristics above. Display each group’s dragon and discuss the similarities and differences.

Why would a common understanding of these characteristics be important to Chinese artisans?

The dragon was an important symbol. As a symbol, it would have been necessary for an artist to reproduce it many times.