

Asian Odyssey

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A National K-12 Interdisciplinary Curriculum Model

USING "MYSTERY OBJECTS" TO DRAW CONCLUSIONS ABOUT ANCIENT CHINESE AND JAPANESE CULTURE

Grade Level

This lesson was written for a Middle School Social Studies or Language Arts class.

Purpose

To use artifacts to draw conclusions about ancient Chinese and Japanese civilizations and cultures.

Concepts

- Artifact: an object created by humans for a practical purpose; an object remaining from a particular historical period
- Archaeology: the scientific study of monuments of past human life as well as material objects, such as fossils, relics, or artifacts; the study of the remains of a culture of ancient people through excavation of relics and artifacts

Key Ideas

Japanese Objects

- This Japanese *Buddhist Tabernacle* (CMA 1969.130) is a lacquer shrine made to hold hundreds of handwritten Buddhist religious texts (sutras), which the Buddhist worshiped as something more important than the mere image of a deity; they viewed them as the promise of redemption. Around 300 sutras, bound in bundles with cord, were placed within the shrine on shelves, now lost. This lacquer shrine and its companion piece, now in Japan, are unique in the history of Japanese art.
- With the arrival of Buddhism into Japan in the 6th century came a variety of icons, ritual implements, and other related objects traditionally accepted for conveying Buddhist religious ideas. Neither sculptural images nor elaborate buildings for worship had existed in the Shinto faith up until this time. Thus the coming of Buddhism represented a revolutionary change in the arts of Japan at this time.
- The highly decorative Japanese flame-style *Storage Vessel* (CMA 1984.68) dates from the Middle Jomon period (c.10,500-c.300 BCE). The people who lived in Japan during this period were hunters and gatherers living in small settlement, often near the coast or at the confluence of rivers. This vessel is made of earthenware with carved and applied decoration. Clay vessels such as this are often the only tangible evidence of such early cultures. The basic shape of the vessel was hand built from coils of clay and then embellished with applied clay coils in exuberant, three-dimensional shapes. For the Jomon people such vessels served as everyday utensils used for cooking or food storage. The distinctive style of this vessel, however, suggests that the people living in this region were able to maintain a reliable food supply and thus had time and energy to devote to creating extremely artistic utilitarian objects.

Chinese objects

- By the 9th century BCE *Bronze Bells* (CMA1989.3) had become highly sought-after objects by the Chinese aristocrats living in urban areas. Frequently made in sets of eight graduated shapes, such bells were designed to hang on wooden racks by loops at the base of their shanks. They must have been played by striking them on the outside with mallets as they had no interior clappers. It is thought their tones were carefully calibrated to correspond to notes on the ancient Chinese musical scale. The technical sophistication of the shape of the unusual lens-shaped cavity allowed each bell to have two different tones. The surface ornamentation on this bell combines relief ornaments of composite animals with a 127-character inscription about Mr. Lei.
- This oil lamp (*Bian*, CMA 1991.8) is an example of the extraordinary creations that in ancient China served as elaborate, individually crafted lamps. The stand is a powerful bird with muscular outstretched wings depicted at the moment it lands on a pair of intertwined serpents on the base. The upper basin, crenulated in design, is the container for the lamp's fuel. It is fixed on a stem that the bird holds in its beak. The lamp is enhanced by an inlay of blue in the eyes and the feathers that are marked by an alternating design of powdered malachite and blue azurite.
- This *Ritual Disc* (1987.58) is an example of cloisonné enamel, a complicated and time-consuming process where brightly colored enamels were set within wire borders set into a base of cast bronze. This disc was made for a Buddhist temple and used in a ritual called "Offering the Universe," during which rice grains were placed in small mounds on top of the disc to the accompaniment of chanted prayers. This ritual was designed to help the participant prepare for more advanced meditative practices.
- The *Tree Root* (CMA 2003.4) is a "found" object of nature that might have been displayed in a scholar's studio. It invites the viewer to use his or her imagination to examine the complex surface and perhaps find hidden caves or craggy ravines in its gnarled form. It is the kind of object that would appeal to the sensibility of scholar-gentlemen who collected such objects for their visual appeal.

Materials

Japanese

Buddhist Tabernacle, late 1100s, CMA 1969.130

Flame-Style Storage Vessel, c.BCE 2500, CMA 1984.68

Chinese

Mr. Lai's Bell, c.BCE 900-800, CMA 1989.3

Bian: A Shallow Basin Supported by a Bird, c.BCE early 400s, CMA 1991.8

Ritual Disc, early 15th century, CMA 1987.58

Tree Root, before 1800s, CMA 2003.44

Macaulay, David. *Motel of the Mysteries*. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1979.

Procedure

1. Have students read *Motel of the Mysteries* by David Macaulay.
2. Discuss how archaeologists use artifacts to draw conclusions about ancient civilizations and cultures.

3. Discuss how Macaulay purposefully and humorously drew erroneous conclusions about 20th-century artifacts.
4. Ask students to choose a common object in their house. Following Macaulay's pattern, students should illustrate and write a humorous, erroneous paragraph about how archaeologists 2,000 years from now might misinterpret the purpose and use of this object.
5. Students should next be shown "mystery objects" from the CMA's collection. They should describe what material it might be made of and how they think the object might have been used.
6. The teacher should then share information about the object (see Key Ideas).
7. A final discussion should emphasize how artifacts are used to draw conclusions about ancient civilizations and cultures.

Enrichment

- A. Students could read aloud the misinterpreted descriptions of their object and allow the other students to guess what the object might actually be. The papers could then be displayed on a mystery object bulletin board.
- B. Prints of "mystery objects" from the CMA's collection could be displayed along with brief descriptions.

Ohio State Standards

Social Studies

1. Analyze the relationships among cultural practices, products, and perspectives of early civilizations.
2. Describe the cultural and scientific legacies of Asian civilizations.

Language Arts

1. Produce informational writing that conveys a clear and accurate perspective and supports the main ideas with facts, details, examples and explanations.
2. Use effective listening strategies, summarize major ideas, and draw logical inferences from presentations and visual media.
3. Give presentations using a variety of delivery methods, visual materials, and technology.

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