

Ming Dynasty

The Ming dynasty, meaning “bright” or “luminous,” was in place from 1368 to 1644. This dynasty marked the return of power to ethnic Chinese after a period of non-Chinese rule by the Mongol emperors. During this period, China experienced stable and efficient government, which allowed the country to prosper. The Ming had the Grand Canal rebuilt to encourage trade, and the Great Wall was extended to keep out invaders. The population of China increased to perhaps 160 million by the year 1600. Most people were farmers, but small industries like porcelain manufacture thrived in China’s cities. The arts—both visual and literary—were important. In addition to landscape painting, artists began to paint portraits.

It was also during the Ming dynasty that European traders began to come to China, and not long after, Christian missionaries arrived to attempt to convert the Chinese to Christianity.

Forbidden City

During the Ming dynasty, Khubilai Khan’s capital was renamed Beijing and was greatly enlarged. A new imperial palace was built as a walled city within a city and was named the Forbidden City. The palace was finished in 1420 and

remained the home of the emperor until the fall of the last Chinese emperor in 1911. Today, the Forbidden City, with its 183 acres of rooms, great halls, gardens, and waterways, is a museum.

Explorations of Zheng He

During the Ming dynasty, China opened sea routes to Southeast Asia and South Asia. Between 1405 and 1433, the sea captain Zheng He (JHENG HAY) commanded seven expeditions along the northern coasts of the Indian Ocean, going as far as the entrances to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Some people think he may have also rounded the tip of Africa. These expeditions included hundreds of large and small ships and thousands of sailors and troops. Their purpose was to encourage trading contacts and show the power of the Ming.

After Zheng He's death, the Ming emperors stopped sending out fleets of ships. Construction of oceangoing ships was halted permanently. The emperors turned their attention inward. No one knows why this occurred, but one theory is that the Confucian-trained imperial advisors considered Chinese civilization ideal and did not want to risk corrupting it with outside influences. A second theory is that the voyages brought little immediate financial return on their huge investment.

Whatever the reason, the Chinese decision to refrain from exploration changed world history. In the same century in Europe, explorers set out in ships far smaller than the ships of Zheng He's fleet and reached both Asia and the Western Hemisphere. As China withdrew from the world, Europeans were spreading their civilization and power both east and west.

In 1644, the Ming were overthrown by the Qing (formerly known as the Ch'ing), the final Chinese imperial dynasty, which ruled until 1912. The Qing emperors were Manchus from the north and not Chinese. However, they adopted the Chinese name *Qing*, meaning "clear" or "pure." The Manchus, while adopting a number of Chinese customs, tried to retain some of their native ways. By the end of the Qing dynasty, Europeans had seized the opportunity to rule the seas and dictate trade terms to the Chinese.

What Teachers Need to Know

Note: The descriptions and activities in the main text below are intended to help you become familiar with the artworks before presenting them to students; however, some of the activities might be adapted for classroom use. Activities intended specifically for students can be found in the Teaching Idea sidebars. The Looking Questions are also printed on the reverse side of the *Art Resources* and have been written with students in mind so that they might be used as a rough plan for class discussion. You should feel free to use these questions or develop questions of your own. Be sure students have time to look at the reproductions carefully before asking the Looking Questions.

Chinese Art: Expressions of Ancient Traditions

China is said to be the oldest continuing civilization in the world. China lays claim not only to this distinction, but it was also the first civilization to develop the compass, paper, silk cloth, gunpowder, movable type for printing, and porcelain. For much of China's history, the Pacific Ocean on the east and the mountain ranges on the west allowed it to develop in relative isolation from Western societies.

China has many rich cultural traditions, including several important traditions in the visual arts. Chinese artists have long practiced various forms of art. They have particularly excelled in three areas—scroll painting, calligraphy, and porcelain.

A Private World: Scroll Painting

There are two major types of painting in China: hanging scrolls and hand scrolls. Hanging scrolls can be displayed in public like western European paintings or medieval tapestries. However, they are not permanent installations. They temporarily adorn walls and are often changed by owners. Viewing hand scrolls is an even more private affair. The admirer slowly unrolls one portion of the painting at a time, contemplating the scene before moving on to the next section of the scroll. (See the included reproduction of *Ink Bamboo*.) Both types of scrolls are easily rolled, transported, and stored.

Instead of oil paints and canvas used by Western painters, Chinese artists typically use ink on paper or silk. Their ink washes (combinations of ink and water) of varying intensities simulate the effects of mist and endless space as well as record selected sharp details.

Nature has been the primary subject for scroll painting since the 11th century. The Chinese reverence for nature is rooted in Taoism, which began during the 6th century. In Taoism, the secret to wisdom and happiness is a life of simplicity and the observance of the laws of nature, rather than trying to make nature submit to human will. Confucianism, the belief system that became the basis of China's political philosophy for hundreds of years, also calls for respect for nature (as well as for one's parents and ancestors, the state, and the emperor).

Landscape painters didn't try to replicate exactly the world they saw. They indicated depth by altering the size of objects and using washes to create the

sense of a misty distance. Both the atmosphere and details of a landscape are meant to create a transporting experience. The scroll painting should arouse feelings of walking through the actual scene itself. Your eyes should “take a walk” through each landscape.

Paintings were judged on the quality of their brushwork. Artists had to handle not only the ink and washes, but each stroke had to be an expression of the artists themselves.

Chinese artists produced other kinds of art besides scrolls, calligraphy, and porcelain. They also excelled in block printing, architecture, sculpture, and paper cutting (which originated as an elite pastime).

16 **Formerly attributed to Guan Daosheng, *Ink Bamboo* (17th century)**

Landscape scenes were important subject matter in Chinese art beginning in the Sung dynasty (960–1279 CE). In the West, landscapes became important after the Reformation in the 16th century in northern Europe.

Although it was mostly educated men who trained in art, some Chinese women excelled as well. However, these women rarely actually went outdoors to study their subject matter. Instead, they lived inside the family compound and traveled only occasionally through the countryside when accompanying their husbands. Nonetheless, female landscape artists equaled men in using their strokes to express something essential about their character. One such artist was Guan Daosheng [gwahn dao-shung].

Traditionally, Chinese artists spent years copying the style and compositions of earlier masters. It wasn't until artists were fully mature that it was appropriate to add personal touches. Guan Daosheng offset her dark, sharp strokes with feathery brushwork. Other artists greatly admired her innovative method of depicting bamboo in the mist after a fresh rain. *Ink Bamboo* features calligraphy on the left side and an image of a bamboo plant on the other.

The calligraphy on this scroll has two parts: a poem about bamboo on the first half and an inscription on the other half. The title of this hand scroll and the inscription (which is dated 1309 and addressed to Guan's sister, Guan Daoguo) attribute the work to Guan Daosheng. However, because of the style of the painting and the condition of the work, scholars now believe that it dates back to the 17th century, but they do not know who painted the work.

Looking questions

- **What do you see on the left side of this work? On the right? *There is printing on the left side, and the leaves of a bamboo plant on the right.***
- **How can you tell this is a Chinese work of art? *You can tell by the lettering. These are pictographs.***
- **In what different ways did the artist use line in the painting? *The artist used long, dark, sharp lines and short strokes in this painting.***
- **How did the artist use ink to create a distinct atmosphere? *The soft washes in the painting suggest mist, creating a distinct atmosphere.***
- **What feeling does the artist's nature scene create? *Answers will vary. Students may say that the scene creates a sense of peace, harmony, or calmness.***

- **The left part of the scroll shows a poem. By looking at the right part of the scroll, what do you think the poem is about? Answers will vary. Students might suggest fields, bamboo, gardens, a shoreline, or wind.**

Brushstroked Words: Calligraphy

Chinese painting and calligraphy are intimately intertwined. Calligraphy is the art of writing using stylized brushstrokes and technique to create beautiful characters. In many cultures, especially Chinese, these images are often considered works of art. In fact, Chinese writing evolved from images. Ancient potters inscribed pictures into Neolithic pots between 5000 BCE and 2000 BCE. The motifs developed into written characters, which artists carved into bone and bronze during the Shang dynasty (roughly the 17th through the 11th century BCE). Calligraphers began brushing ink on silk during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), and finally on paper in 105 CE.

Calligraphy could stand alone, but artists frequently used it when writing poems right on their paintings. The liquid brushwork of the characters visually added to the scene while the words themselves simultaneously enhanced the subject matter.

It takes years of practice and patience to become adept at applying the fluid lines that dominate both Chinese painting and calligraphy. Historically, artists came from an artist-scholar tradition, beginning around the time of the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). These people were the artistic and intellectual elite of society and were educated in music and poetry in addition to painting and calligraphy. Many artist-scholars held positions as officials in the court.

Zhu Yunming [joo yoonming] was one of the greatest calligraphers of the Ming dynasty. He is best known for his “wild cursive script,” a style believed to have been invented by drunken immortals who expressed their energies with brush and ink.



Li Lung-Mien and Zhao Mengfu, *Legend of Guizimo* (detail no. 10)

Chinese writing began as pictographs, with some of the earliest surviving examples seen on bones. Eventually the images evolved into characters, which themselves are images that we associate with words. Calligraphy is at once abstract and literal.

It is not essential to understand what particular characters mean. Even people who read Chinese will consider the painted strokes for their artistic merit. As with landscape painting, lines are judged for their quality and flow, as well as what they express about the artists themselves. Over the years, Chinese calligraphers have developed different scripts, or styles of writing characters. Even when artists are using the same script, there is a great deal of room for personal expression, ranging from the use of brush, paper, spacing, and stroke, resulting in unique and beautiful expressions of art.

Li Lung-Mien [leh-EE loong-myen] (also known as Li Gonglin) was one of the most distinguished painters of the Song dynasty. He became a civil servant after passing the rigorous exam and moved to the capital, where he studied and copied old masters. His style has been described as refined and elegant. He was particularly known for his landscapes and paintings of horses and Buddhist figures.

Zhao Mengfu [jaow mengfoo] was a Chinese painter and calligrapher. He had a major influence on modern Chinese landscape painting. A descendant of the imperial family of the Song dynasty, he was in service to the Mongol empire. His works show the influence of masters from the Tang dynasty, particularly his rougher brushstrokes. This was a stylistic break from masters of the Song dynasty.

Looking questions

- **What element of art is most important in this image? *Line is most important in this image.***
- **What is the art of beautiful writing called? *It is called calligraphy.***
- **What about the poem's calligraphy indicates whether the characters were made slowly or quickly? *The liquid brushstrokes suggest quick strokes.***
- **How would writing a character with brush and ink be different from writing one with a pen? *Answers will vary. Explain that one must be more careful and decisive with a brush than with a pen.***

The Beauty of Clay: Porcelain

Chinese artists first began to work with porcelain during the Tang dynasty (618–906 CE). Europe wouldn't produce the same product until eight centuries later, in the 1700s. In the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 CE), Chinese artists perfected the porcelain technique, fashioning the finely decorated white ware in elegant forms.

Porcelain is made from fine white clay, known as kaolin, that is fired (or baked) at high temperatures. Kaolin is relatively rare, only found in a few locations in China, Europe, and North America. Artists apply a clear liquid glaze, which turns glassy when fired, allowing the white clay to show underneath. The most famous porcelain is “blue-and-white” ware. Here, artists add cobalt blue pigment under or over the glaze, which then stands out against the white background. (See the included reproduction of the porcelain flask.)

Porcelain was a major commodity for China in international trade from the 11th through the 19th centuries. Other Asian countries, and those in the Near East, Africa, and Europe, all sought Chinese porcelain. Today, the nation's ceramic work is still so highly respected that we commonly use the term *china* when referring to porcelain.

18 Porcelain flask, Ming dynasty (c. 1403–1424)

The image and size of this porcelain flask reveal a great deal about the piece. There are three claws on the dragon, indicating that an attendant gave the ware as a gift to the emperor—or the emperor presented the flask to foreign rulers or dignitaries. During the Ming dynasty, the dragons on anything the emperor used himself had five claws. The dragon's massive head and powerful limbs help us understand the creature's symbolic connection to the emperor.

Looking questions

- **What do you see? *Some students will be drawn to the dragon; others will say a vase or a pot with designs, etc.***
- **What are some important elements of art in this work? *Color, form, and line are dominant.***

- **What creature appears on the flask? *A dragon appears on the flask.***
- **What else is shown? *A complicated design of vines and leaves is also shown on the flask.***
- **Do you think that this ware would be used for daily drinking? *Its beauty and size suggest that it would be reserved for special occasions, for ceremonies, or for use by someone of high social standing.***
- **What might it feel like to be served from this flask? *Answers will vary.***