WHAT WAS THE MING DYNASTY?

The Ming Dynasty, which lasted from 1368 to 1644, was one of the most productive and important periods in Chinese history. Under the Ming emperors, China’s population reached 85 million, the largest in the world. Achievements in military might, sea exploration, and artistic production made Ming China a true global superpower. The dynasty’s encounters with other Asian cultures and the West were important moments of cultural exchange at the beginning of the Age of Exploration.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Most objects in this exhibition come from tombs or temples in modern-day Hubei, a province in central China. Ming emperors, who ruled from Beijing, hoped to keep their rivals far from the center of power by giving them estates to oversee in distant places like Hubei. In addition to land, each provincial prince received stipends and gifts from the emperor, including gold, jewelry, textiles, and ceramics. These treasures then made their way into temples as royal offerings and into tombs, where princes were buried with all the luxuries they would need for the afterlife.

KEY HISTORICAL EVENTS IN CHINA

- **1271** Mongol leader Kublai Khan declares himself emperor and establishes the Yuan Dynasty – the first foreign dynasty to rule China.

- **1271 – 1295** Italian merchant Marco Polo travels through Asia, spending 17 years in China. Polo’s account of his journey inspires generations of Europeans to travel to China.

- **1368** The Yuan Dynasty is overthrown by Chinese rebel Zhu Yuanzhang. After capturing Dadu (now Beijing), Zhu names himself emperor and establishes the Ming Dynasty.

- **1403 – 1424** The third Ming emperor, Yongle, oversees several massive building projects, including construction of the Forbidden City (the emperor’s palace in Beijing) and expansion of the Daoist temple complex in the Wudang Mountains.

- **1405 – 1433** The Chinese admiral Zheng He leads naval expeditions throughout the Eastern hemisphere, establishing diplomatic ties with rulers in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, North Africa, and India.

- **1474** Facing threats from Mongols to the north, Ming authorities enlist 40,000 workers to repair and extend the northern portions of the Great Wall of China.

- **Later 1500s** As Ming emperors become less capable and responsible, other government officials compete for power. Corruption and other economic troubles lead to peasant revolts throughout China.

- **1644** Rebel leader Li Zicheng captures Beijing, initiating the end of the Ming Dynasty and the establishment of the Qing Dynasty under Manchu emperors.
RELIGION IN MING CHINA

Three religious traditions were widely practiced in imperial China: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Collectively, they were known as the sanjiao, or “the three teachings,” and were influential in shaping China’s social and political structure during the Ming Dynasty.

Confucianism – Chinese scholar Confucius lived around 500 BCE. He wrote about how individuals should act within society, emphasizing the importance of relationships between superiors and inferiors. In Confucianism, respect for authority and family are seen as the foundation of a healthy society.

Daoism – Daoism developed from the teachings of the ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi. Central to Daoism is the concept of the Dao, which can be understood as the essential, unifying reality of the universe. Daoists believe that cultivating a harmonious relationship with the Dao through rituals and aligning one’s conduct with the Dao, rather than struggling for personal gain, will result in health and long life.

Buddhism – The first major religious system to be imported into China, Buddhism originated in India in the fifth century BCE. It entered China via traveling merchants during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). Buddhism centers on a belief in reincarnation (a cycle of death and rebirth) and the struggle to break free from that cycle to attain nirvana – a transcendent state free from suffering.

SYMBOLS IN CHINESE ART

Phoenix
A mythological bird that brings peace and prosperity and is associated with aristocratic women.

Lotus
This water flower that grows out of mud is an important symbol of purity in Buddhism and of harmony in Daoism.

Crane
A symbol for longevity, since cranes have white feathers (like the white hair of old age) and were believed to live long lives.

Mushroom
Believed to have magical properties, the lingzhi mushroom became a symbol of immortality.

Dragon
An important symbol of power and protection, and the mark of the emperor and other male aristocrats.

Map of Ming China, 1438
Modern-day Hubei was part of Huguang, one of thirteen Ming provinces.
FEATURED OBJECTS

Blue-and-white pilgrim flask
Yongle reign (1403-1424)
Porcelain with underglaze cobalt blue decoration
Jingdezhen imperial kiln
The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art
Gift of Ira and Nancy Koger, 2001
SN11122.64

THEME
Cultural exchange between Ming China and other civilizations

ABOUT THE OBJECT
Ming emperors exchanged diplomatic gifts with rulers from lands as distant as India, Central Asia, and the east coast of Africa. This ceramic flask was likely based on the brass pilgrim canteens that Middle Eastern rulers gifted to the Yongle emperor in the 1400s. Similar flattened, round vessels had originally been used by travelers to carry water. Chinese artists translated the shape and decorative motifs of the brass canteens into a material that they were famous for—blue and white porcelain. The Chinese ceramic flasks became popular as gifts to foreign heads of state and as status symbols for the Ming elite.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
How is this flask similar to the other porcelain objects you see in the exhibition? How is it different?
Why do you think Ming aristocrats wanted to own an object that had both Chinese and foreign connotations?

CLASSROOM CONNECTION
Ming China interacted with other civilizations via both land and sea. Research one of the following topics to learn more about cultural exchange:
- The Silk Road
- The voyages of Admiral Zheng He
- Portuguese trade with China
- Dutch trade with China

Gilded Bronze Statue of Deity Taiyi
15th century
Gilt bronze
On loan from the Hubei Provincial Museum, P.R. China, from the Wudang Mountain Museum Collection

THEME
Religion in Ming China

ABOUT THE OBJECT
Both Buddhism and Daoism were important cultural influences within the Ming Dynasty, and artists from the two traditions exchanged styles and motifs. This statue depicts Taiyi Jiuku tianzun, a Daoist divine being who was based on the Buddhist deity Guanyin. Each was seen as a compassionate figure with the power to rescue humans from suffering. Images of Guanyin sometimes showed her riding on a lion like this one. However, the artist identifies this example as Taiyi Jiuku tianzun by including a lotus crown and three-legged armrest, both characteristics associated with the Daoist god.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
Based on how he is depicted in this statue, what type of personality attributes do you think Taiyi Jiuku tianzun had? How did the artist convey a sense of balance, power, and compassion? Why might someone own a statue like this?

CLASSROOM CONNECTION
This object came from the temple complex in the Wudang Mountains, one of the most important Daoist sites in China. Learn more about the ancient building complex of Wudangshan, which is recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, by visiting whc.unesco.org.

What other important Daoist or Buddhist sites can you identify in China?
TEACHER GUIDE: ROYAL TASTE

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

BOOKS


WEB

Asia for Educators, an initiative of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu


National Consortium for Teaching about Asia, coordinated by the East Asian Study Center at The Ohio State University, http://ncta.osu.edu/lesson_bank_into.html

WORDS TO KNOW

Dao  Literally, “way” or “road”; in Daoism it is the unifying principle that underlies the entire universe

Enfeoffment  The practice of granting land or property to someone in exchange for pledged loyalty; used by Ming emperors to prevent their male relatives from becoming rivals for power

Hubei  A province in central China, home to the Wudang Mountains and the tombs of several Ming princes

Lingzhi  A mushroom used in traditional Chinese medicine that was believed to have magical properties

Sanjiao  “The three teachings”; the collective term for Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, which were the most influential philosophies in Ming China

Wudangshan  An area of important Daoist temples and palaces located in the Wudang Mountains of Hubei Province

HOW TO FIND OUT MORE

Visit www.ringling.org or contact Bonnie Thomas, Scholastic Programs Coordinator, at bonnie.thomas@ringling.org or 941.359.5700 x3705.

Image Credits:

Pair of Gold Hairpins in Phoenix Shape, mid-16th century, Gold. Excavated from a royal tomb of the Jing Principality at Wangxuan, Qichun, 2009. On Loan from the Hubei Provincial Museum, P.R. China, from the Qichun County Museum Collection (detail).

Five-Color Enamel-Glazed Jar with Motifs of Crane and Lotus, mid-Ming Dynasty, first half of the 16th century, Porcelain with enamel on biscuit decoration. Excavated from the tomb of the wife of Prince Duan of Jing at Dacheng, Mount Sanjiao, Qichun, 1966. On Loan from the Hubei Provincial Museum, P.R. China, from the Qichun County Museum Collection (detail).

Lü Ji, Green Bamboo and White Crane, early 16th century, Hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk. On Loan from the Hubei Provincial Museum, P.R. China (detail).

Blue-and-white Meiping Vase with Dragon Patterns, Hongwu reign (1368-98 or earlier), Yuan style porcelain with underglaze cobalt blue. Excavated from the tomb of Prince Jing of Ying, Zhongxiang, 2006. On Loan from the Hubei Provincial Museum, P.R. China (detail).


Taihe Palace, on the summit of the Tianzhu Peak, Mt. Wudang, Hubei province, constructed c. 1416. Image courtesy of the Hubei Provincial Museum.

This exhibition is organized by The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, USA, in association with the Hubei Provincial Museum, China.

Support for this exhibition was provided in part by Sarasota County Tourist Development Tax revenues. Additional support was provided in part by the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, the Ting Tsung and Wei Fong Chao Foundation Endowment, and the Arthur F. and Ulla R. Searing Endowment.

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