

Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Collection Highlight

Wine Jar with Fish and Aquatic Plants. China, early 14th century





*Wine Jar with Fish and
Aquatic Plants.*
China, Yuan dynasty,
early 14th century

Porcelain with underglaze cobalt blue decoration, 11¹⁵/₁₆ x 13³/₄ in.
(30.3 x 34.9 cm). Brooklyn Museum, The William E. Hutchins
Collection, Bequest of Augustus S. Hutchins, 52.87.1

Description of the Artwork

Four distinctly different fish are evenly spaced around this blue-and-white porcelain jar. One (with a spiky dorsal fin) is a perch, and the remaining three are from the carp family. They swim amid a variety of local water plants: lotuses, eelgrass, duckweed, water crowfeet, and pondweed. Movement is suggested by wavy plants and curled fishtails and by the bulging shape of the jar's sides. A band of crashing waves circles the top of the jar.

About the Artwork

This jar is a masterpiece of fourteenth-century porcelain and an example of a naturalistic style of surface decoration that was gaining popularity in China at the time. The rich blue color is produced by cobalt-oxide pigment imported from western Asia via the Silk Road. The vessel was created not long after the Chinese had perfected the process of making blue-and-white ceramics. It was produced in the imperial kilns of Jingdezhen and was probably a gift for a government official.

The fish is an auspicious animal in Chinese culture, and the carp in particular was considered lucky during the Yuan Dynasty, when this jar was created. Fish were kept in ponds for enjoyment and for food, and there are many Chinese myths and stories that include them as characters. The Chinese names of the four types of fish depicted on the jar—*qing yu* (black carp), *bai yu* (silver carp), *li yu* (carp), *gui yu* (perch)—sound like the Chinese words for “honest and incorruptible.” The lotus, a large, beautiful aquatic flower that often grows from mud, is a Buddhist symbol representing a human's ability to overcome suffering.

Questions for Viewing

What is going on in the picture painted on this jar?

What clues did the artist include to indicate this is an underwater scene? Imagine you are there: How would the fish and plants feel if you touched them?

Why do you think the painter chose to include many different kinds of detailed fish and plants on this jar?

The painter placed the fish at the widest, most bulging part of the jar. How would the fish look if they were placed higher or lower on the jar? How would the plants look if the jar had straight sides?

This jar was used to store wine and was probably a gift to a governmental official (like a mayor or governor). When spoken, the Chinese names of the four fish depicted on the jar sound like a Chinese word for “honest and incorruptible.” Why do you think someone would give a governmental official a gift decorated with fish whose names suggest such a phrase?

Gallery Activities

The painter depicted the fish and plants on the jar so carefully that we can still identify most of them seven hundred years later. Fold a piece of paper in half vertically and then again horizontally to create four rectangular spaces. In each rectangle, sketch one detail (such as a fin, gill, or tail) that distinguishes each fish or plant from the others.

Choose one of the fish or plants shown on the jar. Imagine how the painter moved his brush to create the form, considering the speed, direction, and pressure of each mark. Find a partner to work with. Use your finger as a brush to “paint” the fish or plant on your partner’s back. Ask your partner to describe the type of movement made by your finger. Can your partner find the fish or plant?

Classroom Activities

Language Arts

There are many examples of Chinese folktales and myths that include fish with magical or unusual characteristics. Choose one and illustrate a scene from the story. Compare the fantastical characteristics or stories to your observations of the fish depicted on the jar. Choose one of the fish shown on the jar and write a story about what it does every day. Research the fish you choose to supplement what you see on the jar.

Art and Science

Visit a nearby natural area. Create a “naturalist’s notebook” by gathering detailed documentation (written and illustrated) of the plants, textures, temperatures, and activities of the area.

Depict an underwater landscape without showing the water itself. Focus on the movement of fish, plants, or mammals to express the watery nature of the environment.

Social Studies

Create an illustrated Silk Road map to document the influences and trade needed to create and distribute Chinese blue-and-white porcelains. Start with a large map of Asia and the Middle East. Work in small groups and research one of four topics: cobalt-oxide pigment; the porcelain kilns of Jingdezhen; nature in Jiangxi Province; or the international porcelain market. Create images and compile notes on your group’s topic and add them to the large map. Look for evidence of trade or cultural influences.

Resources

www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/onview/

The Brooklyn Museum’s online collection database with a search function that indicates artworks currently on view and their locations.

www.brooklynmuseum.org/education/educators/teacher_resources.php

This webpage offers links to free web interactives and Teaching Resources (PDFs) supporting K–12 instruction.

Demi. *The Empty Pot*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1990.

The story of a Chinese boy who loves to plant flowers and who rises to an emperor’s challenge.

Louie, Ai-Ling and Ed Young. *Yeh Shen: A Cinderella Story from China*. New York: Philomel, 1982.

Yeh Shen earns her wishes by helping a magic fish.



