

Harn Museum of Art

Educator Resource

Chinese Jades of the Qing Dynasty



About the Artwork



Boulder with Landscape and Imperial Inscription

Chinese, 18th Century

Nephrite

4 11/16 x 4 1/2 x 2 in. (11.9 x 11.4 x 5.1 cm)

Bequest of Dr. David A. Cofrin

2009.48.228

Collector fashions during the 18th century called for jade boulders to be left in their natural shapes and carved with landscape and figural designs. Similar to paintings, these boulders represented miniature worlds that could stimulate the scholar's imagination or provide a kind of mental retreat.

This carved jade boulder depicts a scene set beneath a mountain. A small village is represented by a simple building under pine trees, and two peasants carrying bundles work a field. To the left, a farmer and water buffalo are seen plowing. A poem is inscribed above the scene, written by the Qing dynasty emperor.

Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799 C.E.) was a devoted admirer of jade boulders, and many produced in the Imperial workshops during his reign are inscribed with poems composed by him. As with poems included on paintings, the poems on the boulders are meant to enrich the viewer's appreciation of the visual imagery.

The Imperial poem on this boulder describes the joys of life in a prosperous farming community similar to the scene depicted on the stone. It is translated here by Chinese art scholar, Nick Pearce:

*A picture of a bumper harvest made by the emperor
Mountains and flowers are there
Just to prophesy the good harvest of the year.
Village after village are busy with getting in the crops,
So is each of the households.
People live close to each other,
With their chickens and dogs bumping into one another.
Villagers gather to talk farming affairs,
Much of the traditions and way of life is retained.*

Additional Images



Reverse Side



Detail

About the Artwork

Symbols of Immortality

This carved jade plaque was made to decorate a scholar's desk. The scene depicts a favorite subject for artists to represent during the Ming and Qing dynasties – an imaginary mountain, Shoushan (Mountain of Longevity), where the Eight Daoist Immortals lived.

Mountains have been an important part of Chinese art and culture for centuries. Stretching skyward, they represent places where earthly and heavenly ideas or experiences are both possible. They were thought of as home to spiritual figures who had gained everlasting life.

Mountainous landscapes were part of Chinese painting traditions as early as the Five Dynasties period (907-960 C.E.) and became more widespread in the 17th and 18th centuries through printed images. As jade carving grew in popularity during this time, mountain scenes were a natural pairing. Jade not only originates from a mountainous landscape, but its hardness also supports ideas of indestructibility and the concept of immortality.

A deer included in the bottom, right corner may indicate that this plaque served as a gift. In Chinese, the name for deer, *lu*, is a homophone for *lu*, an official's salary. This visual pun serves to wish someone success in worldly endeavors. Combined with the image of Shoushan, the Mountain of Longevity, it would have carried the message of goodwill for a long life and successful career.

Table Screen

Chinese, 18th-19th Century

Nephrite

8 1/16 x 5 11/16 x 5/8 in. (20.5 x 14.4 x 1.6 cm)

Bequest of Dr. David A. Cofrin, 2009.48.201



About Jade

Chinese Culture

Jade carving is one of the most important art forms in the history of Chinese culture. Its use can be traced back almost seven thousand years, beginning in the Neolithic Period (ca. 10,000 - 5,000 B.C.E.). At that time, jade was used to make various types of tools and weapons as well as ritual objects and personal adornments. Over time, jade increasingly became a status material that was used to make a wide range of functional, ceremonial and decorative objects, primarily for the ruling class.

China's long jade tradition peaked in the Qing dynasty (1644 - 1911 C.E.). During this time, jade was more plentiful than ever before, and the carvers were more technically skilled. They produced a wider variety of forms and styles, and jade objects became integrated into the daily life of a broad range of people.

Carving Jade

Nephrite has a complex crystalline structure that makes it very difficult to carve. In fact, nephrite is actually harder than steel and cannot be cut with a knife. Instead, it is shaped through the process of abrasion - rubbing it with the crushed sands of minerals that are harder than itself, such as quartz, garnet or diamond.

During the Qing dynasty, abrasion sands were glued to hand-operated discs and drills. Shaping jade in this way was very laborious and time-consuming. It sometimes took months or even years of patient work to create the most elaborate pieces.

Geology

Jade is a generic name that has been used for a variety of different hardstones that are predominantly green or white in color. The stone that we most commonly refer to as jade is the mineral nephrite.

Nephrite is composed of two other minerals, tremolite and actinolite, both of which are silicates of calcium and magnesium and belong to the amphibole group of minerals, characterized by fibrous or columnar crystals.

Nephrite is found in the seams of metamorphic rock, formed geologically under high temperature and pressure. Nephrite deposits exist around the world in parts of Asia, Australia, North America, South America, Europe and Africa. Most of the jade used in China during the Qing dynasty came from the Kunlun Mountains in what is now Xinjiang Province in Central China.



The name jade is also sometimes applied to another mineral, jadeite. Jadeite somewhat resembles nephrite, but it belongs to the pyroxene family of minerals and is a silicate of sodium and aluminum.

Image:
Nephrite from Lander County, Wyoming.
Photograph by Dave Dyet.

Discussion Themes

Art Is “Making Special”

The carved jade boulder and table screen represent examples of how artists make everyday objects special. The intricate carvings make these desk decorations important in personal, social and political areas of life. On the carved boulder, an inscribed poem by the emperor makes it even more valuable.

Discuss ways everyday objects are made special in our society. Do you have something that is more special because it has words from an important person on it? Look at magazines and find an everyday object that is made special in some ways.

Symbolism

A **symbol** is a person, place, or thing that stands for something else, usually an abstract idea or universal truth. Symbolism allows people to communicate beyond the limits of language. Symbols are part of everyday life, not just part of art or literature. We see them all around us – as the American flag, a peace sign, a school mascot, and even traffic signals.

Discuss visual symbols that are common in our own culture. Make a list and then discuss various meanings associated with each, include why you think each image or object came to represent the larger idea.



Visual Symbols in Chinese Art

These symbols are common in Chinese art and might be interesting for a discussion of symbolism.

Bamboo - Bamboo is a symbol of vitality because it can survive the hardest natural conditions and remains green all year round. It also represents the qualities of durability, strength, flexibility and resilience since it will bend in a storm but does not break.

Bat - The bat is a symbol of happiness and joy, because the pronunciation for bat, *fu*, sounds identical to the word for good fortune. Five bats together represent the “Five Blessings”: long life, wealth, health, love of virtue and a peaceful death.

Peach - A symbol of longevity and immortality.

Pine - Because it is evergreen and does not lose its leaves in winter, the pine is regarded as a symbol of longevity or noble endurance in the face of adversity.

Dragon - The Chinese dragon is the ultimate symbol of the cosmic energy, *qi*, and the most powerful symbol of good fortune. Ranked first among mythical beasts, it can bring rain to parched lands, which in turn represents abundance and relief.

Lesson: Symbolism

Description

Understanding symbols and how they work is an important skill and vital to understanding literature, art and different cultures. This lesson will encourage students to recognize and interpret common symbols and then create a symbol of their own.

Grade Level: Middle grades, 6-8

Learning Goals

- Understand the nature of symbols and how they work.
- Recognize symbols in everyday life.
- Discover common symbols in other cultures.
- Communicate complex ideas through the use of symbols.

Introduction: Understanding and Finding Symbols

- Introduce the concept of symbols and provide examples. Use the discussion themes and Chinese symbols included in this resources.
- Have students work in small groups to create a list of all the symbols they see in everyday life.
- Display examples that students have listed and talk about what they are used to represent.

Florida Standards

Language Arts

Standards for Speaking and Listening - LAFS.6 - 8.SL.1.1, LAFS.6.SL.1.2

Visual Arts

Critical Thinking and Reflection - VA.68.C.1.1, VA.68.C.1.2, VA.68.C.1.3, VA.68.C.3.3

Historical and Global Connections - VA.68.H.1.1, VA.68.H.1.3, VA.68.H.1.4

VA.68.H.3.2, VA.68.H.3.3

Organizational Structure - VA.68.O.2.2, VA.68.O.2.3, VA.68.O.2.4

Skills, Techniques and Processes - VA.68.S.1.3

Activity: Developing Personal Symbols

- Have students work individually to develop ideas for a unique symbol to represent their individual identities.
- Their symbol might represent a personality trait they are proud of, a special skill or ability they have, or a value they find important.
- Have students sketch their ideas.
- Once a final symbol design is developed, ask students to produce a full-color, final image, using color pencils or markers and plain white paper.
- Have students share their personal symbols with the class, discussing elements of the image and its meaning.
- If possible, display the final projects without names, and let students see if they are able to guess who created each one.

Get Creative - Have students use their final design to create a t-shirt with their personal symbol.

Evaluation

- Students will be able to describe a symbol as something that represents broader ideas or universal truths.
- Students will be able to identify common symbols and explain what they mean.
- Students will be able to identify aspects of their own identity that they value.
- Students will demonstrate abstract thinking by choosing and/or creating a visual symbol to represent themselves.

Resources/Bibliography

Books & Publications

- Dissanayake, Ellen. Homo Aestheticus. University of Washington Press, 1992.
- Mason, Charles Q. Spinach Green and Mutton-fat White: Chinese Jades of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). University of Florida Press, 2006.
- Pearce, Nick. "In a Perfect World: Jade Landscape Carvings." Orientalism, October 2011, vol. 4, no. 7, 64-70.

Online

Symbols in Chinese Art:

https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Chinese_symbols_1109.pdf

Symbols in various cultures:

<http://www.whats-your-sign/>