Basic Lesson Plan

EDU010
Ming Dynasty China
Ceramic Pillow
1368 - 1644
The Ming Dynasty – A Brief History
1368–1644

Geography
The Ming Dynasty extended as far north as Mongolia to the north and into central Asia in the west. It also reached as far south as Vietnam. It included the regions around the Huang He River (Yellow River) and the Yangzi River (Chang Jiang). The Dynasty touched the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea.

Founding of the Ming Dynasty
The Ming Dynasty was founded in 1368 when a Buddhist monk named Zhu Yuanzhang led a rebellion against the Mongol-led Yuan Dynasty. The bubonic plague had already weakened the Yuan Dynasty. Economic and political issues added to the Yuan’s end. Zhu Yuanzhang came from a very poor family. He had entered a Buddhist monastery to make sure he had food and clothing. Zhu Yuanzhang was 40 at the time he led the rebellion. After taking control, he changed his name to Ming Hong Wu and the Ming Dynasty was born. Ming means brilliant.

Ming Society
The Ming Dynasty was a period of good government, peaceful society, artistic achievements, and general prosperity. Ming emperors usually took an interest in the poor people’s welfare. Large estates were split into smaller pieces of land and redistributed to poor farming families.

Once in power, Hong Wu began eliminating all aspects of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty. The Confucian education system was brought back. Also reinstated was the civil service examination. Both of these government systems were used by earlier Chinese-led dynasties. The government also sponsored various courses. Included were classes that taught Chinese cultural traditions and Confucianism. Government support allowed colleges and academies to open across the Dynasty.

Hong Wu also took more control of the government than other emperors. In 1380, he killed his prime minister when he learned of a plot against him. He also killed the prime minister’s allies. From this time on, the emperor held complete control and began to rely heavily on eunuchs and mandarins to enforce policies at the local level. Eventually, the power held by these two groups would help bring an end to the Dynasty.
With the government reformed, the Ming began working on the infrastructure. Irrigation systems were repaired and built to help increase farm production. The government also supported the production of fine silk, textiles, porcelain, and lacquerware. Trade within the Ming territory surged and prosperity was felt at all levels of society. Internal trade was enhanced by the expansion of the Grand Canal, which allowed merchants to transport goods within the Empire. Although international trade was not actively supported by the government, merchants did sell goods to cities in Japan and to the islands of Southeast Asia. This thriving market also boosted the Ming economy.

Emperor Hong Wu instituted a code of laws that came to be known as Ta-Ming Lu. These laws were designed to be easily interpreted by officials, so as to avoid any confusion. These laws remained part of Chinese society until the end of the 1800s!

The Ming were fairly successful diplomats keeping relative peace with surrounding societies for long periods of time. In their lengthy existence, the Ming were rarely involved in large conflicts. This wasn’t true of many other nations at the time. Of course, having a standing army of more than 1 million soldiers helps when keeping the peace.

**The Great Wall, the Imperial City, and Zheng He**

In 1398, Ming Hong Wu was succeeded by his son Yong Le. Yong Le ruled the Ming Dynasty from 1398–1424. Among Yong Le’s greatest achievements are expanding the Great Wall, building the Imperial City, and commissioning voyages of exploration.

The northern border of the Ming Dynasty was the Great Wall. The fortification originated during the 4th century B.C., and was further added to by the Qing Dynasty. These walls, however, were in ruin by the time the Ming began constructing the Great Wall. Construction of the Great Wall lasted from the late 1400s through the 1500s. The Wall is approximately 1,550 miles long and varies in height from 33 to 40 feet. It contains watch towers, signal towers, and places for soldiers to sleep. Hundreds of thousands of workers were utilized in the construction of the wall.

In 1421, Yong Le moved the capital of the Ming Dynasty from Nanjing in the south, to Beijing in the north. The Imperial City, known to day as the Forbidden City, became the center of Ming power. The walled city contained the palace, waterways, beautiful gardens, and great courtyards. The purpose of the Imperial city was to show the strength and power of the Ming Dynasty and the emperor. The city still stands within modern-day Beijing.
Between 1405 and 1433, seven sea voyages were made to explore the lands bordering the Indian Ocean. These voyages were led by Zheng He. Zheng He was a court official in the Ming Dynasty. The first of these voyages included approximately 28,000 soldiers aboard 62 ships. It is important to remember that these expeditions took place almost 90 years before Christopher Columbus landed in the New World. The largest ship in Zheng He’s fleet was more than 440 feet long. Columbus’ famed Santa Maria was a mere 75 feet in length! He’s ships even had bulkheads—walls that contain a flood or fire within one section, and can prevent a ship from sinking. Chinese naval architecture was extremely advanced for the time period.

Zheng He’s seven voyages took him, and the Chinese, to Southeast Asia, the west coast of India, and to East Africa. He brought back goods and ideas that had never been seen before in China. These items and ideas were new and fascinating to the Chinese, but created concern among Confucian leaders in the government. According to Confucian teaching, tradition and doing things the way they had always been done was the correct way to live. Some historians think that the voyages of exploration were ended in 1433 because exposure to the outside world was a threat to the traditional Chinese way of life. By the end of the 1400s, the Ming had forbidden the building of ocean-going ships and people leaving the country. Unlike countries such as Britain and Spain, the Ming did not want to benefit economically from their voyages. They simply wanted to show the dominance of the Chinese.

By the early 1500s, contact between Europeans and the Ming were increasing mainly due to the expansion of trade. The Portuguese arrived in China in 1514 and were followed by missionaries. The benefits to trade were soon evident as foreign relations and diplomacy improved along with the overall economy. This new era in trade gave nations a chance to diversify their markets, create jobs, and encourage economic growth.

The Arts

The Ming Dynasty is commonly known for fine porcelain. Ceramic and porcelain works were popular in Ming culture, not only because of their beauty, but also because they often incorporated personal values and Confucian views of self-realization, potential, and learning, among others. Ceramics and porcelain techniques had been developed in China hundreds of years before the Ming; however, the artisans of the Ming Dynasty refined the process to create some of the finest pieces ever created.
Ming porcelain is traditionally known for its white porcelain and blue under glaze. However, susancai, a three-color approach, included yellow, green, and a dark purple. The dragon and phoenix were very popular motifs that were used on the porcelain pieces. Animals, plants, and people also appear on many pieces of art.

As with many empires, the Ming Dynasty left a lasting impact on the world through its art. Vibrant colors and unique designs were displayed on pottery such as the “leys” jar, a common fixture in Ming society. Lacquerware was also popular during the Ming Dynasty. Lacquer is a clear coating that is applied to the surface of pieces of art such as carved bowls. It hardens to a surface that can be highly polished. When polished, the surface develops the look of depth.

Literature was also popular during the Ming Dynasty. In fact, the novel was first created during this time period. Before the Ming, many books were created, but mostly for nobility. For the first time, books were now created using everyday language that could be read by any educated person. Early Ming books were short collections of stories. These stories were told by storytellers in exchange for payment. Eventually, these books turned into longer stories and finally novels. The three most famous Ming novels are *Journey to the West* (also called *The Monkey King*), *Tale of the Water*, and *The Plum in the Golden Vase*.

Emperor Yong Le also made contributions to literature. He ordered the creation of encyclopedia. The volumes were to contain history, philosophy, and literature. When completed, the *Yong Le Encyclopedia* included approximately 23,000 rolls of manuscript. It was never printed because of the length of the book, but provides a glimpse into Ming life and thought.

**The Fall of the Ming Dynasty**

The Ming Dynasty slowly weakened during the late 1500s and the 1600s. The early 1600s brought a famine to China and many peasants starved. Many were forced to eat grass roots and tree bark. The 1630s brought an epidemic. The government did little to help. The frustration felt by the peasants led to revolts in many cities.

While the Ming mainly focused on their internal problems, Manchurian militia groups to the north began to organize and unify. A Manchu leader named Nurhaci organized a central state with a set of laws and a strong military force. During the 1620s and 1630s, these militia groups attacked Ming military sites in Manchuria and took over Korea and Mongolia. Manchu invaders were also moving south into Ming territory. The Manchu eventually joined with the unhappy Ming peasants to
overthrow Beijing. The government system of eunuchs and mandarins failed to alert the emperor to the events taking place outside the Imperial Palace. It was only when the invading army pushed into the Imperial Palace, when the last Ming emperor was told of the invasion. He and his family committed suicide.

The Manchu eventually conquered the weakened Ming Dynasty in 1644. The Ming Dynasty was replaced by the Manchurian-led Qing Dynasty. The Qing Dynasty ruled China from 1644 through 1911.

The Ming Dynasty existed during an interesting era; a time period that saw dramatic changes and power shifts throughout the world. These include Christopher Columbus’ voyage to the New World and the founding of the first British colonies in the Americas. Nations across the world took very different paths as they wished to be viewed by their descendants in favorable and respectable light.
MAP 1: The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644

The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644
Chinese Ceramic Pillow (Ming Dynasty)
1368–1644

Art In History’s replica is an example of a Chinese ceramic pillow from the Ming Dynasty. The Ming Dynasty was founded in 1368. The word Ming means “brilliant” and their dynasty lived up to its name. Some art collectors consider Ming Dynasty porcelain to be the most beautiful of all Chinese ceramics. Massive forms, intricate designs and bright colors are typical of Ming ceramics. The most popular decorative motifs were animals, plants, dragons, and human figures in garden and interior settings.

Porcelain pillows were necessities in people’s daily life. Chinese pillows were made of stone, wood, jade, bronze, bamboo, and porcelain. They took many shapes and forms. Porcelain pillows became widely used after the development of porcelain-making crafts. Mass production of porcelain pillows began during the Tang Dynasty and continued on during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The modeling and decorative patterns on the pillows reflect the culture, customs, fashions, and pursuits of the social life at that time.

Painting on porcelain flourished during the Ming Dynasty and techniques in decorative brush painting improved. The classic Ming blue-and-white wares were known all over the world. Floral and foliage patterns were painted over the glaze, using striking colors of enamel. This over glaze technique took two generations to perfect. The process is very specific and getting the right mixture of enamels was very important.

The Ming dynasty was one of the longest dynasties of Chinese history. It lasted 276 years with 16 emperors occupying the throne. Another accomplishment of the Ming was the building of the Great Wall. While Great Walls had been built in earlier times, most of what is seen today was built and repaired by the Ming. The end of the Ming Dynasty was brought about by war with the Mongols, attacks by the Japanese, and peasant uprisings. This led to an economic crisis for the Dynasty.

Today, Ming Dynasty ceramics like this can be found in museums and galleries around the world. There have been recent exhibitions at the British Museum and the China House Gallery in New York. More information about Ming ceramics from this time period can be found in libraries and online.
SAMPLE MOTIFS

Finished Examples

Finished Examples

Front

Sides

Top
Design and Motif Codes

A. Ming blue-and-white ceramics have a characteristic boldness in their shape and decoration. The wide variety of Ming motifs is often crowded with many details. The pillow’s designs were believed to promote a peaceful night’s sleep and were usually painted with scenes from nature or with good luck symbols that conveyed wishes for longevity. Common motifs include the lotus, vines, dragons, and Taoist figures that had already appeared on earlier Chinese wares. Other animals and creatures include the ch’i-lin (unicorn), and the lung-ma (dragon-horse), and the fish. Scenes from literary and historical dramas written by Confucian scholars were also popular. The modeling and decorative patterns reflect the culture, customs, fashions, and pursuits of the social life at that time.

B. Floral and foliage patterns were painted over the glaze, using striking colors of enamel.

C. Geometric motifs such as cross-hatching and linear banding were sometimes used.

D. Animals and creatures such as the fish, unicorn, dragon, and dragon-horse were sometimes used.
STEP-BY-STEP PAINTING DIRECTIONS

(students can work in small groups)

I. APPLY THE BASE COLOR

1. Shake the colored stains. Pour a small amount of \textbf{WHITE} stain onto the palette. Use the sponge to give the pillow a \textit{light} coat of \textbf{WHITE} stain so the replica is uniform in color. Allow this base coat to dry a few minutes before moving on. \textit{NOTE: It is better to apply two lighter coats than heavier applications. If too much stain is used, the pottery will take longer to dry.}

2. When the pillow is dry, students may write their name on the inside/bottom.

II. PENCIL SKETCH DESIGNS ON THE PILLOW

1. Using a pencil and paper, students should draw their designs. Next, they may begin drawing their designs onto the replica. \textit{NOTE: Remind students before they begin drawing to SKETCH LIGHTLY on their pottery. Pencil lines are easily erased as long as they are lightly drawn. Pencil lines will be a map, or guide, for applying the stains. Designs should be checked for accuracy before any painting begins.}

2. Have the class practice using their brushes by painting thin lines on paper before they actually begin painting on their piece. This should ensure the desired results. If students create an area that must be re-done, the paint may be removed quickly before it has dried.

III. PAINT ON THE PILLOW

After students have finished sketching designs on their pillow, they are ready to paint. Have cups of water for the students so they may clean their brush in between colors. \textit{NOTE: To create a thin paint line dip brush in water first then in paint. This will liquefy resulting in a more fluid flow of paint}

1. Use the \textbf{COBALT BLUE}, \textbf{MAROON}, and \textbf{GRASS GREEN} stain to paint the drawn motifs. The \textbf{COBALT BLUE} stain should be used primarily on the piece, while \textbf{MAROON} and \textbf{GRASS GREEN} may be used as highlights. Paint with slow, determined strokes in order to achieve a smooth and flowing line.

2. Students may add areas of “wash” in various places of the decoration. A “wash” is a term for paint that has been thinned with water, giving it a “watercolor” effect when used. \textit{NOTE: fix any mistakes and remove excess water with paper towels.}

3. Students may mix a small amount of \textbf{MAROON} stain into some \textbf{GRASS GREEN} stain to make \textbf{BROWN}. This paint will be used to outline vines and vegetation shapes.

4. Use the \textbf{WHITE} stain to cover any mistakes. Add finishing touches and apply \textbf{COBALT BLUE}, \textbf{MAROON}, or \textbf{GRASS GREEN} stain as needed. Allow the pillow to dry completely.