

Lesson: Cultural Exchange between China and the Islamic World

This lesson is accompanied by a handout,
Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art.

Essential Question: How did trade between China and Central Asia affect the arts of Islam?

Learning experience: Students will analyze (1) a bowl made in Iraq (ninth to tenth centuries); (2) an Iranian landscape painting (1314-1315); and (3) three pieces (two from Turkey and one from Iran) depicting dragons. All are examples of the adoption of Chinese motifs by artists in the Islamic world.

Anticipatory set: Cultural exchange in the arts is closely connected to the idea of “taste.” “Taste” is judgment, preference, or inclination—what people like. Why and how did people in Islamic societies develop a taste for things Chinese?

Context: Contacts between Iran and China began in pre-Islamic times. The first knowledge of Iranian city states in Central Asia was brought back to China in the second century BCE. The land trade that developed around this time, the famous [Silk Roads](#), would come to satisfy a craving for silk among the upper classes in ancient Rome. The powerful empires that governed pre-Islamic Iran, the [Parthians](#) (248 BCE-224) and the [Sassanians](#) (224-651), were intermediaries in this trade.

[Iraq and China—Ceramics, Trade, and Innovation](#)

An interactive journey from China to Iraq during the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

Freer/Sackler Galleries

By the eighth century, Arab and Iranian seafarers had overcome the difficulties involved in sailing from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea. Ceramics were probably the most important cargo they carried back to the West. Such trade had a tremendous impact on the development of Islamic art:

Chinese ceramics were the single most important stimulus to the development of fine pottery in the Islamic world, arriving first in the 9th century. Previously Islamic potters had produced mainly simple kitchen and storage wares, unglazed or with low-fired turquoise glazes. The first meeting with fine Chinese wares taught them that pottery making need not be restricted to serving mere utilitarian ends but could be developed into a skilled artistic enterprise, producing goods for the luxury market. . . Contemporary textual references reflect the esteem in which the Chinese wares were held. . . Vast quantities of them came to the Middle East directly through a trade that has continued virtually uninterrupted until the present. By the mid-9th century potters in the Islamic world had

transformed the quality of their products, creating a market in which their goods approached the status of fine or precious metalwork (www: Watson 2011).

Some three centuries later the Mongol conquests would also have a transformative effect on art in the Islamic world.

The [Mongol Empire](#) was the largest land empire in world history. In the late thirteenth century it became possible for merchants such as Marco Polo to travel from one end of Eurasia to the other under [Mongol protection](#). Unobstructed trade routes created favorable conditions for the east-to-west and west-to-east movement of art motifs between cultures. Also, the Mongols were much interested in the luxury products made by craftspeople in the great sedentary civilizations they conquered. They frequently transported whole workshops from one part of their empire to another.

[Book illustration](#), which increased in popularity in Iran under the Mongol Ilkhanid Dynasty (1256-1335), now changed

due to the strong influence and incorporation of eastern Asian, mostly Chinese, elements that freely circulated in Persia. . . It is not clear whether Chinese painters were actually transferred to Persia and trained local artists or if it was mostly a matter of wide circulation of Chinese scrolls and other works on paper in Persia that made a special impression on Persian artists (www: Carboni 2012).

Gnarled trees and towering peaks, common elements in [Chinese landscape painting](#), were some of the motifs adopted by Iranian artists.

Dragons and other [creatures](#) also traveled west from China in the wake of the Mongol invasions and the establishment of the Ilkhanid dynasty in Iran.

The [dragon](#) had been part of Chinese culture for thousands of years and was a symbol of the [creative energy of nature](#) and royal authority. However, in West Asia, as in Europe, dragons were malevolent. Dragon killing was a job for heroes and kings. Nevertheless, to depict such [scenes](#) from the Iranian national epic, the *Shanameh* (c. 1000, the most frequently illustrated text in the arts of Islam), painters used the Chinese dragon.

Read about the Mongol Empire and its impact on the arts:

[A New Visual Language Transmitted Across Asia](#)

Metropolitan Museum Timeline of Art History

[The Mongols in World History](#)

Asia for Educators, Columbia University

[The Legacy of Ghenghis Khan](#)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Rationale: Decorative elements in art can reflect the global nature of cultural exchange and cultural diffusion.

Instructional Resources: (1) a bowl made in Iraq (ninth to tenth centuries); (2) an Iranian landscape painting (1314-1315); and (3) three pieces (two from Turkey and one from Iran) depicting dragons; *Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art* handout.

The observations below are meant to be a partial teacher's guide.

1. Blue-and-White Bowl
Iraq, Abbasid (750-1258)
9th-10th century
(KHAL.2006.0026)



[Dish](#)
China, Tang Dynasty (618-907)
8-9th century

- [Fragments](#) believed by some scholars to be Chinese imports have been excavated from places such as Samarra in Iraq.
- Iranian potters did not have the same type of fine white clay as the Chinese, nor the ability to fire ceramics at the same high temperatures.

The hardness and strength of imported articles. . .that arrived in quantity in the early Abbasid period (8th-10th centuries) could thus not be reproduced, but only the surface appearance. Islamic potters thus generally found it profitable to concentrate on copying wares that were valued for their looks and 'status,' rather than those valued for practical use" (www: Watson 2011).

2. Miniature Landscape
Iran, Tabriz, Ilkhanid (1256-1335)
1314-5
(KHAL.2006.0104)



(A) [Lady Playing a Flute](#)
Iran, Tabriz, Akkoyunlu
Later 15th century.

(B) [Painted Banner](#)
China, Gansu, Dunhuang; Caves of the
Thousand Buddhas, Cave 17
Mid-9th century?

- A depiction of the Jetavana Grove, the place where the Buddha did much of his teaching. It is from an important work called *Jami' al-Tawarikh* ("Compendium of Chronicles"), an illustrated world history written by the Ilkhanid vizier Rashid al-Din in the early fourteenth century.
- This is believed to be the "first true landscape painting in Islamic art." The Chinese sources which inspired paintings like this are not precisely known. Nevertheless, works such as (B) from Dunhuang (Gansu province, China) indicate the presence of Chinese landscape styles on the Silk Roads well before the Mongol invasions.
- The picture of a lady playing a flute (A) copies another favorite Chinese motif, the flowering plum tree.

3. Door Handle
Turkey, Jazira, Ottoman (1299-1923)
Early 13th century
(KHAL.2006.0079)



4. Tile with Dragon Figure
Iran, Ilkhanid (1256-1335)
Late 13th century
(KHAL.2006.0094)



5. Carved and Gold-inlaid Cup
Turkey, Ottoman (1299-1923)
15th century
(KHAL.2006.0086)



<p>(A) Dragon China, Tang Dynasty (618-907) 7th century</p>	<p>(B) Tapestry with Dragon and Flowers Eastern Central Asia 11th–12th century</p>
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- This little dragon (A) from Tang China had [ancestors](#) going back thousands of years.
- Paired facing animals are a [common motif](#) with a long history in pre-Islamic West Asia. Winged dragons such as this thirteenth-century door handle from Anatolia (3) “were thought of at the time as charms or amulets to ward off evil. . .such motifs on doors were supposed to prevent undesirable visitors from crossing the threshold” (www: Doorknocker).
- Actually, this is not a handle but a door-knocking device. Parts are missing. This similar pair of [dragons on the door](#) of a thirteenth-century mosque in Turkey shows the mechanism.
- The dragon tile (4) is from a palace of the second ruler of the Mongol Ilkhanid dynasty. The dragon is Chinese. One chamber of the palace had walls covered to the height of six feet with tiles of dragons and other auspicious animals. Dragons accompanied by floral decoration (B) were popular in Central Asia before the rise of the Mongols.
- The jade cup (3) is tiny, only 1¾ inches in height and is inlaid with a gold vegetal pattern. The dragon seems to be hiding his head. It is possible that the cup was used for [detecting poison](#).

Procedure: Students will discuss these five works using *Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art*.

- Study these works using the basic elements of design—line, color, value, texture, space, shape, and form. Of the seven design elements, do some stand out as more important than others? Can you make a general statement with respect to the design issues that the creators of these works regarded as important?
- What words would you use to describe the decoration on the Abbasid bowl (1)? Can you compare it with anything in the arts of our own time?

- Compare the miniature landscape (2) and the painted banner (2B). Are these works naturalistic or realistic?

Realism: Art based on the direct observation of the external world, including or even emphasizing flaws and imperfections rather than beauty or idealized characteristics.

Naturalism: Art based on the direct observation of the external world, particularly in contrast to works that are more stylized, abstract, or dependent on stereotypes. Naturalism is distinguished from realism because it doesn't tend to focus on the flaws and imperfections of the subject depicted.

Adapted from the [Getty Art and Architecture Thesaurus® Online](#)

- Which characteristic is shared by most of these six dragons—3, 4, 5; (A), (B). What makes a dragon a dragon? Which of the elements of style are most relevant? Which of the principles of artistic analysis (balance, unity, emphasis, contrast, pattern, movement, rhythm) are most relevant?

Whole Group Reflection: What are the main differences between cultural exchange in the globalized twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the pre-modern world of the Islamic empires?

Instructional Modification: Students can compare and contrast Chinese and Iranian landscapes to nineteenth-century French Impressionism or the Hudson River School in the USA.

Application: Can you think of places where we see the influence of Chinese art or Islamic vegetal pattern in contemporary design? Explain how the design is used and how it becomes “contemporary.” How does it reflect the convergence of global influences today?

Bibliography

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Acknowledgements

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