Explore one of the world’s finest collections of Chinese art and design at the home of creativity

Key Stages 1 & 2: Art & Design, RE, Literacy

Ox-shaped vessel, maker unknown, 1749-1795, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London
Introduction
The T.T. Tsui Gallery (Room 44) displays an extensive collection of Chinese art and design. The collection includes ceramics, bronzes, textiles, furniture and sculptures. Spanning five thousand years of culture, it is a rich source of inspiration. The gallery is organised into six sections, reflecting different aspects of life and society:

• **Ruling**: Objects such as a carved lacquer throne and dragon robes show the authority of Chinese emperors.
• **Burial**: Funerary items reveal that ancient Chinese cultures believed in an afterlife and sent messages to their ancestors.
• **Temple and Worship**: Examples of Daoist and Buddhist arts show the influences of the two major religions in China.
• **Eating and Drinking**: Objects reflect the social and ritual roles of food and drink in Chinese culture.
• **Living**: Examples like an inkstone or a Kang table show how the scholarly class and wealthy families lived.
• **Collecting**: Objects valued by collectors reveal the changing artistic tastes of different dynasties.

To see more Chinese objects visit: Chinese Export Art (Level 1, Room 47f), Chinese Sculpture (Level 1, Room 47e) and the Ceramics galleries (Level 6, Rooms 136, 137 and 145).

Pre-visit activities

**Storytelling: Traditional Tales**
Find a traditional story about Chinese New Year, such as the Nian (year) monster or the Chinese Zodiac. What does the story tell us about Chinese culture, for example, why is red a popular colour or why are pigs considered lucky?

**Making: China Old and New**
What comes to mind when you think about China? Together as a class, create a collage of the old and new China. This might include images of school life, pastimes, food, clothing, music, dance, sports and festivals.

The Museum visit
We recommend using the following themes as starting points to introduce a few key objects. Download the accompanying student activity sheets for each theme.

**Decoration & Symbolism**
The natural world is a source of continuing inspiration for Chinese art. Common symbols include the dragon, phoenix, crane, bat, fish, ox, melon, peony and lotus. The meanings are often associated with marriage, health, longevity and family life. Meanings come from the characteristics of a plant or animal as well as plays on words. Melons grow on vines and have a large number of seeds, so they symbolise family and fertility; cranes are thought to live long lives; oxen work hard even in difficult conditions, so they are seen as an animal of noble character; and the words for ‘bat’ and ‘happiness’ share the same pronunciation.

Chinese characters are considered highly decorative. On the floor in the middle of the gallery is the Chinese character for ‘middle’. China refers to itself as the ‘Middle Kingdom’.

**Materials & Processes**
Five of the most popular materials and processes used in Chinese art are on display: porcelain, jade, silk, lacquer and cloisonné.

Porcelain originates in China and is valued for its translucence. Jade is a rare, dense stone, with a subtle warm colour and smooth texture after polishing. Silk is a luxurious material and was used for Chinese paintings. Lacquer and cloisonné require labour-intensive treatments and are richly decorative. Lacquer is the sap of a tree; it is applied to a wooden base, built up in many layers and then carved. The carved lacquer table in the gallery is thought to be made up of at least one hundred layers of lacquer. For cloisonné, wires are bent to create a design, onto which enamel paint is applied before firing. The wires are called cloisons, which means partition in French.

**Heaven & Earth**
The emperor was believed to be the ‘Son of Heaven’. His duty was to heaven as well as to his people on Earth. To integrate his two roles, the emperor held rituals to pay respect to the cosmic powers and his ancestors. Burials in China showed that ordinary people also believed in the power of the spirits of their ancestors and asked for their blessings.

Dragon robes show the significance of maintaining the Heaven-Earth balance. Yellow is the colour of Earth and was used by royalty. Designs on the robes include mountains, water and curling waves, as well as dragons flying in the sky among clouds. The emperor was represented by the five-clawed dragon.

Follow-up activities / find out more

• Compare what you see in the gallery with the collage created in class. Discuss similarities and differences.
• Write a story about time travellers to China. Describe what they might encounter.
• Visit the V&A’s China hub on its website: http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/c/china/
• Visit the V&A’s collection online, Search the Collections: http://collections.vam.ac.uk/