

Ceramic Traditions



Nature and Symbolism



Discover the symbolic meanings associated with natural imagery in Korean celadon

Lesson Overview

Learning Objectives

Students will:

- Examine symbolism associated with imagery from nature
- Learn about celadon production in Goryeo-period Korea
- Design their own ewer with symbols that are meaningful to them

Vocabulary

Ceramic

Objects produced by shaping pieces of clay that are then hardened by heat

Ewer

In Korean pottery, an ewer is a pouring vessel/pitcher

Goryeo Dynasty

A Korean dynasty (918–1392) that saw outstanding achievements in Korean art and culture, such as the refined production of celadon and the invention of the world's first moveable metal-cast type

Symbol

An image that represents something more than its literal meaning (for example, a dove is often considered to be a symbol of peace)

Glaze

A coating for ceramics that turns into glass when fired, making the ceramics more attractive as well as protecting the clay and making it waterproof

Celadon (*ch'ongja* in Korean)

A type of glaze that is renowned for its distinctive grayish blue-green color

Required Materials

- Paper
- Pencils

Included Resources

- [Image of lotus flower](#)
- [Image of white moth](#)
- [Image of cocoon](#)
- [Images of other vessel examples](#)

For the Teacher

Background Information

Ewer in the Shape of a Lotus is considered one of the masterworks in the Brooklyn Museum's Korean art collection due to its intricate design that combines many different ceramic-making techniques. The ewer was produced during Korea's Goryeo dynasty, in the first half of the twelfth century, a time when ceramic technology in Korea reached new heights that included refined stoneware, clear celadon glaze, and naturalistic forms. From delicate cups to elaborate vessels, celadon-glazed ceramics were fashioned for the royal court, aristocracy, and religious establishments for everyday and ceremonial functions.

While Korea first imported celadon technology from China in the ninth century, Korean potters quickly modified and innovated their techniques, combining the new technology with their traditional expertise. For instance, by switching to small mud kilns instead of large brick kilns (typically used in China), Korean potters were able to better control the temperature and consequently produce a more distinctive green color. Korean celadons were widely admired, even in China, where one writer described them as "first under Heaven."

Artwork Description

From the round, bud-shape body decorated with lotus petals to the inverted lotus blossom lid, the lotus flower is a recurring motif in almost every aspect of this ewer. The lid and body have slightly different tones of green, probably because they were fired in separate areas of the kiln. We know that they belong together because the tiny white moth on the lid appears directly opposite the cocoon, from which it has just emerged, on the handle. Whereas the body of the ewer is made of light gray clay, the moth and cocoon are in white porcelain, a material that was new to Korean potters at the time. The lotus petals on the body were made by carving into the clay and then applying the green celadon glaze.

About the Artwork

The relative prosperity and peace during the Goryeo dynasty set the conditions for noteworthy achievements in Korean art and culture, including that of celadon production. In addition, the spread of tea culture, as well as the royal court's interest and investment in fine ceramics, further accelerated innovations in celadon. Buddhism, which was the state religion of the Goryeo dynasty, also played a key role in the art made during this period. The lotus flower, the primary motif in the ewer, is an important symbol of rebirth and enlightenment in Buddhism. As lotus flowers root in the muddy bottom of a pond and yet bloom beautifully in the air, the flowers serve as a metaphor for the potential of every human to achieve enlightenment. The silk moth, which is featured on the lid, is a common type of white moth known to Koreans. It is not only associated with producing highly valued silk but may also serve as a symbol of transformation, since moths go through several life stages: egg, larva, pupa, and adult.

The exceptionally intricate designs on the ewer are executed with several different ceramic-making techniques. The lid and its moth decoration were likely hand-molded and attached using a process called appliqué. The pattern on the body was created by carving very shallow indentations in which the glaze pooled, making the lines appear darker. The tiny white dots were hand-painted with slip (thinned clay).

Lesson

Introduction/Warm-Up: Defining a Symbol

Explain to students that they will be examining symbols as they look at ceramics from Korea.

Ask students to discuss the following two questions with a partner (*think-pair-share*):

- What is a symbol?
- What are some examples of symbols?

Ask the group to share what they discussed.

Explain to students that a symbol is an image that represents something more than its literal meaning. Meanings of symbols can vary depending on the context (i.e., the culture, religion, time period, etc.) and can also change over time. Share a couple of examples, such as the use of a rose to represent love or use of a dove to represent peace.



Artwork Discussion

Show students images of Ewer in the Shape of a Lotus, including close-up pictures of the lid and handle. It may help to share printouts of the details in addition to showing them on a projector. Explain that the artwork was made more than eight hundred years ago during the Goryeo dynasty in Korea.

Observational sketching: Invite students to look closely at the object and spend five minutes sketching details of the plants and insects they see. Tell them that, if they are feeling overwhelmed trying to illustrate the whole object, they can focus on one part of it.

After sketching, ask students:

- What more did you notice about the artwork as you drew it?
- How long do you think this ewer took to make? Why?
- How would you describe the colors of the artwork?
- What adjectives might describe the colors (e.g., “fiery red” or “earthy brown”)?

Explain to students that the greenish-blue color of the artwork is referred to as celadon (or *ch’ongja* in Korean). The celadon color was highly valued in East Asia for its resemblance to jade, a green rock that symbolizes purity and beauty. Explain that the vessel would have been used for wine.

Ask students:

- What plants do you see? Where do you see them?

Show students images of a lotus flower and explain that it is an important symbol in Buddhism, the main religion in Goryeo Korea. Share that lotus flowers grow from the mud and emerge above water as delicate flowers in a variety of colors.

Ask:

- What might the lotus flower symbolize?

Explain to students that, because it is a delicate flower that emerges from the mud, the lotus flower symbolizes rising above, or overcoming, hardships in Buddhism.

Show students a close-up image of the moth and cocoon, then ask: What do you think this might be?

Show an image of a moth and cocoon. Share that the cocoon is the silky covering or “case” that a silkworm makes around itself before it becomes a moth, which is a flying insect similar to a butterfly. Then ask:

- What do you think the moth and cocoon might symbolize in this artwork?





Ewer in the Shape of a Lotus (details), first half 12th century. Carved stoneware with underglaze slip decoration and celadon glaze. Brooklyn Museum; Gift of Mrs. Darwin R. James III, 56.138.1a-b. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum in collaboration with National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage, Daejeon, Korea)



Clockwise from top:
Blossoming lotus flower. (Photo: Apanasevich Maxim, courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Moth cocoon. (Photo: Dinesh Valke, courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#))

White moth. (Photo: Mathias Krumbholz, courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Activity: Nature Walk

Tell students that they will be exploring natural forms in their own communities. Make sure each student has a pencil and a notebook to write in, then lead them in a nature walk.

While you're walking, ask students to pay attention to the shapes, colors, and patterns they see. Encourage them to look for both large and small examples; for example, they might look at the shapes and textures of tree bark or of weeds growing in the sidewalk.

Find someplace where students can congregate while they continue to observe nature, such as a park or a courtyard, and ask them to share some of what they noticed on their walk. Then ask students to choose two or three things from nature to sketch in their notebooks. Encourage them to capture as much detail as possible in their sketches.

While they're drawing, remind students of the symbolism of lotus flowers. Ask them to think about the natural forms they decided to draw and to consider what symbolic meanings they could have. Ask students to jot down some ideas before returning to school.



Extension Activities

ELA Connection—Sijo Poetry

Introduce students to sijo poetry, a type of poetry that began during the Goryeo dynasty in Korea. Sijo poems were originally performed as songs and usually include imagery found in nature. Sijos are often written in three lines: The first line introduces the situation of the poem, the second line further develops the situation, and the third line is the conclusion, usually with some sort of unexpected plot twist. Read a few examples together, then ask students to write their own sijo poem focused on the theme of “rising above,” inspired by the symbolism of lotus flowers.

Arts Connection—Natural Vessels

Show students the artwork again and discuss all the different ways that it incorporates natural imagery, such as the lotus pattern on the body of the vessel, the petals on the lid, and the cocoon on the handle. Show students examples of other vessels and discuss different ways they see nature integrated into the designs. Have students design their own vessels incorporating natural imagery from their nature walks, thinking about ways to use patterns, shapes, and textures from nature in different parts of the vessel.

Acknowledgments

Support for our Arts of East Asia curriculum was made possible by the Freeman Foundation.

This resource was written by Natalia Choi, Curriculum Consultant, and Niles Mattier, Associate Manager of Teacher Services, with assistance from Joan Cummins, Lisa and Bernard Selz Senior Curator, Asian Art, and our 2022 Summer Teacher Institute participants.

The Arts of East Asia curriculum initiative is coordinated by Niles Mattier, Associate Manager of Teacher Services, with assistance from Michael Reback, Senior Manager of School Programs.

Cover:

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