

Art of China c. 3000 BCE – 1300 CE



Chinese artists surpassed the rest of the ancient world in ceramic craftsmanship.



Neolithic earthenware vases, Majiayao culture, China 3000-2500 BCE

Just look at these Neolithic earthenware vessels. They are all unique in their shapes, forms, and decorations.

Their smoothly rounded contours are remarkably symmetrical and you can see by the cross-sections that the walls are nearly eggshell thin.



Diamond Sutra frontispiece *Buddha discoursing with Subhuti with divine beings, monks, officials*
woodcut print 868 CE

China invented printing technology and printed the first newspaper in 748 CE. The first printed book is the *Diamond Sutra*. This text was created in 868 with large woodcut blocks.

By 1100 the Chinese had invented movable type and had printed copies of classic texts. Within the next hundred years they were printing paper money. Printing technology became widely used in the West hundreds of years later.



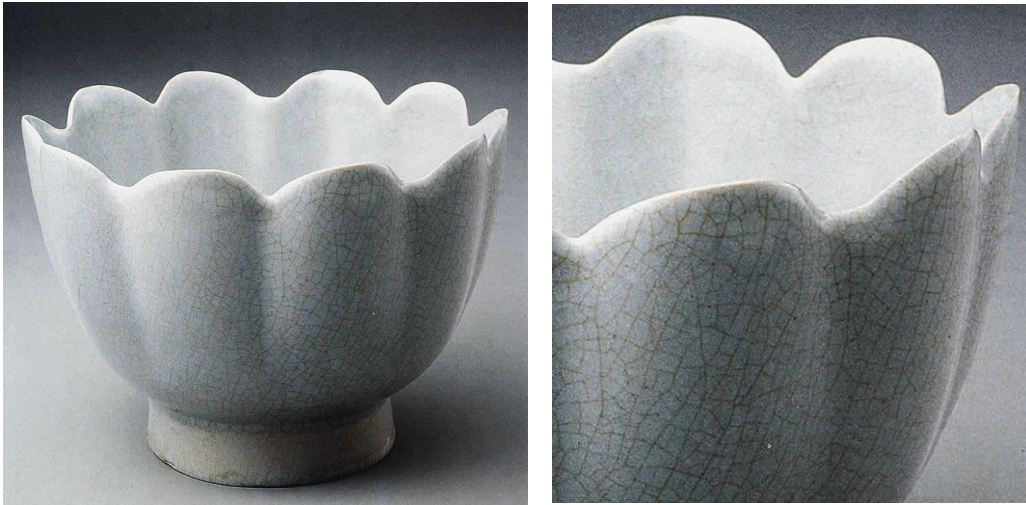
Tang Period Horse, early 700s, North China (earthenware with multicolored lead glazes)

The streaks of glaze running down the sides of this horse are compatible with Daoist philosophy. In ancient Daoist writings, one's goal is to be like water.

Water is gentle and moves easily and effortlessly since it flows along the path of least resistance. It yields to nature and does not force its way but changes course to adapt to its surroundings. Over time, water can carve through the hardest stone. It is a lesson about strength through flexibility.

The artist who created this tomb figure of a horse did not try to force the glaze to remain within certain boundaries.

Instead, the glaze has been allowed to flow freely and it contributes to the unique beauty of the piece.



Porcelain Ju ware lotus bowl Northern Song Dynasty, c. 12th century

Tang and Song artists perfected firing and glazing techniques. They were the first to create porcelain, a type of stoneware that is heated in the kiln to extremely high temperatures. The new porcelain pieces drew from old traditions. Frequently, ceramic pieces were made to resemble jade with blue-green glazes.

If you look closely at this bowl, you can see a crackle pattern. This pattern is created in the glaze during the firing process.

The approach of this “crackle” glazing technique is similar to the running glaze of the Tang horse since the artist lets go of the attempt to control the appearance of the crackle pattern.

Both approaches demonstrate the Daoist emphasis on harmony with nature and not trying to micromanage life. The artist puts the piece in the kiln, allowing nature to determine the final outcome.

The end result is embraced as the most perfect possible form.



Vairocana Buddha, Longmen Caves, Luoyang China, Tang Dynasty c. 670-680 CE

This sculptural ensemble shows important spiritual figures using hierarchy of scale and traditional physical traits.

This figure represents **Buddha**.

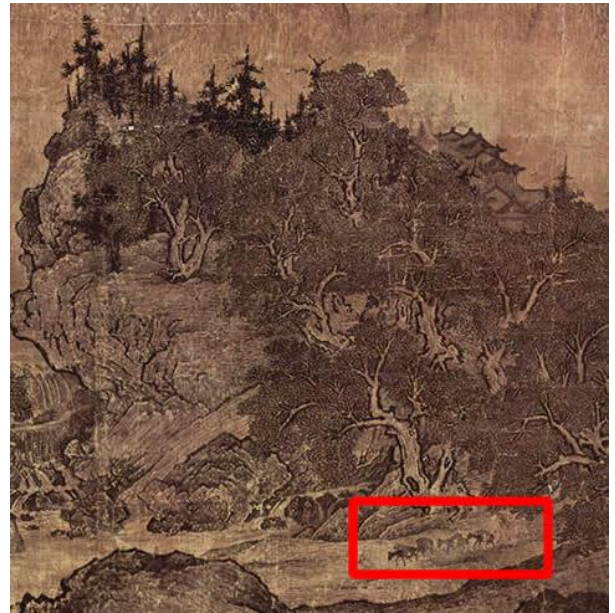
- He is typically shown with a top-knot or cranial bump, elongated earlobes, down-cast gaze, and serene expression.

This figure represents a **Bodhisattva**.

- Bodhisattvas are spiritual teachers who have reached the point of enlightenment. They are dedicated to helping others achieve enlightenment. They choose to postpone Nirvana in order to be born again and again until all living beings have become enlightened.
- These figures are usually shown wearing beautiful clothing and jewelry that symbolized the wealth of wisdom they have to offer. They may not be rich or fancy in real life, but in artworks, they are depicted like this to show their value and importance in the world

This figure is a **monk**.

- Monks may function as a spiritual teachers but they are different from Bodhisattvas. They have not, necessarily reached the point of enlightenment, nor are they always committed to helping humanity lifetime after lifetime.
- In traditional representations they are usually shown with shaved heads and wearing simple robes.



Fan Kuan *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* Northern Song dynasty, early 11th century

Eastern pantheism led landscape artists to approach nature from a holistic point of view. One Chinese art critic in eleventh century described this as the “angle of totality.” Other Song critics encouraged artists to “capture the whole universe within a few inches of space.”

This famous ink-on-silk scroll achieves those goals and demonstrates that human beings are a small part of the greater cosmos. The figures don’t dominate nature, they are a part of the larger whole.

This piece is widely considered to be one of the greatest works in the history of Chinese art.



Mu Qi *Swallow and Lotus* Song dynasty c. 960-1279

Chinese painters in the Song era were encouraged to create works that imitated the yin/yang principle of wholeness. Seemingly opposite ideas are interacting with one another in a single composition.

Notice how visual opposites complement each other in the overall design:

- Large & small forms
- Dark & light values
- Bold & muted brush strokes
- Hazy & crisply defined shapes
- Filled space & empty space