

About Chinese Folk Arts

This outreach kit is designed to let students see firsthand some of the folk arts of China that are still being produced. Folk arts are those artistic expressions that come from people not formally trained in a school of art. Some folk artists learn from parents or others in their family or village. Others simply have the artistic ability to produce exceptional works that the village or region recognizes and supports.

The need for certain objects for rituals, celebrations, and important events usually is what keeps folk arts alive. In the past people needed handcrafted offerings to honor the spirits and demons that governed the diverse facets of their lives. Not too long ago, these celebrations and rituals were discouraged and the arts were waning in China. However, in recent years celebrations have once again taken on importance in communities, and along with them folk arts are flourishing. Globalization has made many of these objects of folk art available all over the world. People like to collect folk art.

Folk arts are conservative; that is, they resist change. However, as daily life changes over many years, meaning and sometimes form does change. Rural people of China (and many parts of the world) are superstitious and for centuries have depended on rituals to ensure good fortune, health, and happiness and provide protection for individuals, families, and communities. These beliefs remain in many areas. In others, the celebrations and rituals serve more to unify communities and provide outlets and relief from the routine and labors of daily life.

Chinese Folk Arts: Continuity and Change

The rural people of China are responsible for keeping ancient folk arts alive.

Among China's rural and ethnic peoples there is great concern for health, happiness, and good fortune. These concerns have been passed down to them from their ancestors and symbolize modern people's connections to past generations.

Many celebrations and ceremonies result from people's desire to protect their communities from bad things and bring good fortune. For these ceremonies, today's people still use folk objects that are based in the past. They demand that the quality of these arts remain high so that the ceremonies will please the spirits and ancestors and be effective.

In addition to community needs, local people call on folk artists for their individual family's charms and household protective objects. Houses contain many kinds of good fortune charms. Mothers still put protective charms on small children's clothing and toys.

Early trade with other countries by way of the Silk Road across China to India and the Middle East introduced China's folk arts to the outside world. Chinese ships sailed across the China Sea to Japan, Africa, and places in between. Eventually trade with Europe and America created a worldwide appreciation of and demand for these arts. Today, people in other countries still collect, use, and enjoy many products of Chinese folk artists.

These objects in this kit are examples of some of the many folk arts that have ties to the past and still are created by modern Chinese people.

OBJECT LABELS

(also included loose in kit)

PAPERCUTS

Colorful papercuts decorate windows, doors and walls to mark festivals, weddings, and other joyous events. Chinese people have made cut paper decorations for over 1,500 years. Today they still can be found decorating windows and doors to help sweep away troubles and misfortune

FANS

Chinese people have used fans for keeping stoves burning, driving away pesky insects, keeping cool, and showing importance for over 2,000 years. Artists like to paint on the fans. Today, fans are made of fragrant woods. They help keep people cool in summer and in winter, when put in drawers of cloths, make the clothes smell good.

CHOPSTICKS

Chopsticks are Asia's forks. They are really quite easy to use. You should hold one stick between your thumb and the base of your first two fingers. Support the other stick with your third finger. Hold both chopsticks near the top.

ABACUS

A Chinese abacus is the world's earliest calculator. Chinese shop owners still use these when making a sale. A contest was held between someone using our electric calculator and a Chinese person using an abacus; the abacus made the calculation faster than the electric calculator.

OPERA MASK AND PUPPETS

Opera and puppet theater in the old style is still popular entertainment all over China. The villains have faces with colored patterns. The heroes and heroines have simpler makeup.

CANDY BAG DOLL

In both old and new China, people give candy in small, colorful bags to children, friends and relatives on special holidays, at the beginning of a friendship, or for a recent marriage.

PORCELAIN TEA CUP

The Chinese discovered a very white, hard material from clay. They used this to make dishes. Today this material is called porcelain or "china". Tea, a popular drink in China, is drunk from a cup with no handle.

WRITING SET

Education is very important to the Chinese. Their ancient form of writing, called calligraphy is a great art because there are so many symbols to learn. Writing is done with brushes and a block of hard ink. To write, you must grind the ink stick in water on a special stone to make it yourself. Today, some people buy their ink already made into liquid but many like to make their own.

PORCELAIN DOLLS

In China, children's clothes and decorations help to protect them from bad things. In the past and even today, children wear hats, collars, and shoes with designs of protective animals to scare away evil spirits. Mothers tie lucky red ribbons and decorations in children's hair.

Sons were thought to be especially important because they would grow up to remember the ancestors and have more sons. They often wore special ornaments on their clothes or around their necks.

Which one of these dolls do you think is the boy? Why?

CHOP OR SEAL

In China, important papers were not signed with a pen but rather stamped with a personal seal. The chop was often beautifully carved at the top and the personal seal was carved into the bottom. This chop does not yet have a person's seal carved into the bottom. A man carried his personal seal in a beautiful case. Artists signed their work with their seals.

CLOISONNE EXERCISE BALLS

These beautiful balls are used to exercise the hands and fingers. They are decorated with an ancient process called cloisonné. Tiny metal wires are attached to a metal base in shapes. Colorful powdered glass is put in the shapes and the object is heated in an oven. The powdered glass melts leaving shiny pictures on the object.

PEDDLER'S DRUM

Peddlers, or traveling salesmen, would play drums like this to let townspeople know they had come with things for sale. Peddlers would sell folk arts made in one village to people living in another place.

SPIRIT MONEY

Paper money was printed on wood blocks, a form of printing invented by the ancient Chinese. Each year, families burned special paper money at the graves of their ancestors. In this way, the ancestors would have money in the spirit world for the coming year. Many Chinese people still remember their ancestors in this way.

CARVED CINNABAR NECKLACE

Cinnabar, a red mineral, is used in much of Chinese art because of its color. Red has long been considered a color of good fortune. Artists carve beautiful and fancy designs into the cinnabar.

OLD CHINESE COINS

Old coins of China were round with square holes in them. The round shape stood for the Universe and the square hole was the earth at the center of the universe. Before pockets were put in clothes, the coins could be strung on a silk cord and tied to a man's belt. Today, old coins are sewn onto children's clothes and worn as jewelry to bring wealth.

LIFE CYCLE OF THE SILK WORM

In ancient times, the Chinese learned how to raise silkworms, unwind the silk threads from their cocoons and spin the thread into beautiful cloth. For many centuries the secret of making silk was kept in China. The emperor said that if anyone told the secret outside of China he would punish them with death. Eventually the rest of the world did find out how to make silk. However, Chinese silk is considered the finest.

JADE CHARM

Jade, a valuable stone in China, comes in several colors. Green is the most well known. Children and adults wore charms such as this one to help keep away illness and bad spirits.

CARVED PUZZLE BALL

The puzzle or mystery ball has that name because it puzzles most people about how the carver could create it. Puzzle balls are an ancient art and can have as many as 25 smaller balls, all carved and freely moving, inside the outer ball. Puzzle balls have intertwined dragons on the outside. Since dragons are considered benevolent (good willed) the puzzle balls bring good fortune to the household where it hangs.

Usually carved of ivory, this ball is of sandalwood, a fragrant tree.

LACQUER WARE

Lacquer ware is a distinctly Chinese art. It began thousands of years ago when country people found that putting the sap of a certain tree on baskets made them waterproof. Later, lacquer was applied to other objects and, because it is a very long and difficult process, it became an art form. Because lacquer work is so time consuming, most of it is made in workshops. This way an artist works on just one stage of production and other artists work on other stages. It is art produced by a group. (6.1)

WOK

China has one of the largest populations of any place in the world. It is difficult to have enough food for so many people. In addition, for many centuries, trees have been cut down and burned for cooking fires and for heat. Now there are not many trees left in China.

In order to feed their large populations, Chinese people invented the art of wok cooking. They cut scarce or expensive foods like meats, fish, and vegetables into small pieces and cook these quickly in the wok. The cooked food is put on bowls of rice so that everyone gets some but no one has a large amount of the scarce items.

Cutting food into small pieces to cook them makes cooking faster, so the cook does not have to have a fire burning for long. Plus, the shape of the bottom of the wok means that only a small part has to be over the fire so the fire does not have to be big. This saves on fuel.

STUDENT ACTIVITY IDEAS

ACTIVITY 1. Understanding Regional Folk Art

Introduction: China is a vast land with many different environments. Local materials dictate the form and function of regional folk art. For instance, the yellow earth of Shaanxi supplies the region with clay to make a fascinating variety of toys. The bamboo forests of Sichuan provide material for many woven handicrafts. Areas where jade and other stone abound produce jewelry and charms. Paper is another material that has been used all over China for many centuries to create charms and offerings to the spirits and ancestors. Many times these offerings were burned to show respect to these spirits. As with spirit money, burning paper is the means of transferring the materials of this world to the spirit world. In addition, New Year celebrations called for many colorful paper pictures and decorations for homes, businesses, and shrines.

Activity Purpose: To demonstrate how regional materials influenced the kind of art an area produced and how the folk artist creates without training or formal instruction.

Project: Gather an assortment of materials such as modeling clay or other similar modeling medium, fiber such as raffia or chair caning splints, colorful papers of various kinds such as crepe, tissue and construction papers, small bars of soap or other material easily carved, popsicle sticks, and any other appropriate material and paint. Local craft stores or donations from parents are good sources of supply.

Divide the students into "communities" assigning an art resource to each. Some communities could have more than one resource i.e. paper and wood (Popsicle sticks) to produce fans if

they choose. Tell the students that New Year celebrations are nearing and they must design an art object for these celebrations using their resources. The objects can be toys, charms, pictures or papercuts, and useful things such as fans. After agreeing on what their art object type will be, each student in that community will produce his version of that object.

At the end of the project, have students present their objects to the class, tell why they chose the kind of object they made and display the variations of that object that resulted from individual student work. It is important to stress that the variation is expected and is what makes each piece unique and a work of folk art. The products of a single community should not all look alike even though the resources and object types are the same. Yet that community should be recognized for the unique kind of folk art it produced.

ACTIVITY 2. Folk Art in America

After exploration of the Chinese folk art kit and completing Activity 1, talk to the students about folk art in America. Explain that American folk arts also involve using materials that are in a person's environment. Point out that folk quilts (made from scraps and discarded clothes) and traditional utilitarian pottery are examples of the American folk art tradition. You can think of other examples to add to the above.

Bring in example of folk art if you have them. Perhaps the students have examples at home they could bring in to show the class. If not, regional magazines contain pictures and articles on southern folk arts. These could be cut from the magazines to make a poster about American folk art.