

CHINESE CERAMICS THROUGHOUT HISTORY

WHAT IS CERAMIC WARE?

The term ceramic is used to describe objects made from clay that have been hardened by heat. This is usually by firing the clay at a high temperature in a kiln. There are three main categories of ceramics: earthenware, stoneware and porcelain.

The invention of ceramics in ancient civilisations revolutionised the quality of human life by providing means to transport and store food and water. In China, the history of ceramics can be traced from the Neolithic age to the modern day in a continuously evolving tradition. Ceramic ware provides insight into the lives, cultures and beliefs of Chinese people through history.

Earthenware 陶

Earthenware (陶) is the earliest form of ceramic ware. It is fired in a kiln at a temperature below 1100°C. This low firing temperature means that earthenware has a slightly porous body, absorbing liquids like water. While earthenware ceramics are hardened, they are also brittle. Decorations on Neolithic earthenware, especially Yangshao ceramics, are often confined to the top two-thirds, potentially because it may have been partially buried in earth for stabilisation during firing.



CHINESE
Jar 2400 BCE
 earthenware, pigment
 36.3 × 39.7 × 35.9 cm
 National Gallery of Victoria,
 Melbourne
 Felton Bequest, 1947

Glaze 釉

As ceramic firing techniques developed, glaze was discovered to decorate and enhance the durability of brittle earthenware. Glaze (釉) creates a thin, glassy layer on the surface on ceramic ware during firing. The effect and colour created differs based on the composition of the glaze. During the Tang dynasty (618–907), sancai (三彩) or 'three-coloured' ware was created by mixing different metal oxides into a lead-based glaze. This technique was used to create colourful horses, camels, mythical creatures and civil officials which were buried in the tombs of ruling classes to guard and serve them in the afterlife.



CHINESE

Horse 700 CE-750 CE
earthenware (Sancai ware)
48.8 × 53.7 × 17.1 cm
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne
Felton Bequest, 1926



CHINESE

Jar Western Han
dynasty 206 BCE-24 CE
stoneware
25.2 × 28.6 cm diameter
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne
Felton Bequest, 1947

Stoneware 炆

With innovations in kiln technology, pottery could be fired at higher temperatures leading to the birth of stoneware (炆). Stoneware is fired at a high temperature of 1100°C or over and has a dense, stone like quality. It is non-translucent with a non-porous body. While stoneware is often glazed, sometimes the glaze only covers part of the object.

This stoneware jar is from the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE – 24 CE). The lighter coloured surface of the upper half was created with ash glaze that turned into an ochre colour during the firing process.

Porcelain 瓷

Porcelain (瓷) refers to white, glazed ceramic wares made from kaolin rocks that are crushed and mixed with water to make fine clay or slip. Fired at a high temperature of 1200–1450°C, it has a hard non-porous body and a shiny, translucent appearance.

During the Song Dynasty (960–1279) pure white porcelain was popular. As China entered the Mongol-led Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368), blue-and-white ware became more fashionable under the influence of Islamic styles. The striking blue colour was created using cobalt, which had to be imported from Persia. The blue-and-white ware was then exported to the Middle and Near East in great quantities, reflecting the booming international trade routes of the time.



CHINESE

Dish Qing dynasty, Qianlong
period 1736–1795
porcelain
3.7 × 17.0 cm diameter
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne
Gift of John H. Connell, 1914

CERAMICS CHART

Use what you have learned so far to fill in the Ceramic Chart.

Type of ceramic	Fired at	Translucency	Porosity	Strength or hardness	Example Use the ideas provided or find your own in the NGV Collection
陶 Earthenware	relatively low temperatures below _____°C				
炻 Stoneware	around _____°C or over				
瓷 Porcelain	_____°C to _____°C				

WHAT TYPE OF CERAMIC?

Match the pictures to the corresponding description. You might like to refer to the vocabulary list on page 8 for unfamiliar words.

Chinese ceramics

Description

1



1

这是一匹陶瓷马，制作于唐代，而且有三种颜色，因而又被称为唐三彩。唐三彩上釉的部分表面光滑。

這是一匹陶瓷馬，製作於唐代，而且有三種顏色，因而又被稱為唐三彩。唐三彩上釉的部分表面光滑。

2



2

这是一个陶罐，制作于西汉时期，是棕色的。它的两侧各有一个把手。这个陶罐上有许多文字装饰，而且表面粗糙。

這是一個陶罐，製作於西漢時期，是棕色的。它的兩側各有一個把手。這個陶罐上有許多文字裝飾，而且表面粗糙。

3



3

这是一个瓷盆，制作于明朝，由白色，红色，蓝色，绿色多种颜色组成。这个瓷盆上有祥云，龙和凤凰的装饰，而且表面光滑。

這是一個瓷盆，製作於明朝，由白色，紅色，藍色，綠色多種顏色組成。這個瓷盆上有祥雲，龍和鳳凰的裝飾，而且表面光滑。

Al Weiwei, Coloured vases 2015

4



4

这是一个蓝色和白色的瓷盘，制作于清朝。这种蓝色和白色的瓷器又叫做青花瓷。这个瓷盘制作于江西景德镇，景德镇以瓷器而出名。这个瓷盘上有龙的装饰，并且表面光滑。

這是一個藍色和白色的瓷盤，製作於清朝。這種用了藍色和白色的瓷器又叫做青花瓷。這個瓷盤製作於江西景德鎮，景德鎮以瓷器而出名。這個瓷盤上有龍的裝飾，並且表面光滑。

5



5

这是一个棕色的陶罐，制作于新石器时期。陶罐上半部分带有黑色的花纹，而下半部分没有装饰。这是因为新石器时期的陶罐大多都半埋在地下，因而下半部分通常没有装饰。陶罐的表面粗糙。

這是一個棕色的陶罐，製作於新石器時期。陶罐上半部分帶有黑色的花紋，而下半部分沒有裝飾。這是因為新石器時期的陶罐大多都半埋在地下，因而下半部分通常沒有裝飾。陶罐的表面粗糙。

6



6

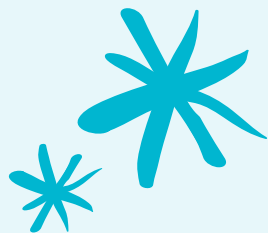
这是一组陶罐，是当代艺术家艾未未的作品。艾未未把像是汉代时期的陶罐漆上各种颜色。每一个陶罐的颜色都不一样，包括紫色，橘色，和绿色等等。

這是一組陶罐，是當代藝術家艾未未的作品。艾未未把像是漢代時期的陶罐漆上各種顏色。每一個陶罐的顏色都不一樣，包括紫色，橘色，和綠色等等。

Basin Ming dynasty, Wanli period 1573-1620

Talk about Chinese ceramics in English

Choose one of the examples of ceramic ware and write a short paragraph in English to introduce it to a friend who doesn't speak Chinese. Translate some of the detail from the description and add some extra information about what interests you about this artwork.



THE NGV'S CHINESE COLLECTION

Many of the ceramic works in the NGV Collection were originally intended to be functional objects, not works of art.

1. Look around the Chinese Collection on Level 1 of NGV International
2. Find a ceramic work that you like
3. Imagine how this object may have been used when it was first produced and fill in the chart on the next page
4. Draw how you imagine the ancient Chinese people may have used your chosen object

You may want to check the label or find other objects that were made in the same era to use as clues.

Example

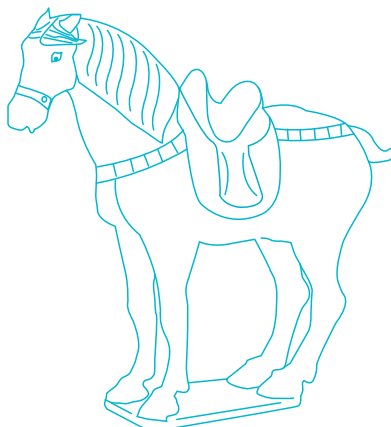
Name of object: **Horse**

Year: **700 CE–750 CE**



Where was the object?	地點	A Tomb
Who was the object for/ who may have used it?	誰	A wealthy person who has passed away
What may be the purpose of the object?	用途	To be used by the dead in the afterlife
How was the object used?	用法	Buried inside the tombs with the deceased

Drawing:



Title of object:

Year:

Where was the object?	地點	
Who was the object for/ who may have used it?	誰	
What may be the purpose of the object?	用途	
How was the object used?	用法	

Drawing:

Ceramics Guessing Game

Prepare a 3 minute talk about your chosen piece of ceramic ware in Chinese using your own observations and the information on the label. You may want to use the vocabulary on page 8. Present it to your class. Can they guess which ceramic object you were talking about?

CERAMIC IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Look around your home. Can you find a ceramic object, such as a sculpture, a plate, a bowl, or a vase? Try to pick an object that you can bring to your classroom.

1. Carefully examine your chosen object and identify which type of ceramic it is using your ceramic chart from page 3
2. Write a short paragraph in Chinese to explain your reasoning, and use the sentence 因为..., 而且..., 所以... to explain the type of ceramics your object is
3. Describe how the object looks and its function
4. Take a photograph or draw a sketch of your object to accompany your writing.



Here is an example:

這是一個瓷碗。它是一個白色的圓形碗，在碗的外側有藍色花紋的裝飾。因為它的表面光滑，而且敲起來聲音清脆，所以是陶瓷。我和我的家人每天用這個瓷碗吃飯。

這是一個瓷碗。它是一個白色的圓形碗，在碗的外側有藍色花紋的裝飾。因為它的表面光滑，而且敲起來聲音清脆，所以是陶瓷。我和我的家人每天用這個瓷碗吃飯。

Your short paragraph:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Ceramic Auction Day



Now, imagine that you are selling the object in a flea market in China and your classmates and teacher are all potential buyers.

5. Make a poster to advertise the object, including its asking price
6. Use the short paragraph you've written as a reference, answer questions and promote your object to your potential customers. Can you sell your object successfully?
7. Once your object has been sold, you become one of the buyers and ask questions about the object your classmates are selling.

VOCABULARY LIST

Simplified-form characters	Full-form characters	Pinyin	English
新石器时代	新石器時代	xīn shí qì shí dài	Neolithic/ New Stone Age
西汉时代	西漢時代	xī hàn shí dài	Western Han dynasty
唐代	唐代	táng dài	Tang dynasty
明朝	明朝	míng zhāo	Ming dynasty
清朝	清朝	qīng zhāo	Qing dynasty
现代	現代	xiàn dài	Contemporary
陶瓷	陶瓷	táo cí	ceramics
釉	釉	yòu	glaze
唐三彩	唐三彩	táng sān cǎi	Sancai/ Tricolor Glazed Pottery
青花瓷	青花瓷	qīng huā cí	blue-and-white porcelain
景德镇	景德鎮	jǐng dé zhèn	Jingdezhen (A place in China famous for porcelain production)
凤凰	鳳凰	fèng huáng	phoenix

NGV SCHOOLS PROGRAM PARTNERS



Education
and Training



The NGV gratefully acknowledges the Packer Family and Crown Resorts Foundations for their support of NGV Kids exhibitions, and student and teacher programs and resources.

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