Art + History: Asia in the World

Following the Phoenix

This virtual tour engages students in using historical inquiry to explore works of art from the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago and the expansive history, diversity, geography, and enduring influence of Asia in the world. Students will follow the phoenix as an artistic motif, cultural myth, and symbol to consider how people and ideas move across space and time through trade, migration, and warfare.

Grade Level: 6–12

Keywords: Asia, Phoenix, Historical Inquiry, Global Trade and Migration, Culture, Symbol, Global/Cultural Competence, Primary Sources
How to Use This Resource

This virtual tour is part of the Art + History learning frame, which emphasizes the close reading of works of art as primary sources. Contextual information and prompts for reflection and discussion are layered in to help scaffold students’ understanding from simple to complex.

For additional approaches to engage students in close looking and meaning-making with works of art, consult the Art Institute’s Tips for Discussing Works of Art or use the Making Observations and Questions activity.
Essential Questions

1. Art + History Frame
   - What can primary sources (including artworks) teach us about art, history, and culture?
   - How can multiple perspectives, as expressed in artworks and other sources, deepen and challenge our understandings?
   - Based on a deepened historical understanding, what new questions can we ask about our own place and time?

2. Asia in the World Theme
   - How has Asian art and culture intersected with and/or impacted the development of ideas around the world over time?

Learning Outcomes

- Explore how artworks can serve as primary sources that spark historical inquiry.
- Analyze different historical sources and perspectives, including artworks, and consider how they can impact understanding.
- Examine the movement of ideas, people, and materials over time and throughout Asia and beyond, gaining a more complex understanding of Asia as a global continent.
Relevant Standards

Reading: Key Ideas and Details
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1
Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it: cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2
Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Illinois Arts Learning Standards: Visual Arts
Responding
Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic works

Historical Sources and Evidence
D2.His.10.3-5. Compare information provided by different historical sources about the past.
Art + History: Asia in the World

Following the Phoenix
Have you ever seen or heard of a bird called a phoenix?

- Where have you seen it? How would you describe what you know about this creature?
- What does it look like? Where does it live?
- Does it have any special meaning or powers?
- How is the phoenix you know alike or different from other observations mentioned in your group/class/family?

Let’s explore cultural traditions of the phoenix in works of art from across the globe and over 2000 years of history. We’ll do that by examining artworks as primary sources. A primary source is a document, work of art, or other source of information created within the time, place or event under study. Today we will look at four artworks, and they will show us that the phoenix means different things to different cultures. On our first stop, we will find out where its story began!
Stop 1 – First Look

· Look closely at this image of an ancient Egyptian coffin.
· You are seeing just a section of a larger object. As your eye moves around the image, note the designs, colors, and forms that you see. Look at the bird that appears on the neck of this figure. What do you notice about how it is drawn or painted?
· Given the fact that this bird is painted on a coffin, what might that suggest about the meaning of this bird to ancient Egyptians?
· Looking at this case, which was created over 2,000 years ago, can help us learn about the origins of the myth of the phoenix.

Context/Background Information

- The legend of the phoenix, its features, and symbolic meanings have moved and changed as people and cultures have come together through trade and migration over time.

- In ancient Egypt this bird was called the **benu** and it resembles a heron, a real bird with a long, graceful neck and long legs that lives near water in many countries around the world.

- The benu is one of many important **symbols** on the surface of this mummy case that reflect the values and beliefs of ancient Egyptian culture, specific to their understanding of life and death.

- The benu is closely associated with the Sun God and is repeatedly referenced in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, a collection of spells which enable the soul of the deceased to navigate the afterlife. For ancient Egyptians, the rising sun brought about rebirth in the afterlife.

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Context/Background Information

- The Egyptian benu inspired later Greek and Roman accounts of the phoenix, which form the basis for the myth of the phoenix that is best known today.

- In the story, written by Greek and Roman authors, the phoenix is said to live for 500 years or more. When it becomes tired in its old age, it flies from Saudi Arabia to Heliopolis, Egypt, the “City of the Sun”.

- There, the phoenix gathers cinnamon twigs and resin to build a next of spices atop the Temple of the Sun. The sun ignites the nest and the old phoenix dies in flames.

- A new phoenix emerges from the ashes and flies back to Saudi Arabia to begin another life cycle.
Look Again

- Now that you have more information, do you see anything new? How have your ideas or thoughts changed?
- What do you wonder? What else would you like to learn or know?

Explore More

Follow the Phoenix from Egypt to China

Let’s follow the phoenix to another time, place, and cultural tradition.
Stop 2 – First Look

· Look at the center of this artwork. What are some distinctive features you see in the bird? What colors do you see?
· Do you see any connections between this bird and the Egyptian benu?
· What do you see surrounding this bird?
· What do you notice along the edges of the dish? What patterns and forms are repeated?
· Observe again with your senses. If you were in this scene, what might you hear, smell, feel, or see?
· What do you think this dish might have been used for? Who do you think it might have belonged to? Why do you think that?

Context/Background Information

- This plate was created in China’s last imperial dynasty, the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), which was founded by invading Manchurian neighbors in 1618. The new Manchu rulers understood the importance of retaining Chinese traditions and symbols of power in their pursuit of credibility in the region.

- The feng-huang (fehng hoo-ahng) is a phoenix-like bird that is very important to Chinese culture and dates back to 2647 BCE.

- This celestial fowl was incorrectly linked to the Western tradition of the phoenix in the nineteenth century, when an Scottish scholar mistranslated a Chinese text and called the feng-huang by the name phoenix.

- The feng-huang is a long-tailed bird that looks like a pheasant and is unrelated to the Western story of the phoenix that dies and is reborn from the ashes. Its name represents the duality and union of the yin-yang (yin-yahng) balance of the universe, with “feng” being male and “huang” being female.
Context/Background Information

- On this dish, the feng-huang is paired on this dish with peony flowers in full bloom. The peony is a longstanding symbol for wealth and power in China. The pairing of the phoenix and peony suggests a blessing of virtue, peace, and strength.

- The Chinese developed the technique of fine painting on glazed porcelain during the Tang dynasty (618–907). Their technical knowledge and artistic skill and the objects they produced were coveted by the Chinese and their trading partners. These plates may have been used at the dining tables of wealthy individuals, but most likely were used as decorative elements in a grand home.

Stop 2 on Interactive Map
Look Again

- Now that you have more information on the history of this work and the culture from which it comes, do you see anything new? How have your ideas or thoughts changed?

- The peony flower is an important symbol in Chinese culture. Can you think of a flower that is important to your family or culture, such as one that grows in a family member’s garden or is displayed or given as a gift on special occasions? Describe this to a classmate or your teacher in conversation or writing.

By now you may have guessed that this isn’t the end of the phoenix’s travels through space and time. The concept of the phoenix continued to evolve as people moved around the globe to trade goods and seek new resources and opportunities. Stories of the phoenix were told, retold, and adapted as these people met others who might listen. Let’s look at another example.
Stop 3 – First Look

- Click on the “Look Closer” link below and look carefully at this artwork. Note at least five observations.
- What pulls your attention? Why?
- Look again. Where does your eye go next? Use your finger to follow the path of your eye as it moves across the work. What else do you see?
- If you could touch this work how would it feel?
- How do you think this was made? What tools might have been used? Why do you think that?
- Focus on the carved birds. How would you describe them and their setting?
- What connections and differences do you see between this representation of the phoenix and the representation of the feng-huang on the Chinese dish?

Context/Background Information

- This *ramma*, or transom panel, was part of the interior design of the lavish Phoenix Pavilion, or Hooden, that Japan created for the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition (world’s fair) in Chicago and was intended as a lasting gift to the city. There are three other similar panels on display at the Art Institute of Chicago.

- In the 1890s, few Americans had exposure to Japanese people and culture. The Hooden was modeled after an existing temple located in Uji, Japan, in order to display Japan’s rich artistic and cultural heritage. Its presence was also intended to signal a future of international exchange and trade where Japan would be understood as an equal among nations.

- This panel illustrates the phoenix’s transition from China into Japan, where it is called the **ho-o** (*hou-ou*). The phoenix became an important symbol of Japanese national identity representing strength and stability.

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Context/Background Information

- This ramma features a pair of phoenix roosting in paulownia trees. While the paulownia is the fabled home of the ho-o, the birds are only shown in this special tree during times of strong leadership.

- The temple that the Hooden was based on and the figure of the phoenix are both so important to Japan that they are featured on Japanese currency today.

- As the United States entered into World War II following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, racism against Japanese Americans and their culture became common in the United States. The Hooden was destroyed by arson in an act of hate in 1946.

- Stop 3 on the Interactive Map shows the inspiration behind the rmmas at the Phoenix Pavilion in Jackson Park. 

Stop 3 on Interactive Map
Look Again


- Now that you have more information, how have your ideas or thoughts on this work changed?
- What connections can you find between the importance of this bird and the one we see on the “Ruby-Back” dish from the Qing dynasty in China?
- What do you wonder about the ramma and its history? If you could ask the makers of this piece and of the larger Phoenix Pavilion a question, what would you ask?

We have watched this otherworldly bird travel through space and time and take on different names and with different meanings in a variety of cultures. Let’s take one more jump to see the idea of the ‘phoenix’ transform again.

Explore More
Stop 4 – First Look

- Imagine you could walk around this three-dimensional object. What might it look like from each side?
- Do you have a sense of the **scale** of this work? Is it bigger or smaller than you?
- Does this look like or remind you of anything you have seen before? How?
- If you could touch this, how might it feel? What do you think it is made of?
- The title of this work is *Mended Petal*. Look again at this work with the title in mind. What do you notice now? Do you see evidence of “mending” here?

Look Closer

This stop will inspire reflection about what the phoenix symbolizes in today’s world, not only in Asia, but also here in Chicago.

Mended Petal is a contemporary sculpture created by artist Yoko Ono, who was born in Japan but has lived in the United States for much of her life. For over 50 years she has created art in different forms including music, sound, performance art, and visual art, often as a call to peace in response to world events.

The cracks on this petal are a reference to an artistic tradition called kintsugi/kintsukuroi, in which broken pottery is mended using golden lacquer, highlighting and transforming the breakage. This technique suggests the object is perhaps even more valuable for having been broken and fixed than when it was new.

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Context/Background Information

- In this method gold is combined with lacquer and used as a glue to bind broken pieces of pottery, creating gleaming seams of gold that resembles bolts of lightning over the Japanese earthenware.
- In *Mended Petal*, Ono draws on this tradition and bridges space, time, and world events in her efforts to use art as a form of reflection and activism.
- *Mended Petal* was created as a companion piece to *Sky Landing*, a sculptural installation on the site where the Hooden once stood in Chicago’s Jackson Park.
- As visitors move through *Sky Landing*, the multiple petals form a larger-than-life lotus flower that serves as a remembrance of the Hooden and an allegory for rebirth. Lotus flowers slowly emerge from the mud in shallow waters to form a brilliant white bloom on the surface, leaving behind the mud from which it was born.


Stop 4 on Interactive Map to see the sight of *Sky Landing* at Jackson Park
Look Again

- Now that you have more information, how have your ideas or thoughts on this work changed? If so, how?
- Based on what we have learned about Yoko Ono, why do you think she created this work on the site where the Hooden once stood?
- Why do you think she referenced the artistic practice of kintsugi in Mended Petal? What might have been broken and in need of fixing?

We started this journey in Egypt, which is in North Africa. We then followed the phoenix to the Asian continent and the nations of China and Japan. We landed in the United States, where ideas from Africa and Asia have been presented to new audiences and continued to evolve.

Reflection

· What did you know or what had you experienced about these countries, cultures, and the interactions between them before this lesson? What were your sources of information?
· What new information have you learned?
· By following the journey of the phoenix, what did you learn about how ideas and beliefs can change as they travel across time and space? What are some of the factors that influence these changes?
· Think about the word transformation. What might it mean in relation to each culture we discussed?
Creative Response: Birds and Belonging

In crafting the ramma for the Hooden, Japanese artists used the phoenix to symbolize their country’s strength and culture to the world. Where else have you seen a bird used to represent an idea, culture, or nation? What bird might you choose to represent you? Use a separate piece of paper to sketch this bird, and note where and how your design should be displayed. Why did you choose this bird and what might it communicate about you to others?
Bonus Stop

Can you make more connections?

In *Lynch Fragments*, a series of welded steel assemblages made in response to the tumultuous social climate of the Civil Rights movement, Edwards addressed African American identity within an abstract sculptural language. *Afrophoenix No. 1*, one of the earliest objects from the series, exemplifies how the artist physically transformed found objects and brought them together in poetically suggestive, tension-filled compositions.
Bonus Stop Continued

Here the formal arrangement of steel elements evokes an equestrian bridle and bit. Chains, hammers, nails, spikes, and screws magnify the sculpture’s associative power, recalling implements of labor and torture. At the same time, the title references the mythological phoenix—alluding to death, rebirth, and transformation. Suggesting a range of meanings, the work demonstrates Edwards’s desire to fuse abstraction with personal and collective histories.
## Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allegory</td>
<td>A visual representation or writing that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benu</td>
<td>Sacred bird from ancient Egypt, that corresponds to the Western concept of the phoenix.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concept</td>
<td>Something conceived in the mind, an abstract or generic idea generalized from particular instances, examples, or experiences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dynasty</td>
<td>A series of rulers or leaders who are (sometimes) all from the same family, or a period when a country is ruled by them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feng-Huang</td>
<td>Mythical bird from China, that corresponds to the Western concept of the phoenix.</td>
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<td>Vocabulary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ho-o</td>
<td>Mythical bird from Japan, corresponding to the phoenix. Closely related to the Chinese feng-huang.</td>
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<td>Installation</td>
<td>A type of art that is three-dimensional and is often created to be specific to and modify our perceptions of a particular space.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kintsugi</td>
<td>A 400+ year old Japanese art and method of repairing pottery, which honors the artwork’s unique history by emphasizing, not hiding, the break. Gold mixed with lacquer is used to make the broken pieces whole again.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manchuria</td>
<td>Historical region of northeastern China or region of northeastern China that now covers the provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Myth</td>
<td>A traditional story or legend, especially one related to the early history of a people that explains a natural or social phenomena, often through the supernatural.</td>
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### Vocabulary

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<th>Word</th>
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<tr>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>A mythical bird that embodies a range of distinct characteristics, meanings, and purposes across time and cultural traditions.</td>
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<td>Ramma (rahm-mah)</td>
<td>A horizontal structural that separates a door from a window above it to provide structural support and allow light and air to move into a space. Also known as a transom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbol</td>
<td>A thing used to represent something else, often an abstract concept.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yin-Yang</td>
<td>The two opposite, but complementary forces that make up all of life. It is an ancient Chinese concept that the universe is governed by cosmic duality, sets of two opposing and complementing principles or cosmic energies that can be observed in nature.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Additional Resources