

Lesson Plan: Chocolate, Ceramics, and Colonialism in 18th-Century Mexico



Chocolate Jar with Iron-Locked Lid

1725/75

Puebla, Mexico

Tin-glazed earthenware; *talavera poblana*

Gift of Eva Lewis in memory of her husband, Herbert Pickering Lewis

INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

This lesson plan supports the integration of artworks into K–12 teaching. It focuses on a single work of art from the museum’s global collection and provides sequential activities and related resources and extensions that activate students’ critical and creative thinking skills, prompting them to deepen their sense of self, connect with others, and engage more fully with a complex world.

Keywords

Cobalt, *Talavera poblana*, Chocolate, Colonialism, Blue-and-white pottery, Earthenware, Global trade, Cultural traditions, Mexico, the Americas, Enslaved labor

Suggested Age Range

This content is adaptable for use by 6th through 12th grade students.

Essential Questions

- How has colonialism shaped trade, technology, and culture (or cultural identity/practices)?

INFORMATION FOR EDUCATORS

How to Use This Lesson

This lesson includes a sequence of three types of activities that can be facilitated by the teacher or assigned to students to complete asynchronously. In sequence, these activities build student engagement from increased awareness, as they observe the work, to understanding of the artwork and artist as well as their cultural and historical context. Students are further encouraged to make connections between the work of art and their own lives and experiences. All activities are framed by the essential question(s) of the lesson, and support student voice and multi-modal learning.

- **Look** activities promote sustained observation, active listening, and curiosity. (5–10 minutes per activity)
- **Explore** activities provide opportunities for students to consider further contextual information, including diverse perspectives, and to challenge their assumptions. (15–30 minutes per activity)
- **Respond** activities engage creative expression, self-reflection, and synthesis of ideas. (15–30 minutes per activity)

For additional approaches to engaging students in observation and meaning-making with works of art, consult the Art Institute of Chicago’s [Tips for Discussing Works of Art](#) or use the [Making Observations and Questions](#) activity.

Learning Standards

Next Generation Social Science Standards

Human-Environment Interaction: Place, Regions, and Culture

D2.Geo.4.6-8. Explain how cultural patterns and economic decisions influence environments and the daily lives of people in both nearby and distant places.

D2.Geo.7.3-5. Explain how cultural and environmental characteristics affect the distribution and movement of people, goods, and ideas.

Common Core Literacy Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.7

Draw information from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

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.

National Core Arts Standards:

Visual Arts: Responding, Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work

Enduring Understanding: Visual imagery influences understanding of and responses to the world.

Look



Let's begin our exploration of this artwork by looking at it closely and quietly for one minute.

- Start by looking at the main part, or *body*, of this jar.
- What do we see? What pulls your attention?
- What colors and designs do you notice? What do the shapes look like or remind you of?

If you are together with your class, share at least five observations with your classmates, or write or sketch them to share later.



Now look at the top of the piece. How is it different from the body?

- . What materials might have been used to make each part?
- . If you could touch each part, how would it feel?
- . Does this work look like or remind you of anything from your own life or that you have seen in the past? Describe that item.
- . This object was designed to be decorative. It is also a container.
 - o What do you think it might have held? Why do you think that?

Explore

Read the caption information for this artwork. To learn more, read the [essay](#) on the jar included in this lesson.

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- Look again. Do you notice anything new?
- How does this information add to or change what you know and think about this work?
- What can we learn from this jar about the **culture** in which it was made?



Extension Activities

Research and Explore: Chocolate Tasting Menu (Grades 4–12)*

*Note to educators:

If you are doing this activity as a class, create a spread of chocolates from around the world accompanied by information the students gather. A few suggested brands to research and taste are Cadbury, Lindt, Nestle, and Abuelita. If your students are learning virtually or if you prefer to have students do this activity at home, ask them to create a shared slideshow or document where they can insert a picture of their chosen chocolate brand.

Do you have a favorite kind of chocolate? What do you like about it? Have you tasted more than one brand? Have you ever considered where this chocolate comes from?

After chocolate became available through trade outside of the Americas, the shape, taste, and availability of chocolate changed throughout time and geographical location. Research the most popular chocolate in a specific country or region of the world. Who makes the chocolate? What can you learn about where the cacao, the main ingredient in chocolate, was sourced?

Together as a class, create a chocolate tasting menu with a spread of these chocolates. You can do it in your classroom or try it out at home and report back on your experience. While tasting and examining the different chocolates, keep the following questions in mind:

- What similarities and differences do you see in popular chocolates from various countries?
 - Observe how chocolates look and taste, examining ingredients and how the chocolate is consumed. Is it a drink? Is it a solid bar?

Explore Further: Colonial Power and Global Trade (Grades 9–12)*

*Note to educators:

The two prompts below could be used to challenge older students to dig further into issues around colonialism and global trade.

1. How does **colonialism** play a role in how chocolate is produced and consumed?

- Consider the role colonialism played in bringing chocolate from Mesoamerica to Europe, and then to the rest of the world.
 - Were any of the countries you learned about in researching chocolate colonized at any point? If so, by whom? How might this influence the trade of goods such as chocolate?
 - Cadbury, a chocolate brand developed in England, is the top selling chocolate in India.
 - What can you learn about the historic relationship between England and India?
 - How might this relationship have influenced trade and markets?
 - What can we learn from these examples about how power relationships impact economics and trade?

***Note to educators:** Please refer to the essay in the next section of this Lesson Plan for more background information about colonialism and chocolate production.

2. What does “fair trade” mean?

- In global trade it can be difficult to set and enforce shared guidelines. Though fair trade is a term you may be familiar with from labels on packaging or advertisements, there is currently no set definition for this practice. The name “fair trade” suggests that trade practices, including how workers are treated, are based on fairness and equity—but who gets to decide what “fair” means?
 - What issues could the lack of clarity around this term cause for cocoa farmers, chocolate companies, and chocolate consumers like us?

- Research the cacao trade practices of each of the chocolate brands that you discussed earlier.
 - What did you learn?
 - If you had trouble finding any information, why do you think that was the case?

Respond

Peer-to-Peer Interview

Work in pairs to interview each other and write down, record, or film your responses. If you are working asynchronously, answer the interview questions on your own and post them for others in your class to see and compare.

Food traditions are important to families and cultures. This iron-locked jar was used to store chocolate, which was very valuable at the time it was made. Because of its value, chocolate was only consumed during special occasions.

- What is a food that you eat on special occasions with your family or community?
- How would you describe this special occasion?
- How is this food stored or served? Does it have its own special container? Do you use specific tools to make it?
- Is there a reason behind why you eat this food at this time?

Essay



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What do we see in this artwork and what was its purpose?

Looking closely at this work of art, we see a rounded ceramic container with blue decorations and a metal top with a lock. The bold, blue designs stand out against the white background. They depict wave-like spirals, flowers, vines, and a long-tailed bird in the center. This type of pottery, called **talavera poblana** (*tah-lah-veh-rah poh-blah-nah*), is made in Puebla, Mexico, and it is influenced by Chinese **blue-and-white porcelain**, which is known for rich blue designs made from **glazes** using **cobalt**. Chinese blue-and-white porcelain was commonly decorated with figures such as peacocks and phoenix-like creatures called **feng huang** (*fehng hoo-ahng*). Since these creatures were not widely known in Mexico, artisans who created this artwork likely adapted the image of the bird to reflect long-tailed birds that could be found locally. The

long-tailed bird depicted on this artwork is likely a regional bird called a quetzal (*keht-sahl*), which is currently the national bird of Guatemala.

Though this container was originally made to function as a flower vase, it was eventually transformed into a chocolate storage jar with the addition of the iron lid to keep chocolate, something locals considered precious, locked away. Chocolate dates back as far back as 1800 BCE in **Mesoamerica**, where people ground **cacao** beans and added spices and water to create a bitter, frothy drink. Maya people believe that chocolate was a gift from the serpent god Kukulcan (*Koo-kool-kahn*) and images of cacao pods and trees are even included in the Popol Vuh (*Poh-pohl-Voo*), which is an account of the creation story of the **K'iche'** (*Kee-cheh*) people, one of the many Maya cultures whose descendants live in present-day Guatemala. Chocolate remained valuable when Europeans colonized the Americas, sometimes being used as currency, medicine, and an **aristocratic** treat with the addition of sugar.

In 1828, Dutch chemist Coenraad Johannes van Houten (*Kohn-rahd Yoh-hah-ness vahn How-tehn*) revolutionized chocolate-making by inventing the cocoa press, which made it possible to separate cocoa butter from roasted cacao beans. This “dutching” process made it much easier to produce and ship chocolate, making it less expensive and more available to the general public in many countries throughout the world. With this increased consumption of chocolate, enslaved people were used to grow and harvest cacao starting in the 17th century to keep up with demand. This contributed to the **transatlantic slave trade** as enslaved people were often forcibly shipped from West Africa to South America to work on cacao plantations. Today, much of worldwide cocoa production takes place in African countries located along the equator where cacao trees are grown. Cacao is often still harvested using exploited laborers, including children, who are paid little for their work. This had led to ongoing calls for regulation around fair labor and trade within the industry.

Who made this artwork and how does the artwork reflect social and/or political structures?

In 1531, the Spanish founders of the newly established town of Puebla de Los Ángeles (commonly known as Puebla) wanted to create a cultural center for manufacturing European-style **goods**, such as recreations of **majolica** (*mah-yoh-lee-kah*) from **Talavera de la Reina** (*Ray-nah*), Spain. Creating a ceramic industry in Puebla made perfect sense because of its location. There are two sources of clay nearby: one in the town of Totimehuacan

(Toh-tee-meh-wah-kahn) that produced a white-pink clay, and the other in the mountains of Loreto (*Loh-reh-toh*), which produced a black clay. These two clays were mixed together to create the consistency for what became talavera poblana. Pieces of talavera poblana can only be produced in Puebla and can be found throughout the city in various forms, such as tile and dishware, even today. Strikingly beautiful, skillfully crafted, and made from local materials, pieces of talavera poblana continue to be a great source of pride for many people in Puebla and throughout Mexico.

Mexico was referred to as “New Spain” (1521–1821) or the “New World” at this time because the area was previously unknown to Europeans and Spain claimed the land as their own. However, millions of Indigenous people had already been living in the Americas for thousands of years by the time European **colonizers** landed from Britain, Spain, Portugal, France, and the Netherlands. In order to maintain their recently established political and social power, Spaniards created laws and regulations to keep themselves in powerful positions, including **ordinances** for creating talavera poblana. In 1653, ordinances from the government declared that only Spaniards, defined as people whose parents were both solely of Spanish ancestry, were allowed to take the test to become master potters, keeping any Indigenous (the majority of the population), Black, or mixed-heritage people living in Mexico from being considered experts in this work. Though non-white artists worked in ceramic factories and likely helped create this piece, only European artists were recognized for their efforts.

The practice of making majolica-style pottery was brought to Puebla by artisans from Spain, but the history of blue-and-white pottery is a larger story of **trade** and cultural exchange. Like its Spanish prototypes, talavera poblana shows the influence of Islamic, Chinese, Italian, and French ceramics, all present in **cosmopolitan** Spain during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and transmitted to Mexico during the colonial period. Chinese blue-and-white porcelain arrived in the Americas directly from Asia starting in the 1570s, when the **Manila Galleons** brought them across the Pacific Ocean from the Spanish colonized Philippines. Cargoes of Chinese luxury goods, like blue-and-white porcelain, landing at the port of Acapulco were then shipped to Mexico City and Puebla, where they remained until shipment continued across the Atlantic Ocean to Seville, Spain.

Glossary

aristocratic: belonging to a high social class

blue-and-white porcelain: During the period 618–907, China developed the materials and technology to create fine white porcelain painted with rich blue designs made using cobalt oxide, a material able to withstand the high heat needed to fire porcelain. Because of the beauty and quality of these objects, they were highly valued in trade, widely distributed, and copied by nations around the world from the fourteenth century onward.

cacao: Cacao beans are grown in pods on tropical evergreen trees along the equator and are used to make chocolate. Chocolate is created by drying, fermenting, grinding, and mixing cacao beans with various spices.

ceramic: an object made of clay and hardened by heat

cobalt: a metallic element used to create vibrant blue designs when painted on dry ceramics and heated at high temperatures. Cobalt has been sourced from mines in many different countries, including Iran, Germany, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo

colonialism: the policy or practice of taking full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting the land and people. During these occupations, towns are re-organized and established by settlers from the ruling power, creating a new colonial system in the area

colonizers: a country or people who participate in colonialism

cosmopolitan: a place or society full of people or elements from many parts of the world

feng huang: a phoenix-like bird that is very important to Chinese culture and dates back to 2647 BCE. The feng huang is a mythical 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

glaze: a mixture of powdered materials and water that is applied to clay surfaces and melts into a glassy coating when fired

goods: items that someone (a consumer) can purchase, such as food, clothing, and pottery

K'iche': an Indigenous group of people living in present-day Guatemala. K'iche' people are one of the many Maya cultures

majolica: pottery covered with an opaque tin glaze and decorated on the glaze before firing

manila galleons: Spanish trading ships that made an annual round trip (one vessel per year) across the Pacific Ocean between Manila, in the Philippines, and Acapulco, in what is now Mexico, during the period 1565–1815

Mesoamerica: the diverse civilizations of Indigenous cultures that developed in parts of Mexico and Central America prior to Spanish colonization in the sixteenth century

ordinance: a law or rule made by a government or authority

Talavera poblana: Tin-glazed earthenware made in Puebla, Mexico, that takes inspiration from Chinese blue-and-white porcelain and pottery from Spain, which was also influenced by Chinese and Islamic pottery. The term *talavera poblana* likely comes from the combination of the name of the Spanish town of Talavera de la Reina, which was a center for creating majolica ceramics, and the word *poblana*, which is an adjective for Puebla

trade: the action of buying and selling goods and services

transatlantic slave trade: a segment of the global slave trade that transported approximately 12.5 million African people, who were captured and taken from the coast of Africa, to the Americas. At least 2.5 million enslaved people died during the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean



Related Resources

Additional source:

McQuade, Margaret Connors. *Talavera Poblana: Four Centuries of a Mexican Ceramic Tradition*. New York, NY: Americas Society, 1999.