

An Artifact Speaks • Artifact Information Sheet

Artifact Name: Tea Mug

Time Period of the Original: Porcelain was first used during the Tang Dynasty (618–907).

Culture/Religion Group: Ancient China

Material of the Original: Porcelain

Reproduction? This is a modern use of the traditional material.



Background Information:

Porcelain is a delicate, white, fine-grained pottery that is often beautifully decorated with a colorful glaze in intricate patterns. In the East, porcelain is further defined as pottery that resonates when struck. In the West, it is further defined as pottery that is translucent when held up to the light. From their first introduction to Europe by the Chinese, items of true, hard-paste porcelain were highly valued. European attempts to re-create this fine porcelain material led to the development of artificial, or soft-paste, porcelain in the 16th century. European artisans were not able to produce porcelain until the 18th century. Today, we often refer to our pieces of porcelain as our “fine china.”

As trade with Europe grew, the Chinese began to make porcelain pieces that were specifically for trade with the West and created in distinctly familiar European shapes, such as mugs, candlesticks, and ewers (pitchers with a wide spout). This mug represents the coming together of the East and West through the use of porcelain as the material molded to a European shape with a Chinese decoration for a Chinese drink that became a European favorite. This featured object is decorated with traditional magnolia and longevity motifs.

Tea:

According to Chinese tradition, tea was discovered by the Emperor Shennong in the 28th century BCE. As the story goes, his servant was boiling some water for the emperor to drink, and leaves from the Camellia tree he was sitting under fell into the water and began to steep. He drank the resulting beverage and declared it refreshing.

Before enjoying it as an everyday drink, the Chinese ate the leaves as a vegetable, drank the beverage as a medicine, and gave the drink as a ritual offering. It was a favorite of Buddhist monks across East Asia, who drank the tea to stay alert during meditation. A Tang Dynasty (618-907) text called *The Book of Tea*, by Lu Yu, gave tips on the cultivation and brewing of tea. The first consignment of tea delivered to Europe came by way of the Dutch East India Company in the early 17th century. The British became tea drinkers through Catherine of Braganza, the Portuguese wife of Charles II, who introduced the drink to court. The habit soon spread.

Teas are classified by their place of origin, the size of the processed leaf, and the manufacturing process (amount of fermentation).

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