

Educator Guide

FEATURED WORK OF ART



HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This resource includes factual information, cultural context, glossary of terms, as well as prompts and discussion questions related to the *Scent Container with Figure of Budai Heshang*, 54.2261.

This resource is recommended for High School audiences and Social Studies subjects. Students will learn about the historical and religious context of this object to be able to relate it to the impact of imperialism. These suggestions were informed by the Maryland State Department of Education 2024 standards.

[Scent Container with Figure of Budai Heshang](#)

Unidentified artist

China and France, 18th century

Porcelain, soft paste porcelain, gilded copper alloy (ormolu)

Museum purchase, 1941, acc. no. 54.2261

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Facts About the Work of Art

- This is a figure of the Buddhist deity Budai. The figure and the cup next to it are made of porcelain; both are framed with gold plated bronze and **soft paste porcelain** flowers.
- Budai, a 10th-century Chinese monk, is named for the cloth sack (*budai*) that he often carries under his arm. Believed to be the incarnation of Maitreya, the future Buddha, Budai helps people in the mortal world. He is popularly depicted as a jovial figure with a laughing face and round stomach, an appearance that speaks to his light-hearted and approachable nature.
- This is an example of the 18th-century trend of “**Chinoiserie**,” European objects and decorative schemes created in what was understood or imagined to be a Chinese style, or in combination with Asian imports such as ceramics and lacquer objects.
- The function of this object is not entirely clear, although it is possible that the wine cup could have been used to contain **potpourri**, a sweet smelling mixture of dried flowers and imported spices among other ingredients.
- Decorative pieces such as this were prone to breakage and required high maintenance, as the porcelain flowers are very delicate and hard to clean. The fragile nature of these items added to their luxury status.

Cultural Context

- Europeans exoticized Chinese culture. For example, religious objects like this were decontextualized for the sake of decorative arts. This practice was especially notable in the mid-1700s through the first quarter of the 19th century, although **exoticization** and **appropriation** of East Asian aesthetics continues today.
- In China, such a sculpture of Budai would have been placed on a home altar to be worshipped. An artist in France repurposed this object by adding the gold frame, flowers, and porcelain cup. The French recontextualization of the object reframes the object for use in a European interior without regard to its original function or importance.
- France’s desire to use Chinese imagery also extended to the desire for porcelain as an import from China. The figure and the cup in this object are made in China from **true hard porcelain**, and the flowers that were created in France were made of soft paste porcelain. Soft paste porcelain was the material used in France in an attempt to recreate Chinese porcelain. It was first sold commercially in the late 17th century.
- European colonialism and Western culture in general has had lasting effects on the appropriation of Buddhist imagery and practices, which can be seen today in stone Buddha heads sold in Western garden centers, and the commercialization and religious de-contextualization of mindfulness, among many other effects.

GLOSSARY

Appropriation: The act of taking something for one's own use or benefit, often without the permission of the original owner.

Chinoiserie: A style of art invented in Europe that is meant to be reflective of or imitate Chinese aesthetics.

Exoticization: To see or present something as foreign or different often through glamorizing and/or stereotyping foreign cultures.

Ormolu: A paste made of ground gold and mercury that is applied onto the surface of a decorative object to give the illusion of it being made of gold.

Potpourri: A mixture of flowers, herbs, and spices that is used as fragrance.

Soft Paste Porcelain: A material developed in Europe in the late 17th century as an attempt to recreate "true"/hard paste porcelain.

True/Chinese/Hard Paste Porcelain: A type of clay known for its strength and bright white color that was originally developed in China.

PROMPTS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. Look closely at the artwork. Describe what you notice.
2. Choose three adjectives you would use to describe this figure based on what you can observe, and explain why these words came to mind.
3. Compare the original Budai figure to the added French components of the gold and flowers. What is different about the style, color, and decorative elements?
4. Examine how the French decorative elements change the original religious context of the Budai figure. How is this tied to imperialism?
5. Identify where we see examples of chinoiserie and Buddhist figures in Western decor today. Complete research if needed to provide examples.