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Visual Literacy Activity

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The East Asian World

Analyzing Art of the Ming Dynasty

During artistic flowerings in a culture's history, a fortunate combination of influences and events can lead to either bold innovations in art or strong revivals of classic styles—or sometimes to a combination of both. You can identify the visual principles and artistic ideals of a period by analyzing the kinds of art it produced.

Directions: The Ming dynasty was a time of great artistic achievement in China. Look closely at the three examples of Ming art, analyze them, and answer the questions that follow.

Caption: *Walking by a Mountain Stream.* Traditionally attributed to Shen Zhou. 1427–1509.

Caption: Meiping vase, Ming dynasty, c. 1450–1500.

Background

The early Ming era, a relatively conservative period for visual arts, is notable for two very different schools of painting. The Zhe school represented conservative artists of the "academy." Zhe artists were professionlly trained and worked in traditional styles tracing back to the Song dynasty. Paintings of the Zhe school are important for their precision, decorative beauty, bright inks, and traditional subject matter. The Imperial court often supported the artists, and their large, decorative paintings honored the Ming dynasty's splendor and self-professed virtues.

The Wu school represented "literati" painting, those that expressed the artist's subjective view of life. Wu school painters were concerned with the inner experience of the individual rather than with decorative beauty and traditional subjects. Wu school artists usually painted just for themselves. Individualistic styles, delicate coloring, and expressive, calligraphic brushstrokes characterize Wu school art.

Ming pottery-making is also notable for its combination of new methods and a reinvigoration of traditional approaches. Technical improvements in firing and the discovery of new color combinations led to the creation of multicolored pottery. However, the most famous Ming pottery remained the traditional blue and white.

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Caption: *Elegant Gathering in the Apricot Garden.* Xie Huan, c. 1437.

This pottery, made with an overglaze of white and an underglaze of blue, had been around since the previous Yuan dynasty. Both Chinese consumers and foreign collectors prize this type of Ming pottery.

The paintings are examples of the Zhe and Wu schools. The black-and-white one is attributed to Shen Zhou (1427–1509), whose stylistic variety, restraint, and sensitivity made him the most famous of the Wu school painters. His work was known for its stylistic variety, restraint, and sensitivity. The other painting is an example of Zhe school academic painting by imperial court artist Xie Huan (ca. 1370–ca. 1450). This painting depicts high-level Chinese government officials in a beautiful springtime garden. Near them stands a crane, an emblem of such officials and a symbol of long life and happiness.

The meiping vase dates from the middle to the last half of the fifteenth century. One side of depicts two scholars meeting between pine and willow trees; the other side shows servants in front of a house. The mieping design—small mouth, slender neck, and rounded curves—was based on the female shape.

Practicing the Skill

1. **Describing** Describe the similarities and differences you see between the two paintings.

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2. **Explaining** Explain how the two paintings illustrate the differences between the Wu and Zhe schools of painting.

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3. **Interpreting** Why do you think Ming blue-and-white porcelain was so prized?

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Go a Step Further

4. **Analyzing** What do the Ming artworks suggest about the visual principles and artistic ideals that were important during the Ming dynasty?

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