

PORCELAIN in PEN



William Grabowski

Celebrating cultures helps to broaden our understanding of the world around us. Especially in these complicated times, the arts—particularly the visual arts—can most wonderfully address the need of cultural understanding in ways that can raise our spirits and encourage empathy.

Recently, our fifth-graders researched and created artwork inspired by an art form begun more than a thousand years ago: Chinese porcelain plates.

Chinese Porcelain Plates

Students conducted research and learned that the first porcelain plates were produced in China during the Tang Dynasty (608–906 AD). The key ingredient was *kaolin*, a soft clay, that was mixed with porcelain stone and fired at a high temperature. Cobalt, a precious commodity at the time, was added to make the blue color for detailing. The art form thrived and by the fourteenth century, China was exporting to the Near East and Middle East.

The seventeenth century saw these plates in high demand throughout Europe, where manufacturers began to create their own versions.

Lighter Ware

I asked students to create user-friendly, updated versions of porcelain plates by drawing on Styrofoam plates with permanent markers. We discussed using

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similar themes found on the Chinese plates; students chose flora, fauna, and landscape as their focus. We found that the best Styrofoam plates to use were those that were the smoothest, with the least amount of indentations.

Styrofoam plates were found to be superior to paper plates, as they resembled dinnerware more closely and were brighter in tone.

Porcelain in Pen

Students began by creating recurring patterns around the edges of their plates with permanent blue markers. Next, I asked them to choose a theme that highlighted geometric and organic shapes, and to begin designing the interior of their plates. I provided traceable circular stencils that they could use to ensure uniformity, if they chose to create a more decorative, intricate geometric design.

Strengthening Minds

My fifth-graders very much enjoyed this challenge. I prompted them to work with care to ensure that their patterns were consistent and their subject matter was appropriate. They needed to be careful to avoid smearing the marker on their work and themselves. Their wonderful results were displayed at our district art show to generous reviews.

We are at our most successful as art educators when we strengthen the minds of our students to help them understand their place as artistic global citizens. Learning about and linking with other cultures and techniques makes us all better learners, broadens our knowledge, and brings us all a bit closer together. ☺

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NATIONAL STANDARD

Connecting: Relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context.

WEB LINK

www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/ceramics-blue-and-white-porcelain.php