

The Legacy of Genghis Khan

Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353



A Resource Guide for Teachers

Education Department ♦ Los Angeles County Museum of Art

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Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353

Los Angeles County Museum of Art ♦ April 13–July 27, 2003

Goals of this Resource Guide

One goal of this guide is to help teachers prepare students to visit the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where they will participate in a docent-guided tour of the special exhibition, *The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353*. A second goal of the guide is to help teachers relate aspects of the tour to their school's curriculum.

About the Exhibition

This exhibition examines the important artistic and cultural achievements that occurred in the Iranian world in the aftermath of the Mongol invasions. It was a period of brilliant cultural flowering as the Mongol masters sought to govern their disparate empire, and in the process they sponsored the creation of a remarkable new visual language.

About the Tour

Docents offer this tour for students in grades 6 through 12. During the tour students will discover how Genghis Khan (c. 1162–1227) united the Mongols and then amassed one of the greatest armies in history, conquering China, Iran, and Central Asia before dividing this vast empire among his sons and grandsons. They will also consider how the Mongols evolved from a nomadic way of life in their Mongolian homeland to a more settled existence in the countries they ruled. Discussions will also focus on the importance of trade and its role in the cultural and artistic exchange that occurred during more than a century of Mongol rule.

Suggested Classroom Discussion Topics before the Museum Visit

- ♦ Copy and distribute the map and genealogy pages. Discuss the origin of the Mongols in Central Asia and the spread of their empire. Identify Genghis Khan, Khubilai Khan, and Hülegü Khan on the genealogy and discuss the territory each one conquered or ruled.
- ♦ Discuss the terms in the glossary so students will be familiar with them when they have their tour of the exhibition.
- ♦ For older students discuss epic poetry. List and discuss epic poems they have studied, such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Shah Zav Enthroned

Page from the Great Mongol *Shahnama*

(Book of Kings)

Iran (probably Tabriz), 1330s

Ink, colors, and gold on paper

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Purchase, Smithsonian Unrestricted Trust Funds,

Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program, and Dr. Arthur M. Sackler (S1986.107)

This page is from a fourteenth-century copy of the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings), an epic poem written by Abu al-Qasim Firdausi and completed around 1010. It is estimated to have contained about 60,000 couplets that tell the history of Iran beginning with the creation of the world and the first shah. This fourteenth-century copy is often referred to as the Great Mongol *Shahnama* because through its illustrations, the historical kings and heroes of Iran are recast in the guise of Mongols as a means of legitimizing the Mongols' rule. The manuscript was taken apart by a Belgian art dealer between 1910 and 1915 and its pages sold separately; today fifty-seven pages are known to exist in private and public collections throughout the world. It is believed that the original work was produced in two volumes with approximately 190 manuscript pages.

The illustrated page depicted here tells the story of the enthronement of Zav who took the throne after the beheading of the tyrannical King Naudar. Although his reign only lasted five years (due to his advanced age at the time of his coronation), it was a period of stability and prosperity for the nation. He is portrayed at the center of the painting in an architectural setting flanked by officials and courtiers who are bestowing praises and gifts. Of the fifty-seven known works belonging to this copy, thirteen are enthronement scenes, all showing a similar composition.

Suggested Discussion Questions

Have students discuss the use of narrative images to tell stories. How has the artist used the composition to tell the story? Can students think of examples of illustrations of historical events that are depicted factually or fantastically?



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Star Tile with Phoenix

Iran (probably Takht-i Sulaiman), 1270s
Fritware, overglaze painted (*lajvardina*)
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.,
Gift of Osborne and Gratia Hauge (S1997.114)

Although they built and occupied great capital cities, the Mongol rulers of Iran continued to practice their ancestral tradition of migration, moving between seasonal camps depending on the time of year and taking their *ordus*, or encampments, with them as they relocated. Camps also included permanent palaces in addition to the tents that were brought to the site. The remains of one palace, known as Takht-i Sulaiman (Throne of Solomon), are located in the Azerbaijan or northwest region of Iran, providing evidence for palace decoration during the time of Ilkhanid rule.

Although not excavated at the site, this *Star Tile with Phoenix* is believed to be from Takht-i Sulaiman based on its size and decoration. It illustrates the important transfer of decorative motifs that occurred during Mongol rule. The phoenix is a popular subject in Chinese art. It is a magnificent bird, one of the four supernatural creatures (along with the dragon, unicorn, and tortoise), often symbolizing a successful and peaceful period of rule. The Mongol rulers of China employed the phoenix and the equally popular dragon to associate them with Chinese tradition. Their use of the phoenix and dragon established them as symbols of imperial rule. Their subsequent appearance in Iran indicates that primary or secondary sources of Chinese art were available to artists during Mongol rule.

Several techniques were used for decorating the tiles at Takht-i Sulaiman, including the overglaze *lajvardina* technique seen here. In this technique a monochrome glaze of turquoise (as seen here), cobalt blue, or white was applied and the tile fired. The tile was then painted with black, white, or red enamel with gold leaf accents and fired a second time.

Suggested Discussion Topic

The transfer of imagery was an important part of the legacy of Mongol rule. Have students discuss symbols or motifs that appear in contemporary American culture that have come from other cultures (for example, hieroglyphic images, the cross, etc.).



Star Tile with Phoenix

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Mongol Archer on Horseback

Illustration from the Diez Albums

Signed Muhammad ibn Mahmudshah al-Khayyam

Iran, early 15th century

Ink and gold on paper

Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz,

Orientabteilung (Diez A fol.72, S. 13)

Photo: Ellwandt, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin

This drawing is believed to be a copy of a work from the Ilkhanid period (1256–1353). During the fifteenth century, albums of paintings, calligraphy, sketches, and related works were assembled to preserve some original fourteenth century works and compile later material related to the Ilkhanid period. *Mongol Archer on Horseback* belongs to one of several albums now housed in the Staatsbibliothek, Berlin called the Diez Albums.

The Mongols were expert horsemen. Prior to their unification and the expansion of their empire under Genghis Khan, the Mongols were nomadic tribesmen who migrated several times a year moving their herds of sheep, goats, and horses in search of suitable water and grazing land. They used horses not only to move their herds, but also to fight battles between one another and their Chinese neighbors. The Mongols valued their horses, whose speed and dexterity enabled them to overpower armies that outnumbered them. Not only were the Mongols skilled riders, they were also expert marksmen and adept at shooting arrows while riding. They developed a bow that could shoot 350 yards, 100 yards farther than the English longbow. These and other advances related to their horsemanship aided Genghis Khan in creating one of the greatest empires in history. In addition to their use of horses for warfare, the Mongols also rode them on hunts, a favorite Mongolian pastime.

Suggested Discussion Question

Have students discuss the characteristics of nomadic and settled societies. What characteristics of the society might be depicted or celebrated in works of art? What materials would be appropriate for the artworks of a nomadic society? (Many of the artworks in the exhibition, such as saddles, relate to the Mongols as horsemen.)



Mongol Archer on Horseback

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Orientabteilung (Diez A fol.72, S. 13)

Photo: Ellwandt, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin

Mihrab

Iran, Kashan, early 14th century

Fritware, molded, overglaze luster-painted with cobalt and turquoise

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

The Nasli M. Heeramaneck Collection, Gift of Joan Palevsky (M.73.5.1)

Photo: © 2003 Museum Associates/LACMA

This object once formed the upper part of a mihrab (pronounced meh-rob), an architectural feature found on interior walls of Islamic mosques, tombs, and other religious structures. Mihrabs can vary in shape, material, and design, but all share a common religious function. Set into the wall of the building that faces towards Mecca, the holy city of Islam, they indicate the direction worshipers must face while praying.

The mihrab is made of a type of man-made clay known as fritware, which is fired, decorated with luster painting, and refired. In this technique metal oxides are applied over the glaze, and the object is refired in such a manner that the oxygen is drawn out, which results in a surface that is especially glittery, or lustrous.

Typical of much Islamic art is the kind of decorative design seen here, combining floral forms and calligraphy. In the center, interlacing vines support flowers in shades of gold, turquoise, and blue. The decorative border—which is more rectilinear in character—contains a quotation from the Qur’an, the Muslim holy book. It comes from chapter 15, verses 45–47. It is written in Arabic and translates, reading from right to left, as follows:

*In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate:
The righteous will surely be amid gardens and fountains;
they will be told: Enter therein, in peace and security.
We shall cleanse their hearts of all traces of ill-will;
they will be as brethren up on couches face to face.*

Suggested Discussion Questions

In this mihrab different patterns are layered one on top of the other. How many patterns do you see? Which parts of the mihrab’s decoration derive from plant forms? Discuss the role of Arabic calligraphy in this piece. (It serves as decoration in addition to conveying meaning.)

Suggested Activity

Make a work of art that incorporates a line from your favorite poem or song. Think about how to effectively integrate the words into your design through the layering of patterns and colors. In creating the patterns, choose motifs related to the meaning of your words.



Mihrab

Iran, Kashan, early 14th century

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Photo: © 2003 Museum Associates/LACMA

Glossary

Genghis Khan	(c. 1162–1227) Known as Temüjin, he united the Mongolian tribes and in 1206 was given the title Genghis Khan meaning “Oceanic Ruler” or “Fierce Ruler.” By about 1225 he had conquered territory from Korea to Hungary.
Hülegü Khan	(c. 1217–1265) A grandson of Genghis Khan who conquered territory in West Asia including Iran, founding the Ilkhanid dynasty in Iran in 1259–60.
Ilkhans	Term used for the Mongolian rulers of Iran. Literally “lesser Khan,” meaning subordinate to the Great Khans in Mongolia and then China.
Islam	Arabic word meaning submission (to God) and the name for the religion founded under the leadership of the prophet Muhammad; it also denotes the Muslim community.
Khubilai Khan	(1215–1294) A grandson of Genghis Khan who ruled China during the Yuan dynasty from 1271–1294. The dynasty continued under his successors until 1368.
Lajvardina	An overglaze painting technique used for tiles and pottery. Named for the Persian word <i>lajvard</i> (lapis lazuli) because of its deep blue glaze.
Luster technique	A decorative technique in ceramics in which compounds of silver and copper are applied over the glaze of a previously fired object, which is then refired, resulting in a glittery, metallic surface.
Mihrab	Prayer niche in a mosque or other religious structure, emphasizing the direction of prayer (facing Mecca).
Mongolia	Area south of Russia and north of China with the Altay Mountains in the west, the Khentei Mountains in the northeast, and the Gobi Desert in the south. Most of the tribes lived in the central steppe region at the time of Genghis Khan and the Mongolian people continue to live in this area today.
Mongols	A tribe originating in the eastern part of modern-day Mongolia, which in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, under the leadership of Genghis Khan and his successors, controlled an area extending from Korea to Hungary.
Mosque	Any place of Muslim communal worship.
Muslim	Literally, “one who submits”; someone who adheres to the faith of Islam.
Ordus or Hordes	Originally meaning “headquarter” or “encampment”; later used to identify an imperial camp or palace.
Pax Mongolica	A period of peace during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.
Qur’an	Literally, “recitation”; the holy book of Islam.
Rashid al-Din	Author of the <i>Jami’ al-tavarikh</i> (Compendium of Chronicles).
Shahnama	(Book of Kings) Iranian national epic, completed in 1010 by Abu al-Qasim Firdausi; it tells the stories of the pre-Islamic kings and heroes.
Takht-i Sulaiman	Seasonal palace of the Ilkhans originally located in the Azerbaijan region of Iran.

Suggested Reading

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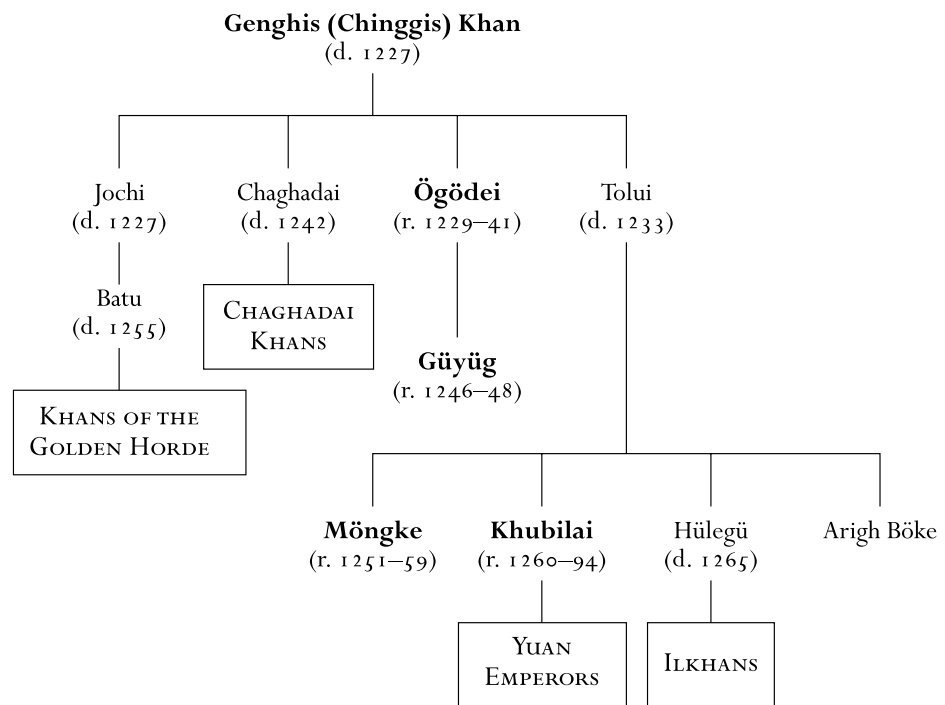
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The Mongol Khans

Great Khans shown in bold





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