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## Title of Object

Ink tablet in the form of a tortoise (see note regarding title in Sources)

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Unknown

**Culture:** Chinese (Han Dynasty)

**Date of Object:** 1st century

**Country:** China

**Accession Number:** 32.54.4a,b

**File Created:** 5/2/2016

**Material/Medium:** Earthenware with modeled and incised decor including the Eight Trigrams of the I-Ching (The Book of Changes)

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**Department:** Chinese, South and Southeast Asian Art

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## Tour Topics

Group 2 tour, ancient culture, animals/birds, ceramics, innovation/avant-garde, mythology, ritual/ceremony, spirituality/sacred, symbolism, writing/calligraphy, Daoism

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. Look and describe what you see in this Ink Tablet Tortoise. How is it different from a natural tortoise?
2. How would you describe the markings on the shell, especially within the six-sided circles?
3. The trigram markings describe the relationship between Yin and Yang in Daoism. Where do you think the owner may have kept this little sculpture? And why?

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## Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

1. Comprised of an ink tablet made from earthenware. The shell is detachable and a square ink well lies within the body of the tortoise. The location where it was found is unknown, but a likely possibility is that it comes from a tomb or gravesite. People were often buried with their favorite possessions.
2. Geometrical patterns carved on the top of the shell of the tortoise. Even though a brief description found in the 1933-34 Bulletin of the MN. Inst. of Arts (vol. XXXII) states “the cover decorated with incised designs,” it is clear that the designs are trigrams from Daoism (as the Mia label makes clear).
3. Earthenware, tortoise ink tablets can also be found at the Art Institute of Chicago or the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The artwork in Chicago (#1976.530) contains designs but no trigrams and is dated Han or Six Dynasties period (206 BCE- 589 CE). The “Inkstone” and Cover in the Shape of a Turtle” from the Met (2003.82a,b) has trigrams and is dated Sui (581-618 CE) to Tang (618-907) dynasties.

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## Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

1. The carving on the shell consists of 8 trigrams from the I-Ching (The Book of Changes). These trigrams (Bagua) are the best known images associated with Daoism. Daoism as a philosophy dates back to Laozi in 6th c. BCE and a principle text credited to Laozi is the “Dao De Jing” (alt spelling: Tao Te Ching). It became revered during the Han Dynasty when Daoism started to become a religion (instead of a philosophy) with the deification of Laozi. The tortoise was one of the animals highly regarded by Laozi. His contemporary, Confucius, also considered the tortoise a sacred animal, believing it to be one of the “Four Spiritually Endowed Creatures” (in addition to the unicorn, phoenix and dragon).
2. The eight trigrams are visual symbols and are the basis for 64 hexagrams found in the “I Ching” or “Yi Jing,” a divination text dating to the Western Zhou dynasty (1050-771 BCE). The text enables divination regarding the present state of the world and decision-making. The trigrams and hexagrams are based upon Yin and Yang and served a vital role in the Daoist, alchemical tradition. The manipulation of the forces of Yin and Yang led to greater understanding and decision-making.
3. Stephen Little states in “Taoism and the Arts of China” (p. 163) that two, key changes shifted Daoism from a philosophy to a religion: a.) the deification of Laozi (by a Han leader in the 2nd century) and, b) the emergence of a Daoist “church” (Little’s term). The disintegration of the Han dynasty and the growth of Buddhism in China were catalysts for the change. The transition continued and included the formal development of rituals during the Six Dynasties period (420-589 CE). The movement encompassing the deification became called the “Way of the Celestial Masters.”
5. This “tortoise ink pot” seems extraordinary since it such an early portrayal of a symbols so strongly associated with Daoism in a ceramic or sculpture, dated at the very beginning of the transition of Daoism from a philosophy to a religion.
6. From artsmia object in focus: This ink tablet was discovered in a tomb dating to the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220). At that time, ceramic objects were buried with the dead, to provide for them in the afterlife. These grave goods (called ming ch’i) reveal a lot about the career and social position of the deceased. The ink tablet, a writing tool, would have been buried with a scholar.

Of his four writing tools--ink tablet, inkstick, brush, and paper--the scholar prized the ink tablet above all. Ink tablets held deep spiritual meaning for scholars; they embodied the essence of heaven and earth and represented a microcosm of the universe. This tablet's tortoise shape is a Taoist symbol of the entire universe.

Scholars used ink tablets to grind and mix ink for writing and painting. The tablets, which were made in different shapes, stood on feet and had a lid that lifted off (in this case the tortoise's shell). An inkstick, made of pine soot and an adhesive gum, was grated against the grainy inside of the ink tablet. As the stick was being grated, drops of water were added until the ink was ready. Then the scholar could dip his brush into it and begin his skillful writing.

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### Current Mia Label Information (optional)

This charming Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE) ink stone, modeled in the form of a turtle, features "the eight trigrams" ba gua carved into the top of its removable shell. The eight trigrams are among the earliest and best-known images associated with Daoism. These visual symbols are the basis for the sixty-four hexagrams of the ancient divination text, the I-Qing or The Book of Changes which was formulated during Western Zhou (1050-772 BCE). In addition to divination, the eight trigrams played a vital role in Daoist alchemical practices and helped explain the cosmological principles of transformation. The eight trigrams and their symbolism are one of several Bronze Age traditions that coalesced during Han to form the basis of religious Daoism.

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### Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

1. "Taoism and the Art of China" by Stephen Little with Shaun Eichman. Univ. of Chicago, 2000.
  2. Teaching the Arts, artsmia, Ink tablet in form of a tortoise: <http://new.artsmia.org/teaching-the-arts/ink-tablet-in-the-form-of-a-tortoise/the-tortoise-is-a-symbolic-animal-in-chinese-culture/>
- (NOTE on title: The collections online labels this object as a "turtle," but the more recent Teaching the Arts section labels this as a "tortoise." The references to turtle have been updated to tortoise in this document.)
3. Wikipedia article on "I Ching."
  4. "Taoism" by Jennifer Oldstone-More, Oxford University Press, 2003.
  5. Inkstone from the Met Museum: <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/65348>