



Arts & Culture in Suzhou

Named part of UNESCO's Creative Cities Network in 2014 for its crafts and folk arts, Suzhou has a long-lasting legacy as a city of culture and high society. Here are some of the ways to experience Suzhou's fine craftsmanship and performing arts:

Kunqu Opera is the forerunner of all Chinese operas, boasting a history dating back more than 600 years. Kunqu Opera has a distinctive quality that is simultaneously graceful and haunting. It originated in the Kunshan area of Suzhou in the late Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) and became further established during the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644). In 2001, UNESCO recognized Kun Opera as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. The instruments commonly used for Kunqu Opera are notable in their own right and include the guzheng, also known as a Chinese zither; the four-stringed pipa that is plucked; the fiddle-style pipa; and the guqin, a seven-stringed zither.

Pingtán is an ancient art of storytelling and ballad singing in Suzhou dialect. This art form originally appeared in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) and was a favorite of emperors and commoners alike. Its distinctive aspects include storytelling, loud laughter and singing. The best place to see Kun Opera and Pingtan is at the Suzhou Kunqu Theatre, but visitors can also explore the heritage of the operas by visiting the Kunqu Opera Museum.

Suzhou's Classical Gardens, of which there are 108, are the city's top attraction and a vivid representation of Suzhou's culture expressed via landscape. Nine have been collectively designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Nut Carvings are miniature sculptures created by skilled artisans. In Suzhou, this artwork is most often produced on olive pits by artisans living in Zhoushan Village on the shores of Taihu Lake and often depicts the joyous lives of fishermen, bountiful baskets of flowers, or lines of poetry.

Suzhou is renowned for high quality **silk production**, first serving as center of the silk industry during the Tang (618 – 907) and Song Dynasties (960 – 1279.) Visiting the No. 1 Silk Factory is an interesting way to learn about silk production which is the basis for

Suzhou Song Brocade, known for its flashy colors, exquisite patterns, and soft texture, can be traced back to the Five Dynasties. It is one of China's three famous brocades, together with Nanjing Yun brocade and Sichuan Shu brocade. However, unlike these art forms, which are typically used as fabrics for garments, Suzhou Song Brocade was also used as canvases for paintings and calligraphy works. As such, this particular fabric came to be associated with high society and the intelligentsia.

Suzhou Double-sided Embroidery is one of the oldest embroidery techniques in the world. It is famous for its variety of stitches, beautiful patterns, elegant colors, and consummate craftsmanship. Embroidery

often depicts aspects of nature and the environment such as animals and birds, landscapes, and flowers. Double sided embroidery is most often found on costumes and home décor. Travelers can visit the Suzhou Embroidery Institute to view craftspeople at work and purchase embroidered souvenirs.

Perhaps the most difficult form of embroidery is **Kesi**, a hand-woven method that can not be replicated on a sewing machine. Kesi patterns are flat with the surface they are woven on, so they appear as a painting on silk. The art of kesi was designated an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2009.

Exquisite, **handcrafted fans** made in Suzhou are renowned for their delicate elegance and rich artistic characteristics. The making of stylish fans in Suzhou is a combination of several exquisite techniques of modeling, framing, carving, and inlaying. With this level of craftsmanship, Suzhou fans have always been an indispensable item in the hands scholars and the literati.

Suzhou became one of the centers of **jade carvings** in China in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Suzhou jade carvings typically consist of small and medium-sized pieces recognized for having the proper density, vivid shapes, smooth lines and exquisite designs.

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