

SPOTLIGHT: Dragons in Chinese Art



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Date: November 17, 2008

Five most essential aspects of this theme:

1. Dragons in Asian art are auspicious animals that symbolize wealth, happiness, strength, power, and fertility. They are associated with the east — sunrise, springtime, life. This contrasts with dragons as portrayed in the western tradition — evil, fire-breathing monsters to be vanquished. Examples such as St. George and Beowulf.
2. From the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) onward, the dragon has been a symbol of the Chinese emperor. The emperor's accoutrements are always embellished with five-clawed dragons. In Chinese mythology, dragons are associated with water and were thus emblematic of new life, growth and spring. They wintered underground, emerging in spring with claps of thunder and rain, a signal to begin annual cultivation. Their authority over life and death made them an appropriate symbol of the emperor, who was entrusted by heaven with a mandate to maintain a strong and healthy empire.
3. The number of claws depicted in dragons on official garb reflect the wearer's rank: five-clawed dragons were solely for the emperor, four for princes and three for less officials.
4. Dragons often appear with a fiery pearl and/or a phoenix. According to some, the pearl represents thunder and rain. Legend has it that pairs of dragons would play games with the pearl

and that it was this heavenly sport causing thunder to strike and rain to fall. Others referenced a myth telling of dragons forever chasing the pearl of wisdom. Still others describe this as the sun, the moon and the dual influences of nature. The phoenix is less ambiguous. It represents the empress. The phoenix and dragon together symbolize marital harmony.

5. The Chinese dragon was a mythical amalgamation of nine animals with the head of a camel, horns of a deer, eyes of a rabbit, ears of an ox, neck of a snake, abdomen of a frog, scales of a carp, claws of a hawk and feet of a tiger.

Possible questions to use when discussing this piece with museum visitors:

1. How does this dragon make you feel? Is it frightening or friendly? What makes you say that?
2. Take a good look at the dragon. Do any of its body parts remind you of other animals? Which ones? Count them.
3. How many claws does this dragon have? How does that compare to the dragons we viewed earlier? Why do you suppose this one has more?
4. The Chinese tell many different stories about the flaming pearl. What do you think the dragon is doing with the pearl? Why?

Tour Type: Explore Asia, Artful Animals