



## **Eight Daoist Immortals**

### **Polychrome porcelain**

The eight three-inch-tall statues represent the Eight Daoist Immortals. These particular statues are hand painted and date back to the 1930s and 1940s, about 20-30 years after the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). From left to right as shown in the photo above, the names of the Eight Immortals are:

- Lü Dongbin, an Elegant Scholar (1)
- Han Xiangzi, a Difficult Nephew (2)
- Cao Guojiu, a Penitent Official (3)
- He Xian'gu, an Immortal Maid (also the only female Immortal) (4)
- Li Tieguai, a Diseased Beggar (5)
- Zhang Guolao, an Ancient Man (6)
- Zhongli Quan, a Defeated Warrior (7)
- Lan Caihe, an Eternal Teenager (depicted as both male and female) (8)

They are thought to represent the different aspects and statuses of life, and some analysts suggest that together they represent all of humanity. In a religious sense, they could potentially be seen as models of how to live a Daoist life by following “the Way” (“Dao” in Chinese). In addition to these eight, there are also other immortals that exist in Chinese folklore traditions. Common depictions of the Eight Immortals in writing and art appear to have started in the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), although they were spoken of in legends and folklore long before that. They are considered semi-historical because they are thought to be named after historical figures who became legendary while also

being seen as religious/mythological figures, having acquired some mystical powers that allowed them to live forever. The Immortals are represented in both the Daoist religion and in secular Chinese folklore. Today, they are most commonly depicted in artwork, together and separately, and in children's literature.

## **Daoism**

Daoism, also known as Taoism, is a religious or philosophical tradition of Chinese origin which emphasizes living in harmony with the Dao, literally: "the Way." The roots of Daoism go back at least to the 4th century BCE. Laozi (also known as Lao-Tzu or Lao-Tze) was a Chinese philosopher credited with founding the philosophical system of Taoism. He is best known as the author of the *Tao-Te-Ching*, the work which exemplifies his thought. Deities and immortals, models in achieving Dao, make it their duty to teach and redeem all creatures, and are therefore worshiped by those that follow Daoism.

## **Power and Beauty Connection**

### **The Three Purities - Room 7**

These three paintings depict the Three Purities, the supreme deities of religious Daoism, who were identified as the source of all Daoist teachings and as rulers of the Daoist universe. They are painted like enthroned emperors with meticulous detail in the colorful outline style associated with traditional Buddhist painting and court portraiture.

Presented are the Celestial Worthy of the Primordial Beginning (in blue robe), a teacher and patriarch of the highest scriptural tradition; the Celestial Worthy of the Numinous Treasure (black robe), patron of the second scriptural tradition, the Cavern of Mystery; and the Celestial Worthy of the Way and its Power (green robe), better known as Laozi, patriarch of the third scriptural tradition. Although images of the Three Purities would have been essential in most Daoist temples, few examples remain. This group is the only known complete set from the Ming dynasty. The three supreme deities of orthodox religious Daoism known as The Three Purities, included the Celestial Worthy of the Primordial Beginning. The paintings in this set represent The Three Purities as they were standardized by The Complete Perfection sect of Daoism which rose to prominence during the Mongol rule of the Yuan dynasty (1280-1368).

### **The Three Purities, late 16th century**

<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/62138/the-three-purities-one-of-three-china>

## **Collection Connections:**

### **Daoist Figures**

"Three figures stand in a mountainous landscape and bid farewell to each other. Their attributes identify them as three of the Eight Immortals from the *Daoist* tradition. The Eight Immortals are legendary beings, each representing a different condition of life:

poverty, wealth, aristocracy, low social rank, age, youth, masculinity, and femininity. Zhong Liquan is on the right and holds a large fan that can resurrect the dead and transform stones into silver or gold. Zhang Guolao, who characterizes old age, is in the center, with a tube-shaped bamboo drum strapped to his back. Cao Guojiu is on the left, dressed in official robes and holding a wine jar; he is regarded as the patron deity of acting and theater. The painting is likely the work of Liu Jun, a court painter of the Ming dynasty, whose work is characterized by dramatic scenes populated with figures.” - [Mia Collection](#), ***Daoist Figures, late 15th-early 16th century, attributed to Liu Jun, 2015.9 (G201)***

“Figures of the Eight Daoist Immortals were popular in Europe as exotic ornaments and novelties, which allowed the Chinese to sell them to both eastern and western markets without alteration into the 19th century. The western term for these delicately modeled, undecorated figures is *blanc-de-chine*, a reference to their white or greyish glaze.” - [Mia Collection](#), ***Figure of Li Tieguai, a Daoist Immortal, c. 1752, unknown artist, 99.217.413 (G209)***

“These sliding door panels (*fusuma*) show a group of Chinese *Daoist* immortals. The Chinese believed the immortals were historical and legendary personages who, through moral virtue, faith, and discipline, managed to transcend the bounds of the natural world and live forever. They were worshiped as saints. Old Chinese themes like this were admired in Japan by military rulers and Zen priests, who exalted Chinese culture and its heroes.” - [Mia collection](#), ***Daoist Immortals, 1646, by Kano Sansetsu, 63.37.1 ( G222)***