

[SECTION 1: Dragons as talismanic and totemic creatures]

China, Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BCE)

Dragon pendant, 1600–1100 BCE

Calcified ivory jade mottled with blue-green clouds with traces of red pigment

Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury 50.46.248

China, Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BCE)

Pendant in the form of a man flanked by a pair of dragons, 480–221 BCE

Pale green translucent jade

Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury 50.46.293

Two stylized dragons are symmetrically arranged at either end of the pendant, flanking a humanoid face with a serpentine body. This figure represents a spiritual deity, with the dragons serving as guardian figures. This was a very common design at the time for jade pendants, which were worn as jewelry that served as talismans to protective the wearer from evil and danger.

China, Western Zhou dynasty (c. 1050–771 BCE)

Dragon pendant, 11th–8th century BCE

Translucent white-grey jade

Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury 50.46.241

A dragon coiled into circular rings is one of the earliest forms of dragons depicted in jade. The design can be traced to the Hongshan culture, which existed around 4000 to 3000 BCE. This example represents the continuation of the design from the Neolithic period into the Western Zhou dynasty, over 2,000 years later. They remained the most popular form of the dragon for hundreds of years throughout the Shang and Zhou periods.

Some stylistic differences occurred as time passed, however: the original designs were of a more three-dimensional, rounded form, in contrast to the flat, disc-like shape of this example. Unlike its prototype, this example is stylized and is decorated with geometric patterns, a new decorative innovation of the Western Zhou. It also has elephant tusk-like protrusions from its nose, which represent the evolution of dragon characteristics over time. Still, its coiled shape clearly references the original Neolithic form.

China, late Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–256 BCE)

Pendant in the form of a dragon, 5th–3rd century BCE

Mottled pale yellow jade with brown markings

Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury 50.46.372

During the Eastern Zhou period, jade dragons were highly stylized, with a focus on fluidity, symmetry, and balance. This example highlights an innovation in Eastern Zhou decorative techniques, as one end of the dragon's body is carved in the same curved shape as the other. It is decorated with the so-called "grain pattern," composed of spiral shapes in relief. These spirals reference the shape of sprouting grains, a symbol of fertility and good harvest. This was a common decorative element in dragon ornaments of this time and the succeeding Han dynasty.

China, Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–256 BCE)

Pendant in the form of a dragon, 5th–3rd century BCE

Translucent green jade

Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury 50.46.359

This example is also decorated with a grain pattern, but its S-shaped form is much simpler than most other dragon pendants of the time.

China, Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BCE)

Wine vessel *gong*, Yin Phase II, 13th–12th century BCE

Bronze

Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury 50.46.104a,b

The *gong* is a type of ritual vessel used to serve wine during ceremonies. It was produced primarily during the late Shang (c. 1300–1046 BCE) and early Western Zhou (c. 1046–977 BCE) dynasties. This deep, boat-shaped pouring vessel displays almost perfect workmanship. *Taotie* (composite animal) masks are found on the handle and sides. Three dragons decorate the surface of the vessel. On the upper register to the right is a beaked dragon with recumbent C-shaped horn. The dragon under the spout of the vessel has a heart-shaped horn. Its enormous beak parallels the curve in the rim. The lid is fashioned as a dragon with the head of a beast, bottle-shaped horns, and a fierce mouth. Its long, sinuous body extends down the lid and loops at the end. All these features resemble those seen on a pair of *gong* excavated from the tomb of Fuhao, consort of King Wuding (r. c. 1250–1192 BCE), thus identifying Mia's example as one of the earliest known *gong*.

China, late Western Zhou dynasty or early Spring and Autumn period

Yi water vessel, 8th century BCE

Bronze

Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury 50.46.44

This gourd-shaped vessel is known as a *yi* and was used as a water container. *Yi* first appeared during the middle of the Western Zhou dynasty (c. 976–886 BCE) and were prevalent in the later Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn periods (c. 885–476 BCE). Before conducting a ritual activity or sitting down to a ceremonial feast, nobility would wash their hands with water poured from a *yi* like this one. Archaeological excavations reveal that *yi* were often paired with *pan* basins. Later, in the Warring States period (c. 475–221 BCE), *yi* evolved from a footed vessel with rich decoration and an animal-mask handle, such as this one, to a simple flat-bottomed vessel with restrained decoration and a ring handle. The charming features of this vessel include the handle surmounted by a horned dragon head and the legs, each one a seahorse-like dragon silhouette.

China, Warring States period (475–221 BCE)
Pair of winged dragons, 5th–4th century BCE
Bronze
Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury 50.46.37.1,.2

The agile, curved bodies and long, vertical necks of these ornamental dragons give them a sculptural, dynamic quality. The comma-shaped tails, curling tendrils, and chevron patterns on their moustaches are typical elements of dragon depictions from the Warring States period. The objects would have been attached to a vessel, serving as a kind of stand, so the reverse side of each body has two holes and less decoration—left almost plain since it would have been unseen.

China, Eastern Zhou dynasty, Warring States period (476–221 BCE)

Belt hook, 4th–3rd century BCE

Gilt bronze with crystal and glass inlay

Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton 96.52.1

Richly decorated belt fasteners like this one ornamented the luxurious silk costumes worn during the Warring States period. This elaborately decorated hook has three crystal bosses set over comma-shaped spirals, with smaller green glass bosses interspersed between entwined dragons. On the larger end is a dragon head with inlaid glass on the forehead. Its large oval ears slant along the sides, and above them are horns, quite long and curving. A pair of smaller dragons wind around the crystals, their heads merging in an undulating form, their bodies curving alongside the large dragon. The long hook ends in a turned-back dragon head. The concave underside has been left ungilded and is inlaid with a scrolling design in silver wire.

China, Eastern Han dynasty (25–220)

Belt buckle, 1st–2nd century

Gold, turquoise, and agate

Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton 2002.10.1

This buckle is decorated in relief with a winged dragon, a motif that was emblematic of the court during the Han dynasty. It is set with cabochons of turquoise and agate. Turquoise had been used throughout the Bronze Age for decorative inlay in metal. While perhaps not in classic Han court taste, this luxurious buckle is exactly the type of object that would have impressed rulers of remote provinces.

The dragon here is still Chinese, but the decoration and design reflect Eurasian influences, from the inlaid precious stones in oval shapes to the dots puncturing the metal to the shape of the buckle itself, which is derived from the Eurasian grasslands nomadic culture.

[SECTION 2: Dragon as ruler of weather and water]

China, Tang dynasty (618–907)

Dragon, 9th century

Gilt bronze

Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton 98.173

The Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang dynasty (r. 713–56) was a fervent enthusiast of the Daoist belief system, which holds specific mountains and rivers to be sacred. Every year, the emperor dispatched envoys of ranking officials and eminent Daoists to the sacred mountains and rivers to perform a rite called *tou longjian* (tossing dragons and tallies). In order to communicate with gods there, they tossed cast-metal dragons—accompanied by tablets inscribed with prayers for the dynasty’s welfare and the immortality of the emperor—into these holy sites. This gilt-bronze dragon was likely cast for such a purpose, a practice that continued until the 900s.

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Dragon in Clouds, 17th century

Hanging scroll, ink on silk

Gift of the Clark Center for Japanese Art & Culture 2013.29.19

This dramatic painting shows a dragon generating rain and lightning above a violently thrashing sea. The dragon is fierce and formidable, and the waves seem to be corresponding to his power. The painting was created using the so-called “reverse-saturation” method, meaning the background was painted with ink, while areas in the foreground were left unpainted to depict the clouds and waves. This gives the scene a highly mysterious, ethereal atmosphere, emphasizing the awe-inspiring power of the dragon.

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Libation cup with base, 17th-18th century

Rhinoceros horn

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Augustus L. Searle 28.53a,b

This vessel, meant to serve as a libation cup during ritual ceremonies, is carved from a rhinoceros horn. The material was originally thought by Daoists to bear powerful properties that could detect poison, and artwork made from it later became scholarly objects of curiosity. The shape of this vessel references a type of ancient Chinese ritual bronze known as a *gu*, an indication of the scholarly fascination with archaism during imperial China.

The cup itself appears to be rising from surging sea waves. A large dragon emerges from the water, reaching toward the sky, while several smaller dragons also scale the cup. Opposite the dragon is a phoenix head and neck. The appearance of a dragon and a phoenix together can be seen as a representation of the *yin* and *yang* powers of the universe, indicating the balance of opposing forces—similar to the depiction of the sea and sky.

[SECTION 3: Dragons as symbols of heavenly power]

China, Eastern Han dynasty (25–220)

Bi disk, 1st century CE

Grey-green mottled nephrite (jade)

Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury 50.46.315

Originating in the Hongshan culture of the Neolithic period, around 4000 to 3000 BCE, the *bi* disk is emblematic of heaven. The *bi* disks from the later Han dynasty tend to be more elaborate. The outer band of this *bi* is decorated with openwork designs of four dragons. Dragons were believed to have the power to control heaven, suggested here by the dragons fully surrounding the disk.

The raised bosses toward the center of this *bi* (known as *guwen* or “grain pattern”) are simpler in comparison to earlier Western Han examples, which were accompanied by incised spirals signifying sprouting grain—perhaps a symbol of fertility. By the late Han dynasty, the curving tails of the grains became less obvious or disappeared completely, as seen here.

China, Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE)

Roof tile end with dragon

Earthenware

Ruth and Dayton Chinese Room Endowment Fund 2001.154.10

In ancient China, roof tiles were in the form of half-cylinders with circular ends. Those tiles along the eaves of the building were capped with decorated circular discs like this one. The dragon motif not only imbues the architecture of the building with an auspicious element is also associated with the four celestial guardians. As evidenced by archaeological finds, dragons were often used along with the Vermilion Bird, White Tiger, and Black Tortoise to represent the guardians of the four cardinal directions.

China, Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279)

Funerary jar decorated with guardians of the four directions and zodiac figures, 13th century

Unglazed stoneware with incised, molded, and appliqué décor

The Ruth Ann Dayton Chinese Room Endowment Fund 2004.48a,b

Made specifically for the tomb, this unglazed storage jar displays the animals of the four directions (dragon, phoenix, tiger, snake-entwined tortoise) in high relief around the neck. Around the belly appear the twelve animals of the zodiac, standing in correct order: pig, rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, ram, monkey, cockerel, and dog. The directional animals are freely modeled while the robed bodies of the zodiac figures are mold-made with attached, freely modeled heads. The jar also contains Buddhist iconography evidenced by the incised lotus petals (a symbol of spiritual purity) around the vessel base, and the elongated lid modeled in the form of a stupa spire. The jar thus merges several important belief systems—*yin* and *yang*, Daoism and Buddhism—in its decorative schemes. In the broadest sense, all the emblems are auspicious and as a group connote peace and universal order for the afterlife.

China, Yuan-early Ming dynasty (1271–1644)

Zhenwu, the Daoist Deity of the North, 14th–15th century

Cizhou ware: slip-coated stoneware with dark brown and russet brown painted décor under a clear glaze

Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton 2003.201

The origins of the deity Zhenwu (perfected warrior) go back to the Warring States (3rd century BCE) and Han dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE) periods. At that time, he was known as Xuanwu (the dark warrior) and was simply represented by a tortoise entwined by a snake, representing the guardian of the North. This mold-made image, produced in the Cizhou kilns of north China, would have been used on an altar table for personal devotion. Zhenwu is shown wearing formal court attire with a flying dragon on the chest. He sits in a dignified posture befitting his status as a celestial emperor of the dark heavens, the dark warrior tortoise at his feet and the sleeves of his robe decorated with images of the Big Dipper.

China, Tang dynasty (618–907)

Pair of flying dragons, 8th century

Gilt bronze

Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton 2000.87.2.1,.2

This pair of dragons are in a sinuous S-shape, with scaly bodies and tendrils curved in one direction, indicating the dragons are flying in the wind. At the mouth of each dragon is a circle, symbolizing a jewel. Dragons began to be frequently depicted chasing auspicious jewels (known as Chintamani) after the introduction of Buddhist art to China. We don't know exactly where this pair of dragons came from, but they seem to have served as a part of a larger sculpture. The liveliness of the form reflects the cosmopolitan culture of the Tang dynasty, which absorbed many influences beyond China.

China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644)

Meiping vase decorated with a dragon in underglaze blue, Xuande period (1426–1435)

Jingdezhen ware

Porcelain with cobalt blue decor under a clear glaze

Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton 2001.139.2

Vessels like this *meiping* vase represent a peak in the decorative technique of blue-and-white wares, combining the freedom and energy of a newly emergent art form with the sophistication of maturity. An exuberant five-claw imperial dragon serves as the central motif, projecting an air of majesty and power as it strides around the surface of the vessel. Four frontal lion masks, alternating with stylized clouds, decorate the shoulder. The scale and imperial imagery of this magnificent vase suggest a formal use within the halls of an imperial compound. It was likely one of a matching pair of vases used to create balanced, formal arrangements in the large rooms of the Forbidden City, the imperial palace in Beijing.

China, Yuan dynasty (1271–1368)

Pear-shaped vase *ping*, early 14th century

Porcelaneous stoneware with underglaze cobalt blue décor

Gift of Allan Rhoades 84.116.5

The subject of a craze that has lasted for centuries, China's signature blue-and-white porcelain resulted from a significant technical breakthrough during the 14th century. This pear-shaped bottle (*ping*) was made near the beginning of this tradition. Encircling the body of the vase is a spiky, three-clawed dragon painted in underglaze cobalt blue. To depict the dragon, cobalt blue designs were painted onto the white porcelain body and then bonded under a clear glaze.

[SECTION 4: Dragons as the primary creatures of the Chinese zodiac]

China, Northern Wei dynasty (386–535)

Dragon and snake from set of zodiac figures, 4th–6th century

Earthenware with white slip and traces of pigment

Bequest of Alfred F. Pillsbury 50.46.198, 197

China, Tang dynasty (618–907)

A set of twelve zodiac figures, 7th–10th century

Molded and sculpted earthenware painted with cold pigments

Lent by David and Flinnina Dewey L2004.427.5.1-.12

China, Yuan dynasty (1271–1368)

Group of 12 zodiac animals, 13th century

Earthenware with mineral pigments

Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton 99.178.3.1-.12

[SECTION 5: Dragons as deities and guardians in religions]

China, Eastern Han dynasty (25–220)

Mirror, 2nd century

Bronze

The John R. Van Derlip Fund 52.11.7

Numerous depictions of Xi Wangmu, the Queen Mother of the West, and her consort, King Father of the East, survive in the form of mirror decoration. On this mirror, the divine couple are accompanied by four fantastic dragons. Each sits on a throne carried on the back of a beast. This composition, of the two divinities on opposite sides of the mirror, is their most common arrangement and symbolizes the ancient Chinese philosophical concept of *yin* and *yang* (opposing, contrary forces that are actually interdependent and inseparable) as well as the deities' residence in opposite realms of the universe, the West and East. Mirrors decorated with divine images and celestial dragons had symbolic value for followers of Daoism during the Han dynasty. A practitioner who possessed the mirror could hope for eternal life or protection from evil.

China, Song dynasty (960–1279)

Figure of Wenchang, Deity of Literature, 12th–13th century

Cizhou ware: slip coated stoneware with overglaze enamels on a clear glaze

Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton 2000.158.1

Wenchang is the combination of two deified personages. The first is a local deity called Zitong, who was worshiped in Sichuan during the Tang dynasty. The second is the deity of the constellation Ursa Major, known to the Chinese as Kui. After the Tang dynasty, the two became a single deity under the name of Wenchang, venerated as the Deity of Literature.

Wenchang is shown here wearing an official dragon robe. Although dragon robes were worn by emperors in earlier dynasties, it was during the Song dynasty that they became not just decoration but part of a regulated system indicating official rank. Wenchang is sometimes shown standing upon a fish, as the Yellow River carp that succeeded in passing the rapids of Longmen at Henan were believed to become dragons. This supposed transformation of fish into dragon has become a synonym for the literary success of industrious students.

China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644)

Numinous Treasure Emissaries, 16th century

Ink, colors, and gold on silk

The Ruth Ann Dayton Chinese Room Endowment Fund 2004.131.2

This colorful painting bears an inscription in a red cartouche in the upper left, identifying the two persons depicted as “numinous treasure emissaries who transmit speech, riding on a tiger and dragon.” Numinous treasure refers to Daoist scriptures, the blue books being carried down from heaven by attendants of the emissaries, who themselves are carried on a tiger and dragon.

To Daoists, the tiger and dragon represented the creative forces of the universe. They are also potent emblems of the balance of power that Daoists believed permeated all existence. Therefore, along with tigers, they are often depicted as the steeds of Daoist deities.

Wang Shouqi, 1603–1652

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Fan painting of a Daoist magician, c. 1650

Ink and color on paper

Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton 96.30.3

In this work, a Daoist magician stands on a bluff by a pond, with a small boy at his side. The bamboo stick he throws into the air is being transformed into a dragon. This illustrates a story from Daoist lore about Fei Changfang, a minor official of the Han Dynasty who studied the secrets of immortality with a Daoist master. The master gave Fei a stick of bamboo one day and told him to ride it. When Fei mounted the staff, he found he could travel great distances in an instant. When he tossed the stick over a pond, it turned into a blue dragon.

Wan Shouqi was a poet, calligrapher, seal carver and painter from a family of high officials. He earned his *juren* degree in 1630 and published his first collection of poems three years later.

China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644)

Two volumes from a set of the Lotus Sutra, 16th century

Gold pigment on indigo dyed paper

Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton 2004.85a-i

The Lotus Sutra (*Saddharmapundarika: The Lotus of the True Doctrine*) was among the earliest texts to reach China from India and became extremely popular among Buddhists there. Paying particular attention to Avalokitesvara (Chinese: Guanyin), the Lotus Sutra is basically a restatement of the ways and practices of a bodhisattva. The calligraphy is beautifully executed in well-balanced *kaishu* regular script, and the illuminated frontispiece and end piece are meticulously painted with a colorful and stylized dragon motif.

The appearance of dragons on Chinese Buddhist sutras demonstrates how foreign faiths and religions were adopted into Chinese culture—with adaptations that made them less foreign. The appearance of dragons on Buddhist sutras at this time also suggests imperial patronage or preference for Buddhism.

China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644)

Bodhidharma Crossing the Sea, 14th–17th century

Hanging scroll, ink on silk

Gift of funds from Joan Wurtele 99.17.2

Executed primarily in fine line ink technique (*baimiao*), a Bodhidharma is shown riding his walking staff through turbulent waves. He holds a flaming pearl in his right hand and peers over his shoulder at a dragon emerging from a bank of dark, threatening clouds. Dragons were believed to affect rain and thunder, and those who could summon dragons could share their power to make rain. Buddhist monks and Daoist sages were both thought to have control over the powers of the universe. The swirling waves, clouds, and contorted dragon represent the forces of nature over which an enlightened follower of the Buddhist law (*dharma*) could gain mastery.

[SECTION 6: Dragons as auspicious creatures in popular culture]

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Hairpin in the form of a dragon, 17th–19th century

Gold

Gift of Mrs. Charles S. Pillsbury, Phillip Winston Pillsbury, Mary Stinson Pillsbury Lord,
Katherine Stevens Pillsbury McKee and Helen Winston Pillsbury Becker in memory of Charles
S. Pillsbury 51.27.29

China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644)

Three Dragon brushrest, Wanli period (1573–1619)

Wucai ware

Porcelain with underglaze blue and polychrome overglaze enamel décor

Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton 2000.147.1

The term *wucai* means “five colors” but was used generically to mean “polychrome,” regardless of how many colors actually appeared on a vessel. The *wucai* overglaze colors included red, blue, green, yellow, and purple, and during the Ming dynasty they were usually used in conjunction with underglaze cobalt blue designs.

Made at Jingdezhen, this rare, porcelain brushrest is molded in the form of a three-peak mountain with a dragon in relief encircling each peak. The central dragon and some motifs are outlined with underglaze cobalt oxide, while the flanking dragons, mountains, waves, clouds, and cusped apron are painted with red, yellow, and green with some black outlining—all in overglaze enamels. The development of overglaze polychrome enamels is one of the most important contributions of the Ming dynasty potter to ceramic history.

China, Ming dynasty (1369–1644)

Brush rest, 15th–16th century

Bronze

Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton 2007.83.1

During the Ming and Qing period, the production of cultural accoutrements rose along with literati culture. The objects for scholars' desks were increasingly produced in various materials. Although the religious connotation had weakened, dragons were still largely auspicious motifs, as in this case. The two dragons here are fighting. Their sinuous bodies form the shape of a brush rest, where a scholar could place his brush when not in use.

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Altar flower vase, 18th century

Gold-splashed bronze

Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton 95.92

This vase represents the dragon's shift from a highly spiritual creature to a decorative element, acting here as extremely stylized handles for an otherwise simple form. The creature's auspicious power persists, however, as a subtle representation of thousands of years of Chinese history.

The vase itself is cast in a precisely symmetrical form, reflecting the high value that was placed on form and perfection during later imperial China. The surface of the vessel is decorated with gold that appears to be splashed upon it, a common decorative technique in Qing dynasty bronze artwork. This vase was used for flowers placed on an altar.

China, Yuan dynasty (1271–1368)

Wine ewer and cover, early 14th century

Qingbai ware

Porcelain with molded, slip, and appliqué décor beneath a pale blue glaze

Gift of C. Curtis Dunnavan 2001.31.8a,b

Towards the end of the 12th century, molded decoration was introduced in Qingbai ware and, by the Yuan dynasty (1280–1368), exceptionally fine, molded vessels were being produced. Some of the ewers echoed the forms of Persian and Tibetan metalwork, such as this extremely rare example, of which only a few are recorded.

The slender, pear-shaped body displays a pair of phoenixes in molded relief above a wide band of lotus petal lappets around the base. The curving tubular spout rises out of the open jaws of a bearded dragonhead opposite an elaborately molded handle in the form of a dragon. In its complexity, the vessel displays several of the innovative Qingbai techniques developed during the Yuan dynasty including the use of beaded relief in the neck, applied slip, elaborate molding, and finely tooled detailing.

You Zhisheng (late Ming to early Qing dynasty, 17th century)

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Cup with base, mid-17th century

Rhinoceros horn

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Augustus L. Searle 27.40.Xa,b

This libation cup, used for wine during ceremonies, is carved from a rhinoceros horn. Beginning in the Tang dynasty, rhino horns were believed to have the power to detect poison and were considered a highly valuable and auspicious medium. The top of this cup mimics the shape of an ancient bronze ritual wine vessel form known as *jue*, reflecting the fascination with archaism that pervaded Ming and Qing culture. The reference to archaism is reinforced by the animal masks decorating the upper body.

Several stylized dragons scale the cup, climbing toward the rim. They are all depicted in lively, sinuous movement, reflecting the typical style of dragon depictions in the late Bronze Age. Lacking the deep religious and spiritual connotations of their original forms on ancient vessels, these dragons represent the auspicious motif common in popular culture at the time. The naturalistic foliage on the base gives them an earthly presence that contrasts with the mysterious, heavenly realm they were originally believed to inhabit.

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Double snuff bottle with dragon motif

Cloisonne

Gift of the Dr. Ira and Maureen Adelman Collection 2022.78.5a-c

Bottles like this one were used in late imperial China to hold snuff—powdered tobacco inhaled through the nose. Though functional utensils, the bottles displayed high levels of craftsmanship and artistry and were seen as small works of art and status symbols for the user. This example is made with the cloisonne technique, in which a metal object is decorated with colorful enamel separated by thin, delicate copper inlaid wire to form an ornate design. There appears to be two bottles, but they are in fact conjoined.

Here, against a backdrop of tiny, stylized clouds, a green dragon and a yellow dragon decorate either side of the conjoined bottles. While they generally resemble ancient dragon depictions, their spirituality is reduced by their presence on a functional, everyday object meant to convey wealth more than religious meaning. The brightly colored, almost cartoonish design gives the impression of dragons as amusing, fun designs, reflecting their shift in status to decorative elements.

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Teapot, 17th–18th century

Bronze, enamel

Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton 2000.40.1a,b

This cloisonne teapot is inlaid with delicate brass wire to create an intricate design against a green enamel body. Each side of the pot is decorated with a dragon that dances and soars across an ornate inlaid cloud pattern. Interestingly, while the bodies of the dragons are rendered in very typical forms, the heads and claws are so abstract they are nearly unrecognizable. The lid is also decorated with a dragon, its face trapezoidal, resembling a flat mask. The abstract nature of the design indicates the dragon is being used as a decorative, artistic design rather than a religious symbol. Indeed, the teapot would have been used on an everyday basis by a wealthy Chinese family rather than for ritual or ceremonial purposes.

[SECTION 7: Dragons as symbols of imperial power]

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Emperor's winter robe, Yongzheng period (1723–1735)

Silk tapestry (*kesi*)

The John R. Van Derlip Fund 42.8.11

Eight golden dragons cavort across this imperial robe, while a ninth hides under the front fold of the skirt. These dragons are part of the twelve symbols of imperial authority and are arranged on the robe according to official dress edicts put into effect in 1759. The sun, moon, mountain, and constellation emblems are positioned symmetrically around the neckband. The other eight imperial symbols—dragon, ax, cups, flame, bat, grain, pheasant, and waterweed—are arranged on the front and back of the robe. Only the top members of the royal family—emperor, empress, empress dowager, and crown prince—could wear twelve-symbol robes. A bright yellow dragon robe like this could be worn only by the emperor himself.

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Imperial seal

Jade

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund 2006.40

Imperial seals always have a knob carved in the form of a dragon. This example, which belonged to the emperor himself, is carved into a pair of intertwined dragons, their faces directly confronting each other. Between them is a sphere representing the auspicious Chintamani jewel. On the bottom of the seal is a four-character mark that reads *yubi zhibao* (Treasure of the Imperial Brushwork), suggesting that it was used to sign paintings and works of calligraphy.

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Imperial Portrait of a Prince, c. 1775

Hanging scroll, ink, colors, and gold on silk

Gift of funds from Louis W. Hill, Jr., David Bradford, Myron Kunin, and Bruce Dayton 83.30

This painting is a life-size portrait of a Qing dynasty prince sitting on a red lacquer throne and wearing a dragon robe. Behind him is a screen richly decorated with nine dragons. Virtually every element of this painting symbolically represents the hierarchy of the Chinese court. Portraits of this scale, painted in exceptional detail with the finest mineral pigments on the most expensive silk, were typically hung in the great halls of the Forbidden City, the imperial palace in Beijing. The largest group of such portraits remains in the imperial collection itself, now in Taiwan.

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Manchu military banner of the White Banner Regiment, one of a pair, 19th century

Embroidered satin

The John R. Van Derlip Fund 42.8.282

The Manchus formed a hereditary banner system in 1601, requiring all Manchu men to be enrolled in one of the four banner regiments. The original regiments were distinguished by their solid yellow, white, red, and blue triangular flags with serrated borders. Prince Dorgon commanded the white regiment. Flags such as these, embellished with dragons in couched gold, were used primarily in ceremonies and military reviews.

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Sword with case, 18th century

Metals, enamel, silk, fiber, wood

Anonymous loan (No. 84)

This sword was possibly used by high-ranking military officials of the Qing dynasty. The dragons here, soaring above stylized mountains and among trees, are depicted in relief on the gilt bronze elements that decorate the pommel, guard, and scabbard slide (used to suspend the sword from a belt). The chape (tip of the sheath) is decorated with dragon imagery in relief as well. Because the dragon was so strongly associated with imperial power, it also imbued the sword with power.

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Nine dragon box, Qianlong period (1736–1795)

Red, green, and brown carved lacquer (*tixi*)

Gift of Ruth and Bruce Dayton 2001.68.14a,b

During the transitional period between the Ming and Qing dynasties (1610–1738), little or no official carved lacquer was sponsored by the court. That changed in 1739, when an official lacquer workshop was established in Suzhou, and many imperial pieces were produced from then on. Official carved lacquers of the Qianlong reign, like this one, are often distinguished by a high level of craftsmanship and a fussiness of design.

This cover and box are decorated with nine five-clawed dragons in pursuit of flaming Chintamani jewels. This corresponds to the nine dragons that appear on the emperor's imperial robes, suggesting this box was meant to be used by the emperor or imperial household. The number nine, in *yin yang* theory, is considered the apogee of *yang*: highest odd digit, masculinity, strength, power. It symbolizes the supreme sovereignty of the emperor and is often employed in palace structures and designs.

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Dish, Kangxi period (1662–1722)

Glazed ceramic

Bequest of Ruth Stricker Dayton 2020.97.1

This dish is finely incised with a pair of writhing, five-clawed dragons in pursuit of a flaming Chintamani jewel amid scrolling flames. The exterior of the gently rounded sides is similarly decorated with two striding dragons, covered with a translucent glaze of lemon-yellow color. Yellow was seen as the generator of *yin* and *yang* forces, and therefore represented the center of everything in existence. Because of its value and prestige, yellow was reserved exclusively for use by the imperial household. Together with the five-clawed dragon motif, this bowl encompasses the visual language associated with royal power.

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Imperial curtain hanging (one of a pair), mid-18th century

Silk tapestry (*kési*)

The John R. Van Derlip Fund 42.8.304.1

Curtains like this would have been used during festive imperial occasions. Decorated with five-clawed imperial dragons that thrash and soar above mountains amid stylized clouds, the imperial imagery seen here is the same as on official attire. This indicates that these curtains were most likely used in residential halls of the imperial palace.

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Covered incense burner, Qianlong period (1736–1795)

White jadeite

The John R. Van Derlip Fund and Gift of the Thomas Barlow Walker Foundation 92.103.24a,b

This three-legged incense burner is carved from white jade, a highly valued stone that peaked in popularity during the 18th and 19th centuries. The tripod form and the rings held by the dragon heads reference ancient Chinese ritual bronze vessels. The alluring mystery of the ancient past, combined with the otherworldly dragon, imbues the censer with both power and mystique.

This censer was made for imperial use, as shown by the four-character reign mark on the bottom, *Qianlong yuzhi* (imperial made during the Qianlong reign). This is reinforced by the presence of two lions carved in openwork on the lid. Like dragons, lions were seen as guardian figures. Their presence in Chinese art originated in Buddhist traditions but later became associated with imperial power as well.

China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
Ruyi scepter, Qianlong period (1736–1795)
Porcelain
Gift of Mrs. Augustus L. Searle 38.44.3

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[SECTION 8: Dragon as an icon of the clouded past]

Yang Yongliang

Chinese, b. 1980

Chasing Clouds, 2021

Film