

The Dragons of ACM

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

As the Year of the Dragon approaches, you can find many examples in the Asian Civilisations Museum's China Gallery

The ACM's earliest dragon (*long*) is represented in the abstract form known as a *panlong* (*pan* means 'coiling' or 'winding'). It decorates the body of a Warring States Period (481-221 BCE) bronze wine container. These containers were used for ritual and ceremonial purposes and dragons, as symbols of supernatural power and the collective forces of nature, were believed to ensure continued dynastic good fortune.

Chronologically, the next oldest dragon in the gallery decorates a Yuan Period (1279-1368 CE) blue-and-white porcelain stem cup. Many believe that this porcelain (attained by using Persian-sourced blue cobalt as an underglaze) was one of the greatest achievements of the period. This dragon was not intended for the emperor's court as it has only three claws and imperial dragons of this period had five claws. The dragon is in profile, its long, sinuous shape topped by two horns. Yuan porcelain was so popular that vast quantities have been found along the maritime trade routes.

The dragon in the centre of the blue-and-white brush-washer pot (Xuande reign, 1426-1435) found in the same display case is coiled into a beautiful roundel (duplicated in a frieze on the pot's exterior walls) and surrounded by clouds. These clouds, with their three distinctive 'salamander tails', help date the piece as early Ming. The dragon is unmistakably imperial as it has five claws and is facing front. Dragon hierarchy ranks front-facing dragons higher than dragons in profile.



Xuande dragon bowl



Blue-and-white dragon Yuan stem cup

Another Ming dragon is depicted in overglaze iron-red enamel on a beautiful Jiaqing Period (1522-1566) dish. Its colour and five claws identifies the ware as imperial. Note, however, that this dragon is

looking back, over his shoulder. This position dates back at least to the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) and influenced the art of China's northern nomadic tribes, who came to depict their own important animals (tigers, stags and horses) in this same 'head-turned-looking-back' position.

Moving to the Chinese textile cases, we find more Ming Dynasty dragons on two festival badges, although from the later Wanli period (1573-1620). The large, imperial-yellow,

five-clawed dragon facing front with splayed limbs poised above a flaming pearl and white hare, was intended for use at the annual moon or Mid-Autumn Festival known as *Zhongqiu*, celebrated on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month. (Hares are associated with the moon in Chinese folklore.) Dragons in this frontal pose are the most important of all and are used as ceremonial state symbols as on an emperor's robe, but the appearance of the two small phoenixes alongside the rabbit indicates that this badge was probably intended for an empress' robe.

The second badge, with the slinky imperial-yellow, five-clawed dragon in profile, surrounded by chrysanthemums, was meant for the 'Double Nine' (*Chongyang*) or autumn festival, celebrated on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month. This dragon's twisted elongated shape and position more closely resembles the dragon seen in profile on the Yuan blue-and-white stem cup.

In the calligraphy case, a red ink-stick intended for imperial use (only the emperor was permitted vermilion ink) is decorated with an archaic dragon in gold. The stick is dated 1771, the same year the Emperor Qianlong began construction of Juanqinzhai, his retirement garden



Festival Badge, dragon with flaming pearl

complex in the Forbidden City. Note the accompanying puffer *lingzhi* fungus-shaped clouds, now reduced to a single 'tail'.

Nearby rests a beautiful *zitan* (hard red sandalwood) ink-stick box decorated with an imperial frontal-facing, four-clawed dragon fit for an emperor's son, but not the emperor himself. Note that these late Qing (post-1800) clouds consist of multiple rounded *lingzhi* shapes, minus any 'tails'.

Patricia Bjaaland Welch hopes that ACM visitors will enjoy discovering the many shapes and forms of the dozen-plus dragons gambolling in the China Gallery.

Photos courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum