



Early 17th century
Porcelain with underglaze
blue decoration
3 1/4 x 18 inches (8.3 x 45.7 cm)
Chinese

Purchased with the
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LET'S LOOK

What words would you use to describe this dragon? Why?

Look for parts of nine different animals in the dragon: a camel, horse, deer, cow, snake, clam, fish, tiger, and eagle.

What do you see around the dragon?

LET'S LOOK AGAIN

What shapes did the artist repeat to make the dragon's long body fit inside the round shape of the plate? What feeling does this give the dragon?

What do you think this plate is made of?

Does this dragon's personality seem male or female? Or both? Why?

LARGE DISH

A blue dragon writhes with bristling power and grace on the surface of this large, round white plate. The dragon's head has bulging eyes, an open mouth, wavy whiskers, and a mane. The body is serpentine—long, lean, and curving, like a serpent or snake. Attached to the body are four legs with enormous paws and claws, which reach out in different directions and show the ability to move anywhere. Can you find parts of nine different animals in the dragon? Look for the neck of a snake, the head of a camel, the ears of a cow, the mane of a horse, the horns of a deer, the belly of a clam, the scales of a fish, the paws of a tiger, and the claws of an eagle.

The small, wavy shapes floating all around the dragon could be flames, clouds, or foam since, according to Chinese legend, dragons live in water and also have the power to fly up to the sky to bring rain clouds, thunder, and lightning. Look for a larger, round shape to the left of the dragon's head. This may be a flaming pearl, which appears often in Chinese art as a symbol of the dragon's great wisdom. In Chinese myths pearls are drops that fall from the moon into the sea and are prized by dragons. Look how the twists and turns of the dragon's body allow it to fit inside the plate without touching the edges, the pearl, or the clouds.

This plate is made of porcelain, a fine ceramic ware made from white clay and invented by Chinese potters during the Tang dynasty (618–907). During this period, traders brought an expensive blue pigment called cobalt from Persia (present-day Iran) to China. Chinese potters then combined porcelain and cobalt to create beautiful blue-and-white ceramic ware for the first time anywhere in the world. The same process was used to make this plate hundreds of years later at the end of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). The potter painted the dragon directly onto the white plate using a mixture, called an

underglaze, containing cobalt. Then the entire plate was covered with a different glaze that concealed the dragon design until the plate was fired (baked in a special oven called a kiln). During the firing the glaze became transparent, allowing the blue design to emerge, like a dragon from the clouds.

The plate was probably made at factories in Jingdezhen (jing-deh-jen), the center of Chinese ceramics for the past thousand years. A perfect place for making porcelain—with good clay nearby, lumber from local woods to heat the kilns, and rivers to transport materials—it produced a lot of pottery for the Emperor. This plate, however, was most likely made for export, to sell in Europe. When the first blue-and-white porcelain arrived in Holland around 1600, it became so popular that European potters tried to imitate it. They finally succeeded, more than a thousand years after Chinese potters had perfected the process. Europeans began to call porcelain “china” (as we do today) after the place where it came from.

ABOUT CHINESE DRAGONS

In the East, especially China and Japan, dragons are thought to be tremendously wise, powerful, god-like creatures that bring good fortune—very different from the evil, ferocious dragons imagined in the West. Chinese dragons can appear and disappear instantly, and can quickly change their size from that of a tiny silkworm into that of a giant thundercloud that fills the entire sky! Each spring, according to Chinese myths, dragons rise up from lakes, rivers, and oceans into the air, creating storm clouds that send life-giving rain down to the earth. This in turn helps rice fields to grow, which provides food. Each fall dragons return to their watery resting places. The Chinese also believe that if dragons are not treated with the proper respect they can become destructive.

The first emperor of China’s Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) claimed that he possessed extraordinary powers because his father was a dragon. Since then the dragon has been a symbol of China and its emperors, who ruled the country until 1912, when the last dynasty was overthrown. Chinese emperors wore robes decorated with dragons and sat on dragon thrones in front of screens embellished with dragons. Starting around 1300, only the Emperor and his family were allowed to have objects displaying five-clawed dragons. Noblemen were permitted to have four-clawed dragons (like this one) on their possessions, and lower officials had to be content with three-clawed dragons! Dragons also appeared on Chinese coins and the national flag. Images of dragons’ heads were often used to guard temples and imperial treasuries, because the dragon’s gaze was thought to paralyze a person’s willpower.

Dragons also have deep meaning in Daoism, an ancient belief system that is fundamental to Chinese culture. The dragon is believed to be the Keeper of the Dao, a mysterious and unnamable creative force, which is the greatest treasure of all because whoever possesses it needs nothing else and lives forever. According to Daoism, harmonious flow between yin and yang (see symbol below) creates balance, order, and goodness in the world. Dragons have been called the essence of yang, and are identified with the sky, light, movement, masculinity, and the Emperor. Their counterpart is the phoenix, a legendary bird that is often seen as yin, and is associated with the earth, darkness, stillness, femininity, and the Empress. Some people see dragons as both yin and yang: yin because they live quietly in deep, dark waters during the winter, and yang because they burst into action in the spring. Perhaps the interplay between yin and yang is what makes dragons so wise and powerful!



The yin-yang symbol of Daoism is round like the dragon's pearl. An "S" divides the circle and there are two small dots on either side, in a design that expresses balance. The small dots show that a seed of yin exists in yang and vice versa.

CHINESE NEW YEAR

The Chinese New Year is based on the lunar calendar and celebrated during China's springtime. (In Europe and America this is usually late January or early February.) Because the Chinese people have been farmers for thousands of years, they are accustomed to living in harmony with the seasons and the cycles of planting and harvesting. As a result Chinese New Year celebrations honor the planting season, as well as all new beginnings.

The last fifteen days of the old year are spent cleaning and cooking special meals for the New Year celebrations, which last for another fifteen days! There are feasts, lion dances, lantern festivals, and dragon parades. At midnight people light firecrackers to scare away a legendary monster who lives in a mountain and comes out once a year to eat people. The high point of the New Year festivities is the dragon dance. A dozen or more people parade an enormous, colorful dragon made of paper or silk through the streets. With the sounds of firecrackers bursting all around, the spring thunderclouds and rain are brought back to life!

CONNECT AND COMPARE

When Chinese emperors ruled, the number of claws on a dragon indicated a person's rank. Compare this to the system used by the U.S. military (like five-star generals), the Girl Scouts, and other organizations.

Research the Chinese influences on the blue-and-white china from Spode, England, decorated with the popular willow pattern.

Make a list of all the places you can find the yin-yang symbol.

Trace the land routes used by Persian traders to bring cobalt to China. Also trace the routes of Portuguese and Dutch merchants who sailed to China for blue-and-white porcelain.

RELATED ART PROJECT

Create a Chinese dragon on a round surface, such as paper or clay, that is the same size as the porcelain plate here (18 inches in diameter). Look carefully at the dragons on this plate to see how they are arranged. How will you make your dragon fit into this large, round space? To get started, imagine that a piece of string or yarn is the dragon's body and arrange it in different ways inside the circle. Which animals will make up the different parts of your dragon? What colors will you choose? Where does your dragon live?

This plate is included in The Arts of Asia, a set of teaching posters and resource book produced by the Division of Education and made possible by a generous grant from Delphi Financial Group and Reliance Standard Life Insurance Company.