

# TALES AND LEGENDS

## Decorative Art collection

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During 2011 to 2012 we re-assessed the museum's collection of Chinese objects, exploring and revealing hidden stories, rich imagery and interesting tales that Chinese designs hold.

The museum's oriental collection comprises of a variety of objects from bronze sculpture and textiles to lacquer, coins and over 300 items of Chinese porcelain. Many of these form the 1936 Hurdle bequest to the museum on permanent display in the China connection gallery.

Chinese art and design is immensely important to western design and continues to influence it today. In the 18th century, Chinese porcelain, lacquer and textiles were amongst the Chinese wares that were in huge demand in Europe. Trading boats – or 'junks' – were loaded with these wares (porcelain on the bottom as ballast) and sailed to Europe where the wealthy and fashionable would buy it.

Many Chinese decorative symbols, such as pagodas, dragons and flowers were used in emerging European design, merged with other favourite styles such as rococo and neo-classicism. The mixture of styles with a Chinese theme became known as 'chinoiserie'.

Porcelain manufacture and lacquer were techniques and materials not seen or used before in Europe. As these Chinese objects started to appear more and more in Europe, many tried to emulate these crafts. This sparked a huge race in the 18th century for factories to produce true 'hard paste' porcelain like the Chinese. It was in this period that factories such as Chelsea, Derby, Bow and Worcester made their names. William Cookworthy in Plymouth was the first to produce the sought after porcelain in England.

Find out what we discovered about some of the objects through this project.

**JAR: 1937.81.57****By Connie Thomas, Volunteer**

This underglaze blue porcelain jar was made in China for export to Europe in 1645 to 1660. It can be seen on display in the Museum's China Connection Gallery.

This jar depicts a qilin, a mythical creature in Chinese culture which is sometimes seen as a Chinese version of a Unicorn, although it differs from the unicorn as it has a very distinctive appearance, with a mixture of many different animals making its one body. The qilin has two horns and has a green or blue scaled deer's body, a dragon's head, horn and hooves and a bushy tail.

Many attributes of the qilin have become more exaggerated throughout the years as seen on this jar, this qilin has a very thick bushy tail and his hoofs are exaggerated by the position of his legs.

Many qilin were painted with dominating and ferocious characteristics, yet breathing fire and violence was only something the qilin would do when a pure natured person was challenged by a sinner. The qilin also made an appearance at special events like the birth and death of a great leader, seeing the qilin would be a sign of longevity and good fortune as it could live for up to two thousand years. It can walk on grass yet not trample the blades and it can also walk on water. It takes great care when it walks never to tread on any living thing, and it is said to appear only in areas ruled by a wise and benevolent leader.

As the qilin is seen as a powerful and honourable creature, it is symbolised in Buddhism as the 'civilising book of law' and they are often found guarding large prayer temples. The image of the qilin is still used today in Chinese culture when doing the hierarchy of dances; this involves carrying the large qilin head and having outbursts of energy, showing the same movement as the qilin in Chinese celebrations. When looking at the status of the different Chinese animals depicted throughout their history, the qilin comes second in rank to the Dragon and Phoenix.



## CUP AND SAUCER: 1915.128AB

By Viola Mazza, Work Placement

In Chinese culture butterflies have many meanings, particularly related to joy, summer and conjugal felicity. They are also often used to wish longevity and therefore decorate birthday gifts or lanterns during the Autumn Moon Festival. Very often it is possible to find butterflies on pieces of pottery - they can be very colourful or simply stylized with a line and two small points for the wings.

On this blue and white cup and saucer we can see many butterflies of different sizes, flying together in pairs, alternated to a figure who looks miserable and wistful, maybe waiting for someone missing. As I looked at it, I thought about a legend which is based on a Chinese folktale and is considered to be the Oriental 'Romeo and Juliet' which goes this way:

### The Butterfly Lovers

The story is set in the Eastern Jin Dynasty (AD 317-420) and the main characters are a couple of lovers whose names form the title of the story - Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai.



Zhu Yingtai is a wonderful and clever girl from the noble Zhu family of Shangyu who succeeds to convince her father to let her study despite opposing traditions. In order to attend classes to Hangzhou she disguises herself as a man and during the journey she meets Liang Shanbo, a scholar from Kuaiji (now Shaoxing). From the first moment they get on really well and for the following four years they share the same room at school. Slowly Zhu Yingtai falls in love with her friend who is too focused on his studies to notice the feminine characteristics of his classmate.

One day Zhu Yingtai receives a letter from her father who wants her to go back home immediately. As she can't refuse she decides to reveal her truth to the headmaster's wife and asks her to give Liang Shanbo a jade pendant as an engagement gift. The young man goes with Zhu Yingtai to see her off and, although she hints, he still doesn't realise her true identity. Before they part she asks him to visit her later, so he can propose to marry her 'sister', as she pretends to act as a matchmaker.

After many months Liang Shanbo visits her and finally finds out that Zhu Yingtai is a woman. They instantly make a vow of 'til death do us part', but unfortunately her parents have already arranged for her to marry a rich man. Liang Shanbo can't stand this news, gets critically ill and finally dies. On the day of Zhu Yingtai's wedding mysterious whirlwinds prevent the procession from escorting her beyond Liang Shanbo's grave where the young woman begs for the grave to open up. Suddenly, the grave opens with a clap of thunder and Zhu Yingtai throws herself into it to join her lover. Their spirits turn into a pair of beautiful butterflies and emerge from the grave. Together after all they fly away and will never separate again.

This legend is very poetic and dramatic at the same time and shows how butterflies are important in Chinese culture.

This plate was made during the K'ang Hsi era (1662 to 1722) and I am not sure if the potter who created it was thinking about the 'Butterfly Lovers', but in my opinion artists often appreciate when people find new meanings in their works especially relating them to other important masterpieces. When we enter a museum we would like to learn and have fun, so I think it is important to remember to always use our imagination too.

**BOWL 1937.81.100****By Ellen Lin, volunteer**

On the porcelain you can see two birds, which actually are the Fenghuang, a mythical bird superficially similar to the phoenix in China. One of them is called Feng, which is the male, yang, solar, fire bird, and the other one is called Huang, which is the female, yin, lunar and feminine bird. The Feng and the Huang together symbolise everlasting love, and as a bridal symbol signifies 'inseparable fellowship'.

The Chinese phoenix is the second most respected legendary creature (second to the dragon), largely used to represent the empress and females. It is also considered the greatest and the leader of birds. It is said that a Chinese phoenix has the beak of a cock, the face of a swallow, the neck of a snake, the breast of a goose, the back of a tortoise, the hindquarters of a stag and the tail of a fish.

## KUI XING 1909.9043.75X

**By Alison Cooper, Curator of Decorative Art**

This figure is hand carved from steatite (soapstone) and was made in the 19th century.

This is Kui Xing – the Chinese God of Examinations! He is a servant to Wen Chang, the God of Literature. As well as ensuring deserved scholars do well in their examination, Kui Xing is also in charge of paperwork. Wen Chang's other assistant is Chu Yi who assists scholars in finding good jobs.

In legend, Wen Chang and Kui Xing both live as stars sitting close together in the constellation we know as the big dipper: Kui Xing literally means 'chief star'.

The story goes that as a mortal, Kui Xing was a brilliant student and outstanding scholar. He received the highest score on his Imperial examinations which meant that he was to be awarded a golden rose. However, poor old Kui Xing was quite an ugly chap as well as having developed a bit of a hunch back from all of his studies. When he was due to be given the golden rose, the Emperor was so shocked at his appearance that the rose was dropped and broken.

Kui Xing became despondent and later, on a sea voyage, he fell – or jumped – into the sea. But Kui Xing did not drown. He was rescued by a sea dragon who escorted him up to the heavens to serve Wen Chang.

This figure shows how he is commonly depicted – with a calligraphy writing brush raised up over his head and holding an inkwell.



## SHRINE TABLET

**By Spring Xu Cui**

This 18th century shrine tablet is carved from wood and decorated with red, black and gold lacquer. Shrine tablets are ritual objects that would be used for worship in temples and shrines but also in household altars.

What images comes into your mind when you think of the religions in China? Buddha, Daoism immortals or Confucius? In the Forrest Gump film, Forrest found it incredible that Chinese people didn't have any religion. I bet he would be speechless if he saw the shrine tablet.

The tablet represents five things the Chinese worship on special occasions such as the Chinese New Year. They are sequentially Heaven, Earth, Emperor, Ancestor and Teacher.

### Heaven

Have you ever said "God knows"? The Chinese version of this is "Heaven knows". You might be able to see from here the status of Heaven in Chinese people's mind.

The Chinese believe that Heaven has the power to rule everything in the universe - when to snow, when to rain, when to give sunshine and when to give wind. In Heaven, there is a paradise like palace where all the gods live.

### Earth

Second to Heaven, earth is the source of life vitality. It is known as the mother of all the creatures.

### Emperor

Emperor is believed to be the ruler appointed by Heaven. If Heaven is worshiped, so is Emperor.

### Ancestor

Worshipping ancestors is a very ancient tradition. Honours are paid to ancestors or departed spirits in front of ancestral tablets like this one as well as in graveyards, particularly on special festivals such as All Souls' Day.

### Teacher

The people who help you learn have always been respected in Chinese tradition, which originated from Confucius. Confucius believes that Emperor, the ruler, should be treated with ultimate loyalty. Obviously emperors would think it a great belief and promote the philosophy among the people.



## TEAPOT

### By Spring Xu Cui, Project Assistant

Can you guess from his dress what the male figure's job is? Is there any relationship between him and the female figure on the other side? Is the text telling a story about them? Who are they? With these questions in mind, I started my search to find out the identities of these two period figures.

Let's follow the tradition of 'ladies first' to introduce you to the female figure. She was born in a beautiful village in Southern China in the 3rd century at West Jin Dynasty. Her name is Lu Zhu.

A very wealthy politician called Shi Chong passed the village during a business trip and fell in love with Lu Zhu. He took her home and made her his concubine. In ancient China, men could legally have concubines as well as a wife.

Lu Zhu's beauty as well as her talent for music and dance was immediately known by the people in his circle. One of Shi Chong's political rivals even coveted Lu Zhu's beauty and forcefully took her away from Shi Chong. Fully armed soldiers surrounded his manor.

On hearing this news, Lu Zhu jumped out of the Golden Valley mansion that he had built for her and killed herself. She thought this was the best way to show her loyalty to Shi Chong and her appreciation for his love and care.

Lu Zhu became a symbol for loyalty and the theme of poems and paintings in history. The text beside her image on the teapot is a poem which expresses regret over the loss of such a beautiful young life.

Now it's the gentleman's turn. He was a King in Southern China from 904 to 932. His armour implies that he was an excellent general. He is called King Wu Su and you can find temples and statues in today's Su Zhou and Hang Zhou areas in memory of him.

King Wu Su was not born a great king. At the beginning of his reign he was so consumed with his power and wealth that he did not work hard enough to govern his country properly. His father walked away and never talked to him because of this but King Wu Su did not understand. One day, King Wu Su stopped his father and begged him to tell him what he had done wrong. His father told him that he might have to surrender himself to his enemy countries if he continued to neglect his country. King Wu Su took his father's words on board and became a great King who was loved by his people.

King Wu Su was also called the King of Sea Dragon because of his special contribution to many irrigation works and water conservation projects that took place in his country. The King of Sea Dragon is a figure who is in charge of the use of water in many Chinese folk stories. The text beside his image is a poem which tells of his achievements.

I couldn't find any connection between the two figures on the teapot and don't know why they were painted together. But heroes and beauties are always popular themes in literature and art. Is this why two people who never knew each other turned up together on a teapot a thousand years later? I bet they never would have expected that!

