

# Enter the Dragon: Imperial Power and its Depictions

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By Marian Ang | Mar 28, 2023

In Chinese culture, the dragon is the accumulation of thousands of years of history. Its image evolved over millennias in tandem with the unification and rise of China, whilst its symbolism became indivisible from imperial power and ambition.

Ancient dragons were pure products of the imagination. Today the dragon's image is widely agreed to be a composite of deer antlers, a camel head (some say a horse head), ghostly eyes, a snake body, a crab belly, carp scales, hawk claws, tiger palms and cow ears. Its power lies in a large, luminous pearl concealed under its chin, with 81 of its scales infused with benevolent essence (*yang*) whilst 36 contain a malign essence (*yin*).

Yet it was not always so. The earliest images of a dragon in historical relics appeared as primitive snakes or fish. Before the Qin dynasty, the dragon was an object of worship, related to tribe leaders and ancestors but its imagery did not belong to any individual. The Qin dynasty saw the image of the dragon become unified in line with the centralisation of the country, as well as a means by which the emperor consolidated his own throne. Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of unified China, styled himself "the Emperor of the Dragon Throne" and "master of the waters". Later emperors exploited the relationship between the dragon as ancestor and as a symbol of military prowess, most notoriously the peasant-born Liu Bang (later the Han Emperor Gaozu), who claimed to have been conceived after his mother encountered a dragon during a rainstorm. From then on, every emperor called himself the "heavenly son of the real dragon", and decorated imperial rooms, clothes, daily utensils, and even tombs with dragons.

By the Song dynasty, the dragon became the exclusive symbol of the emperor, with Emperor Huizhong decreeing that any offenders would be sentenced to jail for two years. But repeated injunctions did not deter the ordinary people from using the dragon's image. The Yuan dynasty went further, specifying that five-clawed dragons were reserved for use only by the emperor, whilst princes were allowed to use four-clawed dragons. Similarly, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the five-clawed dragon (coloured red during the Ming dynasty and yellow or gold during the Qing dynasty) was strictly reserved for use by the emperor only. It is said that in the Qing Dynasty, when someone in Jingdezhen painted a dragon with five golden claws, not only were he and his entire family put to death, but local officials were also investigated for the incident. The emperor used the symbol of the dragon to channel different facets of his personality and reign and to reinforce his links to the heavenly realm.

Ahead of Sotheby's Hong Kong's [Important Chinese Art](#) spring sales, we take a look at the stories behind some of the finest and rarest Chinese works of art appearing at auction in 2023.

## Imperial Ambition: the T.Y. Chao Yongle period blue and white ewer

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A unique and outstanding imperial blue and white 'dragon' ewer, Ming dynasty, Yongle period | Estimate upon request

Made for use by the Yongle Emperor himself, a highlight lot of this season is one of few known existing blue-and-white examples of this design in both private and public collections. Considered an architect of Chinese culture, history and statecraft, the Yongle Emperor was an extremely influential ruler who launched major voyages of exploration into the South Pacific and Indian Oceans. The motif seen on this ewer became the blueprint for all later dragon-decorated imperial porcelains, and is “rare as star dust on

Yongle porcelain” according to the scholar Regina Krahl, who called this ewer “the most desirable of the few examples known to exist”. The rare, rich blue cobalt pigments were imported from Persia at the time, and the different shades of blue create a delicate effect analogous to ink painting. Two elegant five-clawed dragons are rendered in direct mirror image, swerving as they look up towards the liquid pouring from the long slender spout. Their soaring bodies fill the ewer’s raised panels, above a frieze of stylised cloud scrolls. The small and delicate potting indicates that the imperial potters endeavoured to create something distinctly different especially for the imperial palace, compared to the usual massive blue-and-white chargers and jars that were intended as diplomatic gifts. This may have been linked with the transfer of the capital from Nanjing to Beijing, where the construction of the Forbidden Palace may have required new imperial porcelains.

### **Imperial Innovation: an extraordinary Yongzheng period puce-enamelled *falangcai* dragon vase**

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An imperial and exceedingly rare puce-enamel falangcai 'dragon' vase, Blue enamel mark and period of Yongzheng. | Estimate 50,000,000-80,000,000 HKD

Belonging to the rarest category of Qing imperial porcelain, this vase’s extraordinary monochrome *falangcai* (“foreign enamels”) puce-hued enamelling is one of only three similar pieces known in this category. At 30cm tall, much larger than other *falangcai* examples, and painted with two powerful five-clawed dragons, this vase was a special commission by the Yongzheng Emperor, an adventurous and somewhat eccentric individual who enjoyed experimenting with unconventional ideas and took a strong personal interest in the production of works by the imperial workshops. Often engaging in detailed dialogues with his craftsmen, he set them an unusual challenge: that of recreating a copper-red dragon-decorated vase in enamels. The unusual deep puce enamel – unlike the usual rose-pink and purple enamels found on *falangcai* wares – would have been specially prepared for this job by the workshops in Beijing, and the mottled copper red was reproduced by complex shading and stippling that required a

different flow of the brush, with the undulating classical scrolls and banana leaf striations executed very differently to the normal wares painted by Jingdezhen's craftsmen. This vase is mentioned in the records of the *Zaobanchu*, the workshops of the Qing Imperial Household Department, and it is possible that this vase was made to be paired with the one in Japan's Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art and presented together to the imperial court.

## **Imperial Longevity: an outstanding blue and white 'nine dragon' *meiping* vase, Qianlong mark and period**

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Elegantly modelled and painted in brilliant tones of cobalt blue, this *meiping*'s remarkable depiction of nine ferocious dragons against waves is a testament to the period of aesthetic achievement and technological mastery in imperial porcelain production. The composition is dominated by a three-clawed full-frontal dragon with wings rendered emerging from swirling waves, surrounded by eight sinuous beasts with differing numbers of claws. The depiction of the beasts is very similar to that of the Yongzheng period and, given that this Qianlong vase could have been produced in the third year of the reign, it is possible that the painting was completed by the same craftsmen who were already working in the imperial kiln in the preceding period.



An outstanding blue and white 'nine dragon' vase, meiping, Mark and period of Qianlong, Possibly made in 1738 according to Qing court record | Estimate 7,000,000-9,000,000 HKD

## **Imperial Celebration: a massive imperial Khotan-Green Jade '*tian en ba xun zhi bao*' seal Qing dynasty, Qianlong period and an important carved amber 'five dragons' '*jingyun qinian*' seal, Qing dynasty, Kangxi period**

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An imperial Khotan-green jade 'tian'en baxun zhi bao' seal, Qing dynasty, Qianlong period. | Estimate 20,000,000-40,000,000 HKD

Once placed in the Hall of Diligence (Maoqindian), the Qianlong seal carved with the characters Tian'en ba xun zhi bao (Treasure of the Emperor at Eighty Thanks to Heaven's Blessing) was commissioned by the Qianlong Emperor to celebrate his 80th birthday. The Qianlong Emperor's ambitions were vast, from his unification of a multi-ethnic Chinese empire across East Asia to his patronage of the arts, including the formation of the national palace museum collections now in Beijing and Taipei, the largest repositories of important Chinese artefacts available today. This fern-green large square seal is mounted by a beautifully carved pair of tightly intertwined crouching dragons, their powerfully carved bulging eyes and flared nostrils above curling whiskers and fanged jaws, with

meticulously incised scales and flowing manes. “Being so blessed by Heaven is truly unique”, declared the Qianlong Emperor, and the details of this personal commission are clearly documented in the Qing archives concerning the Imperial Household Workshops.



An important and exceptionally rare imperial carved  
amber 'five dragons' 'jingyun qinian' seal, Qing  
dynasty, Kangxi period | Estimate 4,000,000-  
6,000,000 HKD

The Kangxi amber seal was made around the time the Emperor was 60 years old and it expresses his wish for the prosperity of the country and the wellbeing of the people. The first half of the Kangxi Emperor's rule was devoted to the stabilisation of the empire and suppressing armed rebellions. It was only in the second half of his rule that he turned his attention to economic prosperity and the patronage of art and culture, and this seal expressed his wishes in an eloquent and erudite manner. Amber is unique among the seals of imperial court emperors and empresses. With a translucency that glows like a gemstone when viewed in the light, amber's softness makes it difficult to carve. Five majestic dragons are carved onto the seal, gathering and dispersing playfully among the flowing clouds.

Revered by emperors, the dragon became the most famous symbol of Chinese culture, even becoming an emblem of the nation and its peoples in the first ever Chinese national flag. Venerated by generations of Chinese people, it aided the emperors to realise their ambitions and to unify a divided country under their reigns.

## About the Author

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Marian Ang is a Hong Kong-based art writer and researcher, and a regular Sotheby's contributor.

