



Fall 2017

Small Asian Wonders

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Bucci, Gabriella A., "Small Asian Wonders" (2017). *Wonders of Nature and Artifice*. 2.
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Small Asian Wonders

Abstract

As curiosity grew in the Renaissance, so did the scope of collections of wonders. The Cricket Cage, Jade Screen, and Iron Dragon are three examples of rare collection items from the Far East. While these three east Asian small wonders may have been commonplace in their country of origin, they were considered marvelous to the collectors of Europe who had never seen objects such as these produced in their own countries.

[excerpt]

Keywords

dragons, jade, crickets, cricket fights, sika deer

Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Fine Arts | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Industrial and Product Design | Intellectual History

Comments

Produced as part of a collaboration between Kay Etheridge's course FYS-188: Exploration of the Marvelous: Art and Science in the Renaissance, and Felicia Else's course ARTH 284: Wonders of Nature and Artifice: The Renaissance Quest for Knowledge.

Original version online at <http://wonder-cabinet.sites.gettysburg.edu/2017/cabinet/small-asian-wonders/>

Small Asian Wonders

By Gabriella Augustine Bucci

As curiosity grew in the Renaissance, so did the scope of collections of wonders. The Cricket Cage, Jade Screen, and Iron Dragon are three examples of rare collection items from the Far East. While these three east Asian small wonders may have been commonplace in their country of origin, they were considered marvelous to the collectors of Europe who had never seen objects such as these produced in their own countries.¹



Dragon, Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College – Photo courtesy of Gabriella Bucci

Cricket Cage

Cricket Cage, gourd and ivory, 1820-1850, Height: 11.5in; Width: 2.5in, Special Collections and College Archives, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College



[Cricket Cage](#) by [stjohn_smith](#) on [Sketchfab](#)



Cricket Cage, China, Qing Dynasty, Gourd and Ivory, 11.4 x 6.4 cm, Gift of Frank Kramer, Class of 1914, Special Collections and

Created during the Qing dynasty between 1820-1850, the Cricket Cage, from Gettysburg College Special Collections, is made from gourd and has a lid crafted from elephant tusk ivory.²



Common Cricket, *Gryllus bimaculatus* –
CC Image Courtesy of Vlad Proklov on
Flickr

A popular sport in China, starting in as early as the eighth century, was cricket fighting. As the popularity of the sport grew, so did the amount of cricket “connoisseurs” who would breed and raise common crickets for the sport. These “connoisseurs” needed cages to keep these crickets in and gourd of cages employed.

Image of Modern Day Cricket Fight – CC Image courtesy of Shannon Shue on Flickr
Common Gourd – CC Image courtesy of Frank Boston on Flickr



Common Gourd – CC Image
courtesy of Frank Boston on
Flickr

The delicate process of making a cage begins with selecting a common gourd and then fitting a mold around the gourd, loosely, and waiting patiently for the gourd to grow into the shape determined by the mold.³ Then, in order to create the lid, the elephant ivory tusk was carved in partly open work and fitted to the open mouth of the gourd.⁴



Image of Modern Day Cricket Fight – CC
Image courtesy of Shannon Shue on Flickr



Lotus Flower Gourd Detail – Photo Courtesy of Gabriella Bucci

On the gourd are designs of beautiful lotus blossoms, and on the ivory, prunus blossoms. The lotus flower represents summer in the Chinese culture and is a symbol of fruitfulness, fruitfulness that the spring season provides.

Carved into the lid of the cage are prunus blossoms, or plum tree blossoms, which are the flower symbolizing winter, but also good fortune.⁵ Carved Fruitf

ulness and luck are two things that a cricket owner would want depicted on their cage because in the sport of cricket fighting, in which the winner is mostly determined by chance, luck is essential to have in order to succeed.



Prunus Blossom Lid Detail – Photo courtesy of Gabriella Bucci

While the collectors in Renaissance Europe did not collect these cages for the sport of cricket fighting, the naturalia of the gourd and ivory, combined with the artificialia of the carving of the ivory and the design on the gourd, combined with their uniqueness and unfamiliarity, made these objects perfect additions to marvelous collections of art and nature.

Jade Carving

Jade Carving, jade, c. Ming or Qing dynasty, Height: 2.75in; Length: 3in, Special Collections and College Archives, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College

Another marvel in Renaissance curiosity cabinets would have been any object made out of jade. Chinese jade carvings, which had been prominent in China since the neolithic era, only began to reach European collectors in the middle of the seventeenth century.⁶ If a collector had a jade carving in their collection, it was truly a rarity and a marvel.





Jade Wunderkammern – CC image courtesy of chinesejadeguy



Un-carved Jade – CC image courtesy of James St. John on Flickr

Gettysburg College Special Collections' *Jade Carving* is an example of one of these marvelous jades. This light, creamy colored jade is actually nephrite, the true jade. Seen in this jade is a openwork carving that has a scene depicting two deer surrounded by various flora. In order to create this scene, an abrasive sand, containing hard minerals, would be placed on the jade, and then, a tool would be used to scratch away at the jade until the jade took its final desired form.⁷



Sika Deer – CC image courtesy of Gavin Hill on Flickr

In the scene, two deer are shown, one male with antlers on the right and one female on the left looking back at the male. They are sika deer, a species native to east Asia, and are surrounded by flora including prunus blossoms. In Chinese folklore, a white deer represents the reaching of immortality and symbolizes longevity.



Close Up Sika Deer – Image courtesy of Gabriella Bucci

A small wonder such as this would have been displayed on a stand, such as it is currently displayed on, and would be a decorative piece to encourage the good fortune mentioned above. It would be easy to overlook a piece like this in a larger curiosity collection, due to its size and its subtle elegance, but due to the fact that it was jade and from the far East, it would have been considered quite a marvel.

Dragon

Dragon, Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College – Image courtesy of Gabriella Bucci

Dragon, cast iron, c. late Qing dynasty, Height: 5.625in; Length: 18.5in, Special Collections and College Archives, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College

The *Dragon* from Gettysburg College Special Collections, because of its mysticism could have been among the wonders of a European curiosity cabinet and fit in well with other objects of naturalia and artificialia. Gesner and Aldrovandi, early European naturalists who had extensive collections of their own, both included images of the mythical dragon in their encyclopedias.



Dragon, Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College – Image courtesy of Gabriella Bucci



[Iron Dragon](#) by [stjohn_smith](#) on [Sketchfab](#)



Dragon Print Page – From Gessner's *Historiae animalium*

Visually, the *Dragon* is quite fierce, with its intricate head, curving body, elongated tail, and talons. The *Dragon's* head shows an opened mouth with sharp teeth, an extended tongue, and whiskers like phalanges coming out of both its mouth and snout area. Its eyes are visually represented with closed lids and more more whisker like phalanges around its eyelids. There is a slight detail on the crown of the dragon's head indicating the presence of



Dragon Print Page – From Aldrovandi's *Monstrorum historia*

scales, and sharp horns extend back towards its tail from behind the dragon's eye sockets.

His midsection resembles that of a snake. With its underbelly containing larger wider scales, and the scales on top being shorter and rounded, a sense of realism, as much as you can achieve with a fictitious animal, is established.



Close Up of Head of Dragon – Image courtesy of Gabriella Bucci



Detail of Dragon's Scales and Underbelly – Image courtesy of Gabriella Bucci



Detail of Dragon's Talon –
Image Courtesy of Gabriella
Bucci

The dragon has a pronounced and pointed spine running the entire length of its scaly body, from the base of his skull to the tip of his tail, as well. The *Dragon* seems nimble, agile, and vigilant due to the fact that the only part of his body that touches the ground, and supports him, is the center talon on his front two claws, and the inside talon on the hind two claws.

This dragon is made out of gray cast iron. Gray cast iron is formed by melting the iron, at a high melting point, then pouring said iron into a preformed mold. In order to create the gray color, instead of a fractured white color, the molten iron that was poured into the mold must be kept hot, and cooled gradually over a period of hours, in order for the final emerged product to have the desired color.⁸

Dragons have a special place in Chinese culture. A divine animal, and one of the twelve animals that make up the Chinese zodiac, dragons represent good luck, good fortune, and prosperity to the Chinese people.⁹ In addition to its well-wishing meaning, its mysticism would lend this object to be displayed in a prominent place in a curiosity collection.



Chinese Gardens during the Lantern Festival – CC image
courtesy of Gavin Hill on Flickr Hubert Figuière

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