Small Asian Wonders

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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
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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.

**Cricket Cage**

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

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.

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
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. Carved Fruitfulness 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.

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. If a collector had a jade carving in their collection, it was truly a rarity and a marvel.
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 an 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. 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.

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.

Iron Dragon by stjohn_smith on Sketchfab
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 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.
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.

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2. Cricket Cage, 1820-1850, GettDigital: Asian Art Collection, Special Collections / Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania
4. Cricket Cage, 1820-1850, GettDigital: Asian Art Collection, Special Collections / Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania