

Animal symbolism abounds in Chinese art

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NEW YORK – Animals in Chinese art have never been mere decoration but a way of imparting important lessons about life and philosophy as well as conveying political messages. Imbued with certain human characteristics from strength and bravery to purity and fertility, the animals depicted in art were carefully chosen by the artist. While these often-hidden messages in the art were easily understood in their time, with a little of research modern viewers and collectors can appreciate these works of art on a deeper level than just as pretty pictures. Collectors gravitate to paintings and objects rich in animal symbolism.

“It is not just the symbolism of the animal, it is the way each animal is portrayed with interpretation, some with a simple homonym, others with artistic representation,” said Mary Ann Lum, co-owner of Gianguan Auctions in New York City with Kwong Lum.

Real and mythical animals were among the first motifs to be painted on pottery and earthenware in China. Fish and deer have been found on Chinese pottery going as far back as the fourth century B.C. Deer often connote good luck, as well as prospects for wealth and fortune and fish similarly have come to mean a wish for wealth or success. Fish can be portrayed singly or in pairs, with the latter sometimes interpreted as referring to marital happiness.

In the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), many animal motifs were used to transmit political and ethical messages, according to Hou-mei Sung’s 2009 book for the Cincinnati Art Museum, *Decoded Messages: The Symbolic Language of Chinese Animal Painting*. “As the result, a sophisticated language of Chinese animal painting was developed, employing both the animals’ symbolic associations and homonymic puns,” Sung writes in the book.

Among the most common mythical animals seen in Asian art are the dragon and the phoenix. The phoenix symbolizes good fortune and the dragon is well revered, ruling over other animals in mythology. The latter usually represents the emperor and is a key part of the Chinese zodiac set of 12 animals, which repeats every 12 years. The series comprises the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog and pig. The year 2019 is the year of the pig, which is associated with the home and symbolizes wealth.

Among popular animal motifs in Chinese art is the cicada, which Lum said signifies purity. “It can mean just that in a carved jade pendant but when a similar cicada pendant is placed on the tongue of the deceased, the rebirth symbolizes immortality, as it metamorphosed, closely tied to ritual and sacrifice.” When the cicada blades are cast onto a Warring States bronze ritual container, for example, the cicada regeneration then inspired a hope for the owner of the vessel, its

symbol of resurrection transcends the mortal world into the spiritual realm, Lum explained.

“Like the Egyptians, some Chinese animals take on human form, as a totem, bestowing them mythical powers,” Lum said, citing an owl with humanoid features or the crane, which connotes longevity and when shown in pairs, signifies marital harmony. “Or when one animal is combined with another symbol, the homophone symbolizes blessings, such as Bat and Lingzhi, denoting happiness such as a monkey riding on a horse,” she said.



A bronze ‘cicada’ tripod vessel ding sold for \$60,000 at California Asian Art Auction Gallery USA in September 2017. Photo courtesy of California Asian Art Auction Gallery USA and LiveAuctioneers

featuring 20 Chinese artworks depicting elephants, which as an animal has long been admired in Chinese culture.

Ongoing scholarship into the tradition of Chinese animal painting will continue to yield new discoveries and inspire collectors, who can appreciate these works of art on an emotional and intelligent level with both eye and mind.



This Famille-Rose Hundred Deer vase realized \$189,105 in October 2015 at Gianguan Auctions. Photo courtesy of Gianguan Auctions and LiveAuctioneers

This vase is a fine example of Chinese animal painting, featuring a landscape scene with deer and mountains. The deer are depicted in various poses, some standing and some grazing, set against a backdrop of stylized mountains and a blue sky.

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According to commentary on www.Chinasage.info, “the monkey is seen a cheeky, irreverent creature in China always bringing fun and laughter.” It also holds a special place in the Chinese zodiac animal series.

Some collectors will be partial to the zodiac sign they were born in. “We have a collector from the northern part of China who will mostly buy paintings with roosters because he is born the year of the rooster, so he will favor a rooster painting from Qi Baishi as opposed to his wisteria one,” Lum added.

Exploring the symbolism of animals in Asian art has long been a source of interest. In 2005-06, the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, presented the exhibition, “Evocative Creatures: Animal Motifs and Symbols in East Asian Art,” which showed more than 50 artworks detailing the symbolism and significance of assorted real and mythological animals in the arts of East Asia. “By the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), domesticated animals and fantastic creatures alike had entered the Chinese artistic repertoire, and in late Imperial times (the Ming [1368–1644] and Qing [1644–1911] dynasties), the phoenix and the dragon—ancient symbols of the yin and yang (female and male) forces of the universe—became official symbols of the royal house,” according to online commentary on the museum’s website that detailed the exhibition.

As part of the Asian Art in London show in November 2018, the gallery, Priestley & Ferraro, mounted an exhibition, “Symbol and Support: The Elephant’s Role in Chinese Art and Chinese and Korean Ceramics and Works of Art,”



A large and impressive Chinese porcelain wuzai fish vase made \$1,027,958 at Fellows in February 2017. Photo courtesy of Fellows and LiveAuctioneers

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A rare and fine Doucai dragon bowl went for \$145,470 in April 2015 at Gianguan. Photo courtesy of Gianguan Auctions and LiveAuctioneers