



Korea (Asia)

Dragon Jar, 18th century

Porcelain with underglaze iron decor

16 ¼ inches

Gift of Louis W. Hill, Jr., 81.113.6

Theme

Dragon jars, so named for their motifs or decorations, were made in Korea during the Choson (“JO-sohn”) dynasty. Dragon jars are thought to bring good fortune to their owners, a belief that originated in China. Korea has long been influenced by China, its large and powerful neighbor to the west. Yet this small peninsular country has developed and kept its own artistic character.

Background

Korean ceramics have long been admired, collected, and imitated throughout Asia and the West. Despite evolving aesthetic preferences, changing technologies, and strong influences from China and Japan (brought about through foreign trade, invasion, and occupation), Korean ceramics have retained their unique character. They can be distinguished from those of Japan and China by their spontaneity and subtlety, distinctive interpretation of the natural world, and creative infusion of and adaptation to outside influences.

Korean ceramics function as ceremonial, funerary, and household objects. The finest, most decorative ceramic vessels were used in ceremonies and/or burials, while less elaborate vessels were made for everyday use. Many of the oldest, best preserved examples were buried in tombs and thus protected from the elements.

During the Choson dynasty (1392–1910) Korea’s rulers practiced Confucianism, a religious ideology that emphasizes living simply and humbly. The changes in political, spiritual, and social attitudes during this period are reflected in the ceramics. During the early centuries of the Choson dynasty, porcelain vessels were commonly left undecorated—often referred to as “white ware”—as an expression of Confucian modesty. By the mid-15th century, however, white porcelains were painted with brownish-red copper-and-iron oxide, as well as cobalt blue underglazes. These vessels, with their vigorous painting styles and whimsical designs, are uniquely Korean.

Dragon Jar

Symbols of good fortune and power, dragons were a favorite decoration on Korean ceramics. Though inspired by Chinese designs, Korean dragons are much more playful than those made in neighboring countries. The brushstrokes on this dragon jar make it appear lighthearted, even humorous. Yet the artist also depicted the dragon’s power, giving it a long snout, sharp teeth, fierce eyes, and hair standing on end.

The artist who decorated this dragon jar painted the creature’s entire body covering the surface. The dragon wrapped around this jar is shown swooshing through the sky, surrounded by wispy clouds. Dragons were said to control the weather and bring rain—a good omen for a plentiful harvest.

Originally, dragon jars were reserved for ceremonies and to decorate royal households; they later came into wider use. The number of claws on a dragon's foot often reveals something about the person for whom the jar was made. Five-clawed dragons, which represented the emperor in China or the king in Korea, were owned only by royalty. This dragon's feet, concealed by its snout and a cloud, suggest that the jar belonged to a common household.

Fun fact: The American architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) once owned this jar. It decorated his suite at the Plaza Hotel in New York.

Technique

Produced on the Korean peninsula since the Koryo dynasty (918–1392), porcelain production flourished during the Choson dynasty. Originating in China, porcelain is a type of ceramic created by combining *kaolin*, a fine white clay that retains its shape even in very high temperatures, and *petuntse*, a stone that gives porcelain its translucent quality. The proper mixture of kaolin and petuntse is then combined with water to make a substance to be shaped on a potter's wheel, by hand, or in a mold.

Underglazing describes the surface application of mineral pigments (typically by brush) over which a clear glaze is applied and fired, keeping visible the mineral pigments beneath. Because of the intense heat at which porcelain is fired, only three coloring oxides can be used: iron, copper, and cobalt. The underglaze is painted directly onto unfired porcelain, which absorbs the color and keeps it from running. After application of a clear glaze, the vessel is fired at temperatures exceeding 2,100° F.

The MIA's collection contains two dragon jars: this one, painted with an iron oxide that accounts for the dragon's brown color, and a second painted with cobalt oxide, which creates a blue dragon. During the middle of the Choson dynasty, a shortage of cobalt oxide, a commodity imported from the Middle East, made it a precious, and costly, mineral. In response, Korean potters turned to the more plentiful iron oxide to paint their jars and vessels, displaying a remarkable freedom in their brown-and-white designs.

Artist

Korean art of the late Choson dynasty is known for its whimsical style, especially when painted with iron and copper oxides. The maker of this porcelain jar depicted a dragon with a humorously long snout, bushy eyebrows, and large, baleful eyes. Long whiskers trail from its snout, and hair stands in spikes from its head. Quick dabs of iron oxide suggest scales and bumpy skin. Because porcelain rapidly absorbs oxides, the painter must have been confident and quick with the brush.

Cultural Clues

- The frequent use of dragons to decorate jars indicates an important motif. In Korean culture, dragons were a symbol of good fortune and power.
- The dragon's body wraps itself around this jar, swooshing through the sky surrounded by clouds. Dragons were said to control the weather and bring rain for a plentiful harvest. The artist indicates the dragon's symbolic role by depicting it flying the cloud-filled skies.
- The use of the less expensive iron-oxide (brown) glaze instead of the more costly cobalt-oxide (blue) glaze indicates that this jar was likely made for someone of more modest means, not royalty or the court.
- Reserved for royalty, the five-clawed dragon was forbidden for use by commoners. This jar lacks a depiction of dragon claws, leading to a conclusion that it belonged to a common household.
- The playful brushwork and expressive nature of the dragon motif suggest that the artist was very skilled and at ease with applying the iron-oxide glaze to the jar's absorbent clay surface.
- During the Choson dynasty (1392–1910), Confucianism was the official religion. Confucianism emphasizes living a simple, humble life. With its carefree, whimsical design and simple shape, this jar reflects the Confucian virtues of humility and simplicity.
- Dragon jars were first made in China, reaching Korea through trade. China greatly influenced Korean ceramists, who adopted Chinese technologies and techniques, and then adapted them to their own aesthetic tastes.

Suggested Questions

1. What kind of creature did the artist paint on this jar? What clues tell you this is a dragon? How is this dragon similar or different from dragons you've seen before?
2. How would you describe this dragon, especially its face?
3. Is it frightening? Or friendly? Why do you say that? What words would you use to describe this dragon?
4. Why do you think the artist decided to put a dragon on this jar? If this was your vessel, what creature would you want painted on it? Why? What would you store in your jar?
5. Unlike the vicious, fire-breathing dragons of Western mythology, Korean belief holds that dragons defeat evil, bring rain for bountiful harvests, deliver good fortune, and symbolize the authority of the ruler and the balance of nature. Dragons were a popular decorative motif during the Choson dynasty. What does this tell you about Korean culture of the time?
6. Compare and contrast this brown dragon with the MIA's blue dragon (see laminate prop).