

Press Release

The Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art, Geneva



The Beginning of the World

Dragons, Phoenix and Other Chimera

11 November 2020 – 18 April 2021

Since time immemorial, China has been interested in the Great Narrative of the Universe. Even before the first dynasties, observers of the Heavens were tracking the movement of celestial bodies. Cosmology, followed by astronomy, became State sciences and the sovereigns – the Sons of Heaven – were to be the custodians of this interdependence between the sky and the Empire. China was thus as much part of Heaven as of Earth. As is demonstrated in the exhibition *The Beginning of the World: Dragons, Phoenix and other Chimera*, the history of this relationship can be observed through the prism of jade. Arcing back over eighty centuries, this venerable stone has been a kind of mirror reflecting Heaven, Earth, and mankind. Its inner beauty enchants and delights as much as it leaves us pondering. The role of jade is exemplified through emblematic symbols, a mythical bestiary, and ritual implements. There are over two hundred remarkable pieces on display from the collection of Sam and Myrna Myers – a collection that started in Switzerland in 1966 when they visited Vladimir Rosenbaum's art gallery in Ascona. Other gems, agates, turquoises, and crystals, as well as delicate liturgical silk fabrics embroidered with gold thread, are also part of this exceptional collection.

General curator: Laure Schwartz-Arenales

Guest curator: Jean-Paul Desroches

Scenography: Nicole Gérard with the help of Corine Racaud

In partnership with: Adrien Bossard, Musée des Arts Asiatiques, Nice, France (The exhibition is scheduled to be presented in Nice, from 8 May to 24 August 2021)

Sam and Myrna Myers at the Baur Foundation

A Return to the Source

In a return to the cosmological foundations that shaped the history of the Celestial Empire, this exhibition of jewels from Sam and Myrna Myers's (fig. 1), magnificent collection of archaic Chinese jades reviews the life's work of two outstanding collectors. From time to time, there are places and objects through which, in their differences as well as in their affinities, the Baur and Myers collections echo and complement each other.

From 1920 until his death in 1951, Swiss entrepreneur Alfred Baur, a great lover of Far Eastern objects, steadily acquired over a hundred jade pieces of remarkable workmanship, which are on display in the museum's permanent exhibition (fig. 2). Carved between the 18th and 20th centuries, these precious gems represent the very last links in a thousand-year-old craft tradition whose sources are dazzlingly evident in Sam and Myrna's objects.

Sam and Myrna's career as collectors began in Ascona, in Switzerland. They had recently moved to Paris and, on a summer break in Ascona, in 1966, they ventured across the threshold of the elegant Casa Serodine, which since the end of the 1930s had been the gallery of Wladimir Rosenbaum (fig. 3a-b). The young Americans ceded happily to the benevolent encouragement of the kind old antique dealer and bought four Greek terracotta statuettes. It was not long before they focused their attention on Asian art and began travelling the world in a tireless search for the most beautiful pieces. But they regularly returned to Ascona.

In the early 1970s, although they had already amassed a large collection of porcelain, the Myers turned their attention to jade. Sam had discovered a boxful of jades in a Philadelphia antique shop and felt an immediate attraction for the objects. Their significance eluded him at the time but he intuitively understood their inner radiance and beauty. It was in Ascona that Sam and Myrna decided not only to purchase the package of precious jewels they had just received from the Philadelphia antique dealer, but also to set about unravelling the mysteries of its contents. Their instant enthusiasm for those gems was the origin of a collection that is now unique in the world.

Ascona, a beautiful town on the banks of Lake Maggiore, remains a permanent anchor for the Myers collection. You could hardly imagine a more suitable place than this former fishing village, still teeming with creativity and the free-spirited idealism that had made it famous. Many reform-minded individuals, theosophers, artists, and scientists, had been drawn to the harmony of the place and spent time there together. Historian of religions Mircea Eliade went so far as to describe Ascona as a sort of "axis mundi", between heaven and earth. It is as if that intellectual fervor had always breathed life into Sam and Myrna's "cabinet of curiosities" and their Parisian gallery, where the foremost specialists in Asian arts were regularly invited to study their treasures. It followed naturally that these prestigious jades should find their way to Geneva, to a Foundation, which, thanks to Alfred and Eugénie Baur, is the only museum in Switzerland exclusively dedicated to oriental art.

Jade, China's memory

Because jade is almost indestructible, it is a permanent record. The best-preserved cultural vestiges unearthed in archaeological excavations are made from jade. The first cutting implements known

were discovered at the Xiaogushan site at Haicheng (Liaoning). They are thought to be 12,000 years old. A great number of *jue* – jade slit rings used as earrings – were excavated in sites from pre-Hongshan cultures such as Xinglongwa culture (c. 6200-5200 BC) and Zhaobaogou culture (c. 5200-4500 BC). Today it is thought that jade working goes back 8000 years.

Since the Neolithic period, China has maintained a profound connection with the cosmos. The world was based on the Sky-Earth binomial, and humans stood powerlessly by, watching their relentless exchanges. With the emergence of the first royal dynasties (17th-3rd century BC), shamans, sorcerers, soothsayers, philosophers, and sages strove to bring order to the world. Proceeding by analogy, they gave concrete form to their speculations with the help of an incredible bestiary. Eventually, under the imperial dynasties (from 221 BC to 1911 AD), the Sky-Earth-Human triad was established. Humans, although attentive observers at the heart of this universe, were henceforth destined for immortality. The exhibition is an invitation to time-travel across more than forty centuries, on this spiritual itinerary studded with rare objects, predominantly crafted in jade.

As they revealed and reflected the evolution of this metaphorical vision of the world, the visual appearance of jade objects went through profound changes, as we see in the first room of the exhibition: the carver became a sculptor in his own right and his creations three-dimensional. Although early representations verged on abstraction (fig. 4), as time went by, a language gradually emerged. At first, the designs were carved into the surface, then they penetrated the matter, shaping it from within, to bring out powerfully realistic images based on careful observation (fig. 5).

The archaic jades of the Myers collection

The archaic jades of the Myers collection shown in this exhibition can be traced to three distinct geographic areas: the valley of the Liao River, the central and lower valley of the Yangzi, and the central valley of the Huanghe (Yellow River), regions which have been the subject of numerous archaeological investigations and have contributed to enriching our understanding of the ancient world. In the *Shu Jing*, the "Book of Documents," written during the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770-256 BC), these three regions are defined by three types of jade which are designated as *Yiyu*, *Yueyu* and *Dayu*.

Yiyu jades 夷玉 are associated with the Dongyi, herders who lived in Liaoning and Inner Mongolia. That was the site of the Hongshan culture and its predecessors. Later, some of their descendants settled in the south and the east, where they founded the Shang dynasty (1600-1046 BC). There they drew upon the Hongshan culture, as can be seen in representations of animals, birds, cicadas and even the *zhulong*. (fig. 4). These images, which evoke the idea of metamorphosis — an egg, a chrysalis, an embryo —, are symbols of regeneration and the vital force or *qi*. Through the intercession of these animals, which accompanied the body, the deceased would be able to pass into the afterlife. At that time, shamans, sorcerers, and soothsayers reigned over the spirits, as is attested by the three seated jade figures with their astonishing headdresses. Two are from the Hongshan culture, while the third is from the Western Zhou dynasty (fig. 6).

Yueyu jades 越玉 are particularly well represented in the Myers collection by two emblematic forms, the *cong*, which is a cylinder with square sections, and the *bi*, which is a round disc with a hole in the center. According to this cryptic saying from the *Zhouli*, (the “Rites of Zhou”): “You use a green *bi* to worship the heavens; you use a yellow *cong* to worship the earth.” Most of them are from the Liangzhu culture (3200-2200 BC). These two forms developed over 3000 years until they reached their decorative apotheosis in the Han Dynasty. Their enigmatic simplicity is the subject of numerous hypotheses.

Bi can also be of imposing size (fig. 7). Several theories have attempted to link the *bi* to the image of Heaven, which had been observed attentively since the third millennium. It is thought that the *bi* may have been a materialization of the orbital trajectory of the sun or a synthetic representation of the sky with stars around the celestial pole, which is indicated by the central orifice. In any event, there is no doubt that the function of the *bi* evolved over the millennia. By the Han Dynasty, they had become merely a token of marriage, a sign of exchange.

The *cong* are decorated on their four sides with zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures. There is a precious example in the Myers collection measuring more than 50 cm which has sixteen sections (fig. 8). These ritual objects appear to have been for the exclusive use of shamans. The number of sections may have indicated the degree of its owner's knowledge and supernatural power. The *cong* have also been compared to the plaque, from Liangjatan culture (3500-3200 BC), engraved with a diagram thought to be a representation of the cosmos, with round sky and square earth.

Dayu jades 大玉 are associated with the Huaxia, an agricultural people thought to have come from the eastern foothills of Tibet, who lived in the valley of the Huang he (The yellow river). They founded two dynasties, the Xia (2100-1600 BC) and the Zhou (1046-256 BC). The majority of Xia jades were large flat, beautifully polished blades known as *yazhang*. They have a pierced aperture at one end and a butt so that they could be fixed to a shaft. They originated in the Longshan culture (c. 2300-1800 BC) and evolved to reach their apogee in the Erlitou (c. 1850-1550 BC). *Yazhang* have been found attached to walls, as they were at the Shimao site, which attests to ritual use. Under the Zhou, *yazhang* were made by skillful carvers, as two bottle green blades from the Myers collection illustrate (fig. 9); they are decorated with birds delicately edged in relief, using a vocabulary inherited from their predecessors, the Shang. With the development of metallurgy these blades evolved into jade tablets *gui*, the morphology for which was codified in the *Zhouli*.

A universe in resonance

The sky fascinates, the sky fashions, it questions and it responds, the sky nourishes the spirit and stimulates creators. Chinese cosmological speculations played a role equivalent to that of theology in the West. Yet the Chinese sky was always viewed as a place of exchanges. Unlike in the West, where it was seen as permanent and unchanging, an image of divine transcendence.

On the first morning of the world, after the beginning of the beginning, Heaven and Earth were formed – a binome represented in the iconography of jade since the Neolithic period in the pairing

of the dragon and the phoenix, as the vestiges discovered in Northern China in the area of Hongshan culture attest, as well as those unearthed in Southern China in the area of Liangzhu culture.

Thereafter, the constellations appeared in the firmament. At the four cardinal points, there were the Four Sacred Animals: the *Red Bird* of the South, the *Green Dragon* of the East, the *Black Tortoise* of the North, and the *White Tiger* of the West. *Bi* discs are adorned with clouds (fig. 10), and around the celestial pole, the central aperture, the Four Animals compete with the Four Orientals.

The universe was a precise system where space, time, beings, and things obeyed *ganying*, the principle of resonance. Based on this system of correspondences between the Four Seasons and the Five Elements – or Five Agents – (water, fire, wood, metal, earth), this vision pervaded every object, whatever its size or its function, whether ritual, profane or political: ornaments, *bi*, belt hooks, ritual cups, seals and mat weights, all glorified the daily life and beliefs of the departed, over whom the four animals kept eternal watch, in virtuoso complicity with the incandescence of that hard stone (fig. 11a-b) .

Animals of the Genesis

“The East is represented by wood, its constellation is the Azure Dragon; the West by metal, its constellation is the White Tiger. The South corresponds to fire, and has as constellation the Vermilion Bird; the North is connected with water, its constellation is the Black Tortoise. Heaven by emitting the essence of these four stars produces the bodies of these four animals on earth. Of all the animals they are the first, and they are imbued with the fluids of the Five Elements in the highest degree.” Wang Chong, *Discourses Weighed in the Balance (Lunheng)*, Chapter IV. The Nature of Things

China, more than any other civilization, has always been sensitive to natural philosophy and cosmological speculation. Several ancient classical writings describe the first moments of the universe. Four sacred animals, the Vermilion Bird, the Green Dragon, the White Tiger, and the Black Tortoise, emerge, together from the original chaos.

Mentioned in the Zhou period in the “Bamboo Annals” as the fifth element – the earth –, the Yellow Unicorn, *Qilin*, accompanied the Four Sacred Animals on their cosmic rounds (fig. 12). Half deer, half horse, it reigned at the centre of the world over the category of hairy creatures, while the Vermilion Bird, the Azure Dragon and the Black Tortoise ruled over those with feathers, scales and shells, respectively. *Bixie* (fig. 13) were another kind of fantastic creature from the same atlas of the universe: with their roaring dragon's head on the body of a winged horse, their feline paws and, sometimes, a lion's mane, these great beasts were believed to have the power to drive away evil spirits while at the same time bringing good fortune, which is why they are found near burial chambers. None of these beasts were intended to frighten; they had been present since the beginning of the universe to assist humans. The lion played with its cubs, the tiger thought only of protecting humans. It was the embodiment of courage and military values. The dragon, driven by a benevolent spirit, ensured that it rained at the appropriate times. The unicorn trod softly to avoid trampling the insects or flattening the grass as it walked upon the earth. The bear, an exorcist and symbol of the center and the earth, expelled ghosts and their pernicious miasmas (fig. 14).

The photographs presented in this exhibition were taken during the missions of Victor Segalen (1878-1919), doctor, poet, archaeologist, novelist, and traveller. They make the connection between the intricate art of the jade carver and the powerful bestiary – the lions, tigers, dragons, turtles, and phoenixes – of large funerary statuary (fig. 15). Some of the connections are striking. There is a particularly distinctive shared aesthetic between the softly curved felines that line the spirit ways in the middle of the agricultural plain and the remarkable set of *bixie* in the Myers collection – chimeras from the Han period (206 BC-220 AD), some of which are ridden by immortals (fig. 16). The dark jade animal set with inlaid gold wire patterns is particularly striking (fig. 17): its coat is covered with birds, mythical creatures, and immortals surrounded by clouds, swollen with the *qi*, the vital breath.

The Empire under Heaven

As Neolithic cultures developed in China, they developed contacts and influenced each other. The first royal dynasties, the Xia and the Shang, sought to install the unknowable in the heart of the State. The Zhou imposed rites. At that point, man and nature were one. The unification of authority in the Qin dynasty (221-206 BC) established an equivalence between the functioning of the cosmos and that of human society, identifying the role of the sovereign with the principle of the universe, of which he was the guarantor. Called the "Son of Heaven", it was believed that he received his mandate from Heaven itself, not by inheritance nor by conquest. Heaven came down to Earth, therefore, in the person of the Emperor.

Although Xianyang, the capital of the Empire, no longer exists, it was conceived as a "cosmological" city, built in alignment with the celestial pole, which coincided almost exactly with the star Thuban. The Milky Way was represented by the River Wei. It is not surprising, therefore, that at the dawn of our era jade carvers sought to use the iconography of the stars. We see this in a pillow from the Myers collection which uses veins in the jade to suggest the Milky Way (fig. 18). That pillow is one of a pair: the one for the man has a three legged bird, the symbol of the sun; the other, for his wife, is decorated with a toad, an allusion to Chang'E, the divinity who resides in the moon.

The only thing that remains of Xianyang is part of the tumulus of Qin Shi Huangdi's mausoleum, which has been immortalized in the photograph taken in 1914 by Victor Segalen. The tumulus stands on a square base, probably a reference to the quadrilateral heaven formed by the four stars, Mizan, Alioth, Pherkad and Kochad. In his description of the construction of the tomb, the historian and astronomer Sima Qian (145-86 BC) wrote "Mercury represents the rivers, the Changjiang and the Huanghe, and the vast sea. Machines set it in motion. On the ceiling, were all the signs of Heaven and, on the ground, all those of geography." It has not been possible to check these details *in situ*. But traces of mercury on the site suggest that Sima Qian's description may be accurate. In his book, the *Shi ji*, or "Records of the Historian", Sima Qian reports that under Wudi (141-87 BC) teams of star gazers, time guardians and calendar specialists worked day and night on behalf of the State. At that time, Heaven was the other half of Earth.

Prior to the Common Era, astronomy was rarely an autonomous study; it was enshrined in precious manuals for divination which have been found in tombs. This was the case in the excavation of the

Mawangdui tomb no. 3, in Hunan. It contained the funerary library of the second Marquis of Dai, Li Cang, who died around 170 BC. Among the works found, two were exceptional because of the wealth and precision of the information they contained: the *Wuxingzhan*, "Divination by the Five Planets", which recorded observations of the five planets during the period from 246 to 177 BC; and *Tianwen Qixiang Zazhan*, "Divination by Astronomical and Meteorological Phenomena", such as clouds, halos, aspects of the sun, moon and comets.

The Quest for Immortality

The writer Xu Zheng (220-265 AD) based the appearance of man on the myth of Pangu: "The world was apparently born from an egg. From its hatching appeared the round sky, the square earth, and the giant Pangu accompanied by the Four Sacred Animals. When Pangu died, his eyes formed the sun and the moon, his blood the rivers and the seas, his breath the wind and the clouds. Finally, humans were born from his parasites." All these beings were formed at the convergence of Heaven and Earth: from Heaven, they received the spirit of life, *jingshen*; from the Earth, the fleshly envelope, *xingli*. Although the boundaries between the different kingdoms were not always clear in the early days of the world, humanity gradually reached its fullness. Man became aware that he was endowed with several souls: *hun*, the heavenly souls, and *po*, the earthly souls; death was the moment of their separation. It was therefore advisable to take great care of them during life by means of funeral rituals.

A jade suit sewn with gold wire was the supreme mode of burial in the Han funerary ritual: it was the final stage of a long evolution, which initially took the form of closing the orifices of the head and body to assure the physical preservation of the deceased, by preventing the vital breath, the *qi*, from escaping, to encourage immortality of the soul. Geometric plaques of jade were sewn on shrouds creating an aspect of a mask in which one could distinguish the eyes, nose, and mouth (fig. 19). The jade vest in the Myers collection (fig. 20) fits in this group and attests to the importance of jade and its presumed virtues at the time of the funeral. A jade cicada was often placed in the mouth to symbolize its metamorphosis after a larval life underground – a metaphor for the deceased who would shake off their earthly envelope to be reborn purified in the afterlife. The hands clasp two jade pigs, in remembrance of earthly existence.

The idea of transcending bodily limitations and extending life became a leitmotif in Chinese history. Ingesting powdered jade, it was believed, was a means of prolonging life. In the Han court, a range of vessels was specifically designed for that purpose. They are characterized by precious materials, delicacy of craftsmanship and their sophisticated forms (fig. 21). To ensure that these efforts bore fruit, people would seek out a Daoist specialist to conduct erudite rituals. As a result, the philosophy of Daoism gradually became a religion during the Han dynasty.

What has been reflected by jade over 8000 years is the irresistible ascension of Man, that creature kneaded together from Heaven and Earth. Jades from the archaic periods have taught us that Heaven was the other half of Earth. A sky that was scrutinized, invoked, and interrogated.

Before the Han dynasty, the Chinese looked to Heaven for guidance, thinking that Heaven determined what would occur on Earth. They studied the sky to find out. And jades of the

Practical Information

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| Dates | 11 November 2020 - 21 March 2021 |
| Venue | Fondation Baur, Musée des Arts d'Extrême-Orient 8 rue Munier-Romilly 1206 Genève – Suisse +41 22 704 32 82 www.fondation-baur.ch |
| Opening times | Open from Tuesday to Sunday 14:00 – 18:00, until 20:00 for guided public visits |
| Admission charges | Full price: CHF 15.- AVS, AI and students: CHF 10.- |
| Exhibition Curator | Laure Schwartz-Arenales, Director |
| Scenography | Nicole Gérard, with the help of Corinne Racaud |
| Press contact | Leyla Caragnano, communication@fondationbaur.ch +41 79 220 56 25 |
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| Cultural mediation | Anne-Sophie Kreis, mediation@fondationbaur.ch |
| Public guided visits: | 18:30 on certain Wednesdays: 18 November, 2 & 16 December 2020, 13 & 27 January, 10 & 24 February, 10 March 2021 |
| Private guided visits: | Reservation at musee@fondationbaur.ch |