

Phoenix

**Covered box.
About 500 years old.
Potted and painted
with care in Vietnam.**



Covered box: Two phoenixes | Northern Vietnam, 15th century; reportedly found in Sukothai, Thailand. Stoneware

Background information

The phoenix is an imaginary bird that was first depicted in art over 1500 years ago. The Chinese took the best parts from six different real birds to form it! Its head came from a golden pheasant, body from a mandarin duck, tail of a peacock, legs of a crane, mouth of a parrot, and the wings of a swallow.

The phoenix represents supreme beauty and grace, and was often used by the Chinese imperial family as a symbol of the empress. It is said that the phoenix appears only during times of peace, a picture of it hints at impending good fortune. This makes it an auspicious symbol. Although associated with strength, warmth, and the sun, the phoenix was seen as depicting the feminine yin. When paired with the dragon, which represents the emperor, they are seen as the sign of perfect conjugal bliss.

By the 14th century, Chinese porcelain had become very popular and much sought after around the world. During the 15th century during a time of turmoil in government, the Chinese banned exports creating a crisis of supply. To fill the continuing demand for ceramic goods, makers in Vietnam and Thailand increased production. They could not produce true porcelain like the Chinese, but they created high-quality, blue-and-white ceramics that were a good substitute. These stoneware vessels matched the decorations, but not the light weight and durability of Chinese porcelain. This covered box is a fine example of the type. It is so nice that it may have been specially commissioned, or made to be used as a diplomatic gift.

Phoenix

Proposed Activities

STUDENTS WILL LEARN ABOUT

- The nature of the phoenix
- Symbolism of the phoenix

GLOSSARY

Porcelain is a type of pottery made with kaolin, a special kind of clay. When fired, it retains its white colour, is non-porous, can be made very thin – sometimes it's even translucent, and is very durable.

Stoneware is a type of pottery fired at high temperature, non-porous, and opaque.

REFERENCES

Welch, P B. *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery*. North Clarendon, 2008.

Devotion & Desire: Cross-Cultural Art in Asia. Exhb. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, 2013. By Alan Chong, et al.

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LOOKING ACTIVITIES

1. Look closely at the object and describe everything you see.
2. What creature can you see on the object? How many of them can you spot?
3. What would it feel like to touch? How heavy do you think it is? What material is this made of?
4. Imagine what it would taste like?



MAKING ACTIVITIES

1. Use paper, Styrofoam, or cardboard to make your own phoenix. From which different birds or animals would you take parts to make your phoenix?
2. Make an origami paper phoenix.
3. Make a symbolic design or creature to represent your own values.



CROSS-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

English

The phoenix is commonly associated with the empress of China. What words can be used to describe the empress (include descriptions of the way she talks, walks, and behaves)?

Science

1. Diversity of Living and Non-Living Things
 - Would you consider a phoenix to be a living or non-living thing? Why? List characteristics of living things.
 - What group of living things would it fall under? Why?
2. Diversity of Materials
 - Birds have special body parts, such as hollow bones and feathers that help them fly.
 - What physical properties do you think help them fly safely and easily?
 - Do they need anything special to help them fly, even in the rain?

Science – Physics

Forces – Bernoulli's principle – fluid mechanics

- Expanding on Bernoulli's principle – show how the principle works for the flight of birds
- Wing lift experiment – build a paper wing and observe how air pressure provides lift