

# Qilin

Platform bed.  
Intricately carved, then gilded  
and lacquered in China over  
100 years ago.



Opium bed | China, Chaozhou, 1875, Gilded and lacquered namwood (qilin)

## Background information

The *qilin* is an imaginary creature made from parts of different real animals. It symbolizes kindness and other things for the Chinese. Generally, the *qilin* is depicted with the head of a dragon, body of a deer, and tail of a cow. Since *qilins* are believed to live for 1,000 years, it is a symbol for long life, virtue, and wisdom. It is a common decorative motif on Chinese ceramics, textiles, and furniture.

Although they can look fearsome, *qilins* only punish the wicked. It is said that the animal has an innate ability to discern the guilty from the innocent. It was used as the emblem of justice during Emperor Yao's rule back in the 3rd century BC. To this day, some Chinese believe that the kind and gentle *qilin* sends children to families. They often hang on their doorways pictures of the *qilin* with a beautiful child riding on its back, on its way to deliver it to a family.

In contrast to a scholar's studio furniture that is simple and austere, this daybed is elaborate and highly decorated. Furniture like this is often carved with scenes of filial piety or famous Chinese fables, meant to instruct the user. Gold leaf was often applied to lacquered namwood furniture made in Teochew.

## Proposed Activities

### STUDENTS WILL LEARN ABOUT

- The use of the *qilin* as an auspicious symbol in Chinese art
- Decorative elements on Chinese furniture

### GLOSSARY

**Coolies** are labourers, usually from China or other countries, who were paid very little.

**Namwood** is a type of wood that has a reddish tone.

### REFERENCES

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



### LOOKING ACTIVITIES

1. Can you spot the *qilins* on the legs of the bed? How many are there?
2. Imagine you are a *qilin*. Make the sound you think it would make.
3. Look closely at the scenes on this bed and describe them as much as you can.
4. How heavy do you think this bed is? How many people could sleep on it?



### MAKING ACTIVITIES

1. Using cardboard or straws, create a bed that you would like to sleep on.
2. Use a viewfinder (can be made using ice cream sticks or by putting together strips of coloured paper) to isolate details and create a collage.
3. Sketch your favourite parts of the scene. Imagine what the characters would be saying to each other and write speech bubbles for them.



### CROSS-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

#### English

Get students to research about coolies. Get them to write a story about their lives in Singapore.

#### Social Studies / History

Why was opium smoking acceptable back then?  
What were the factors leading to the Opium Wars?

#### National Education

Imagine that opium smoking was still prevalent in Singapore today, and think about the possible impacts on families and society.