

# ACM WONDERS

Suitable for ages 13 and up

# ACM

## COVERED BOX

Handmade and painted in northern Vietnam about 500 years ago

### Background Information

This Vietnamese spherical, ceramic box is decorated with a flying phoenix. Associated with strength, warmth, and the sun, the phoenix symbolises the feminine (yin). It is said that the phoenix appears only during times of peace, and seeing one hints at impending good fortune. This makes it an auspicious symbol. When paired with the dragon, which represents the emperor and the masculine (yang), they are symbolic of perfect marital bliss.

By the 14th century, Chinese porcelain had become very popular and much sought after around the world. In the 15th century during a time of turmoil in government, the Chinese banned exports, which created a crisis of supply – foreign buyers could not get porcelain. 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 well-made that it may have been specially ordered (“commissioned” is the term used in the art world) or made to be used as a diplomatic gift.



Covered box  
Stoneware  
Northern Vietnam  
15th century  
15.5 x 17cm  
Asian Civilisations Museum  
2012-00390

# LET'S DISCOVER

Learn about the symbolism of the phoenix in Chinese and Vietnamese culture.

## FUN FACT

The phoenix is an imaginary bird that was first depicted in art over 1,500 years ago. Chinese artists used the parts from six different real birds to make 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.

## GLOSSARY

**Porcelain** is a type of pottery made with kaolin, a special kind of clay. When fired at high temperature, it retains its white colour and becomes very durable. It is non-porous, and can be made very thin – sometimes it is even translucent!

**Stoneware** is another type of pottery. It is also fired at high temperatures and is non-porous, but opaque and heavier and a bit more rough than porcelain.

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## LET'S LOOK CLOSELY

Use these guidelines to discover details about this object.

1. **LOOK** closely at this object and note its shape, size, and texture. What do you think it was used for?
2. The phoenix (called Phượng Hoàng in Vietnamese) symbolises values like nobility, and grace in Vietnam. In China, it is commonly associated with the empress.

What are some words you can use to **DESCRIBE** the way the empress might have behaved, walked, or talked?

3. **COMPARE AND CONTRAST** the decorations and material of this covered box with porcelain objects made in China found in the same gallery, or search for “Chinese porcelain” on Roots.sg. What differences and similarities do you see?

## CREATE AT HOME

Continue the experience at home by doing these activities. Mention us @ACM\_SG with a photo of your completed design for a chance to get featured.

4. The phoenix represents the empress. **CREATE** a mythical creature that represents you. Use parts of real creatures to form your fantastic beast. What animals would you choose and why would you choose them?

**WRITE** a description of your mythical creature. What type of food do you imagine your creature might eat? Where would its habitat be?