

The Dragon's Pearl

A New Museum for The University of Texas at Dallas

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THIS FALL, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT DALLAS WILL unveil Phase I of the Edith and Peter O'Donnell Jr. Athenaeum. The first of two art museums will be the Crow Museum of Asian Art, along with other collections. This new home and second location for the arts of Asia (our location on Flora Street in the Dallas Arts District will remain active) is the footprint of a burgeoning Asian art museum for our region. The collection of the Crow Museum, while catalyzed by the Crow family over four decades of collecting art they loved, is now an assemblage of many collections given and acquired over our twenty-five year history. The new museum, in its campus gown, takes on a new primary role as teacher to the more than 35,000 students, faculty, and staff at the building's footsteps.

The building is a vessel of access and invitation. Designed by a team from Morphosis Architects of Los Angeles, led by design partner Arne Emerson, it has landed on the southeast edge of the campus as a sculpture of luminous white precast concrete with a glimmer of feldspar in the mix, subtly gilded and stunningly beautiful. There is a play on many things: inside/outside, carved/uncarved, open/closed, transparent/opaque, light/shade, looking out and looking in, but more than anything, this building is a place to step into and to feel held. Morphosis listened to our wishes to create a museum for everyone. Access points are visible at the ground floor, and before you enter you can see yourself in the building—at study, at play, engaged and alive.

The Crow Museum is been a place where, we believe, works of life come to art, rather than the older adage that works of art come to life. Now that you're here, in this essay, I wish to welcome you and introduce you to a few examples of works in the collection. In this virtual extension of the new museum on campus, I invite you to explore the very popular theme of dragons. Dragons in Asian art are mythical creatures: tremendously powerful beasts, full of meaning, with vast dominion over one of the most important aspects of life—the weather.

Unlike the dragons of the West, the dragons of East Asia are benevolent, compassionate creatures, combining the best attributes of several animals: the talon of the eagle, the head of the lion, and the body of the serpent. Dragons are strong, physically and mentally. In Chinese legend, they represent the ultimate creative force, only attained through enlightenment. They rule the rain, the sun, the clouds, and the sky, all elements of survival to an agrarian civilization.

In folklore, the dragon is born in a tale of scarcity. A young boy, facing drought and famine, goes off searching for food for his ailing mother. After many days of a treacherous search through dry land, he encounters a bright green patch of grass. He races home to feed his mother and returns to the patch of grass again for food. As he is digging in the grass, much to his amazement, the boy uncovers a large shiny pearl. He takes the food and the pearl home to his mother. While the grass wilts, the pearl offers quite the opposite: a miracle of an abundance of rice. In this tale, anything the pearl touches is multiplied. The boy and his mother share the rice and food with their neighbors and, as humans do, some want more: greed is the moral lesson of this tale. The boy, wishing to protect the pearl from theft, swallows it. Within moments and in a blaze of lightning and thunder, he feels an insatiable thirst. He is hot. And then the boy is transformed into a mystical, serpentine form: a dragon who ascends into the heavens to protect the earth.

In art, the dragon, reigning over earth and sky, evolves to represent the highest power in the land—the emperor and his family. Status is physically symbolized by the number of claws on the dragon's feet: five for the emperor, four for the officials, and three for a lesser class of leader in the court. Dragons often appear next to, or even surrounding a pearl (sometimes flaming), which is an allusion to the legend. Pearls represent wisdom and knowledge, and dragons are believed to be constantly engaged in an unquenchable quest for knowledge of history, literature, art, and other information. The dragon, like the boy, is always thirsty for more. As all good moral legends suggest, we should be like this, too.

Just as the lotus is a cross-cultural symbol of enlightenment in Asian art, the dragon reigns in imagery from China to Japan to Korea. The Crow Museum has almost seventy works of art with references to dragons, either in image or calligraphic script.



Figure 1. *Seated Buddhist Figure of a Lohan.*
China, Ming Dynasty, 1479.
Crow Museum of Asian Art, 1979.12

This Ming-dynasty Daoist monk from China (Figure 1), dated by inscription to the year, is an object with stories to tell. Stiffly posed, he sits alert, eyes intensely open, with a dragon in his right hand and a pearl in his left. The dragon reaches out, arm extended and poised to capture this treasure of enlightened knowledge. This simple and symbolic exchange, set against the stoic form of the monk, is his life's work. Dated and inscribed cast-iron images of this time are rare: one of the yet-to-be researched treasures of our collection, a pearl waiting to be grasped. The seams of the construction of the cast iron section tell us of the maker's process, something that refinement would have disguised. (Originally, a coat of gesso paint was traditionally applied to hide the seams.) This lesson of learning is the only thing this simple monk wants us to know: sit still, pay attention, be quiet, listen and learn.

Dragons also commonly appear in Chinese textiles, often on robes worn by the emperors and their families—imagine a crest indicating status and wealth (Figure 2).

This traditional 18th-century Tibetan cloak, fashioned from a Chinese style of robe, presents several “main-character” dragons playfully holding several pearls of wisdom and knowledge. As a monk's “dancing robe,” which would have been worn for special occasions, it offers imagery of dragons over water and mountains—dominion over all. The splendor of gold with highlights of blue and red reflects extravagance and elegance fit for a king. The scales on the bodies of the dragon suggest snakes, and we see the powerful taloned limbs winding up into a fiercely countenanced lion's head topped by the antlers of a deer. He who wore this robe exuded power and protection, and a capacity to know and to govern wisely with that knowledge. The pearls are literally “in hand.”

In our Japanese collection, we have several rock crystal spheres presenting this dynasties-old theme of dragon and pearl (Figure 3).

Rock crystal spheres from Japan were intended to be a feast for the eyes and for the mind. The rock crystal, a sedimentary stone quarried from the mountains in Japan, was polished through a painstaking process of abrasion. Imagine using a large rock tumbler and many long hours of work to abrade the material. The rock crystal shown here is the second-largest in the world, and among the “top ten” works in the Crow Museum today. The sphere is designated as “flawless,” a visual puzzle of refraction and play that reverses the image as you peer through its glossy surface. Artisans formed the bases with equal complexity—this sphere is nested upon a base of silver gilt. Dragons weave in and out of the lacy waves and bubbles of ocean, actively swimming, straining, grasping, and chasing one very large pearl. In this work of art, the sphere is the pearl of wisdom and knowledge, and like the dragon, we are all in the role of seeker on a quest that is never-ending.

In our collection, dragons adorn painted ceramics, bronze bells, temple sculptures, and even roof tiles. Auspiciously, they protect all who encounter them, declaring, “Welcome, the dragon says. I will



Figure 2. Imperial Robe.
China, Qing dynasty, 18th century.
Crow Museum of Asian Art, 1984.23



Figure 3. Rock crystal sphere on stand with dragons.
Japan, Meiji period, 19th century.
Crow Museum of Asian Art, 1983.15

protect you.” Dragons have pounced through time and daringly reign over popular culture today in anime, film, and the popular “How to Train Your Dragon” book series.

And back on campus, I offer that this new museum is the shiny white pearl we all seek: a precious treasure, decades in the dreaming, years in the making, and now ours for the knowing. Hold it wisely, dragons.

About the Crow Museum of Asian Art of The University of Texas at Dallas

Founded in 1998 by Trammell and Margaret Crow, the Crow Museum of Asian Art of The University of Texas at Dallas inspires and promotes learning and dialogue about the arts and cultures of Asia through its exhibitions, the research and preservation of its collections, artistic and educational programming, and visitor experience and engagement. The downtown museum, in the heart of the Dallas Arts District, is free and open to the public. It offers an array of beautiful spaces and galleries in a serene setting for quiet reflection. In 2019, the Crow family gifted the collection to The University of Texas at Dallas in honor of its founders and to ensure its preservation and care in perpetuity. A second location, designed by Morphosis Architects will open in Fall 2024 as Phase I of the Edith and Peter O’Donnell Jr. Athenaeum, a planned multi-phase arts and performance complex dedicated to enriching the arts on campus. Learn more at crowmuseum.org.