

# MFA **H** *The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston*

## YEAR OF THE DRAGON SCAVENGER HUNT

The Lunar New Year ushers in the Year of the Dragon, a symbol of strength, wisdom, power, and protection to many cultures. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, invites you to explore our collections to discover how dragons have been represented across cultures over time. How many can you find? Share your adventure on Instagram and tag us @mfahouston.



### GLASSELL SCHOOL OF ART

Near the Ólafur Eliasson Tunnel | China



Ai Weiwei, *Dragon Reflection*, China, 2019–20, aluminum poles, steel wire, tempered glass mirrors, bamboo, silk, and LED lights, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum commission funded by the Caroline Wiess Law Accessions Endowment Fund, 2019.695. © 2019 Ai Weiwei

In China, the dragon takes on mystical and powerful resonances, and they are prominently featured in the annual Lantern Festival parades. Artist Ai Weiwei explains further, “there have been folk customs along the Yangtze River in China, where people used bamboo to form ‘bench dragons’ . . . composed of three parts: the dragon’s head, body, and tail. . . . In China, there is an idiom that says one can see the head of a dragon but not the tail. The mirrored surfaces of the *Dragon Reflection* extends this mythic creature infinitely.”

Take advantage of the stairs or nearby elevator to see *Dragon Reflection* from above and below. How does it change when seen from different perspectives? What are your reflections on the dragon as a powerful and mystical creature?

### NANCY AND RICH KINDER BUILDING

Gallery 312 | Netherlands



Joris Laarman, produced by Joris Laarman Lab, established 2004, *Dragon Bench*, designed 2014, fabricated 2015, Amsterdam, Netherlands, stainless steel, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by the Caroline Wiess Law Accessions Endowment Fund, 2015.252.

Joris Laarman created this sculpture using a device that allowed him to print molten metal in the air. This process allows him to experiment with lines and space to create dynamic sculptural furniture. What kind of dragon can you see in this bench?

### CAROLINE WIESS LAW BUILDING

Art of the Islamic Worlds Gallery | Azerbaijan and Persia



Faig Ahmed, *Dragons of Karabakh*, Azerbaijan, 2021, cotton warp and weft, wool pile; symmetrical knot, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by the Caroline Wiess Law Accessions Endowment Fund, 2023.109. © 2021 Courtesy Faig Ahmed and Sapar Contemporary

In *Dragons of Karabakh*, Faig Ahmed blends traditional Caucasian carpet-making and contemporary sculptural techniques to think about cultural memory. The carpet contains stylized dragons, geometric patterns, and vegetation. What images can you make out in the patterns?



*Base of a Huqqa (Qalyan)*, Persia, early 17th century, stonepaste, molded and painted in blue and black under transparent glaze, the Hossein Afshar Collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Dragons figure prominently in the arts of China as well as Islamic lands. A fierce but protective dragon coils around the base of a ceramic water pipe used for smoking tobacco. Can you imagine the smoke emanating from the pipe mimicking the puffs of smoke exhaled by a fire-breathing dragon?

# CAROLINE WIESS LAW BUILDING

Art of China Gallery | China



*Vase with Dragon*, Jingdezhen, China, Qing dynasty, 1662–1722, porcelain with peachbloom glaze (Jingdezhen ware), the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, bequest of Charlene Quitter Thompson, 2013.487.A,B.

The auspicious nature of the dragon is also associated with water, hence the dragon's place here on this vase. The glaze on this vase was expensive and difficult to make, making vases with dragons like this rare.

There's another dragon in this gallery. Can you spot it? Hint: Royal families may have used it for dinner!

Wiess Gallery | Mexico



*Incense Burner (Incensario) Lid*, Teotihuacan, Mexico, 150–650 AD, earthenware with slip and traces of polychrome pigment, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Museum purchase funded by the Brown Foundation Accessions Endowment Fund, 97.113.A,B.

This incense burner is topped by a dragon-like serpent where smoke would escape through the eyes and the mouth when used. In Mesoamerica, burning incense was central to religious rituals and serpents played a central role in their religious cosmography. Can you imagine this serpent breathing smoke?

The Glassell Collection of Indonesian Gold | Indonesia



*Bracelet*, Bali, Indonesia, late 19th–early 20th century, gold, bronze, rubies, diamonds, and garnets, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Alfred C. Glassell, Jr., 2004.2262.



*Necklace*, Southeast Moluccas, Indonesia, late 18th–early 19th century, gold, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by the Brown Foundation Accessions Endowment Fund, 2006.539.

In places like Indonesia, the dragon often takes the form of the *naga*, a snake-like dragon that is often associated with the life-giving element water. There are several dragons and nagas in this gallery. Can you find them? What differences and similarities can you spot between the *naga* and the dragons you've seen today?

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