



NINE DRAGONS

JADE IS HIGHLY VALUED by East Asians, for whom it represents beauty, nobility, perfection, constancy, power and immortality. The Chinese character for jade (pronounced “yu” in Mandarin Chinese) is very similar to the character signifying king; it is an image of a king with a stone in his pocket, because jade is revered as a royal stone. When Patrick Chu, designer and founder of the Loiminchay pen brand, decided to make the ultimate pen, jade was the only material he considered. His newest creation is the Nine Dragons.

“All Chinese emperors called themselves dragons, and the highest dragon is the nine dragons, because nine is the imperial number,” he explains. “I don’t look at Nine Dragons as a pen; I look at it as an *objet d’art*. It is for people who love both antiques and jade. We made one proto-

type, and then we decided to make three pens, which were pre-sold. After that, three more sold. Six is not really a good number, so we thought about doing seven. When people told me to do eight, then I thought I should do ten pens. There will be ten in all, and only two are still available. Eight have sold.” Not bad considering that each sells for a quarter million dollars.

“The prototype took the longest because I submitted the drawings to the jade sculptors—a select group of skilled artists—who then sculpted the three prototypes with a much cheaper grade of jade. That took about one and a half years,” Chu continues. “We then assembled everything in France.”

From start to finish, concept to final product, the Nine Dragons project took Chu about seven years. “From the time the

Written by Keith W. Strandberg; photography by Pen World.

jade carvers get the jade in their hands, it takes about two months for each pen," Chu details. "The jade is expensive, so they can't afford to make a mistake. If they don't feel like working, they don't work."

Jade has grains and textures that aren't revealed until the pen is sculpted, so sometimes the artists modified the shape of Chu's design to follow the structure of the jade. Chu says, "If one of the dragons is planned to be horizontal and as they cut and carve they think vertical would be better because of the grain of the stone, they inform me, and I usually agree."

The biggest challenge in the entire process was finding the jade. Because of the Nine Dragons' physical size, it was nearly impossible to find large enough pieces of jade of the quality Chu insists on. As Chu recounts, most jade brokers didn't even want to talk with him when they

The Loiminchay Nine Dragons and its black lacquer pen rest. The pen sells for \$250,000.

heard he wanted to make a pen. They usually want to turn high-quality jade into the greatest number of products possible: earrings, rings, bracelets, pendants, etc.; they don't want to find a great piece of jade and have it monopolized in the manufacture of a few fine pens.

It's important that the jade for all parts of the pen matches. That means a huge amount of jade has to be earmarked for each pen. "The finished pen is 8.25 inches long, so the uncarved jade has to be at least 9 inches long, and that's really a lot of jade," Chu admits. "The jade sculptors, engravers and agents can make a lot more money by selling the stone for rings and jewelry. They also didn't want to sell to us because such a big pen was a new challenge, and no one really knew if it could be done."

The search was ultimately successful. "I had been searching for the jade





The crown of the pen is carved in a representation of a dragon's head; China's Great Wall.

for these pens for five years," Chu continues. "I finally found an excellent agent who was able to find a block of jade in 2003." The Burmese jade for the Nine Dragons pen came from Myanmar's Jade Mountain. No one knows the worth of any single stone until it is cut open, so buyers often bid "blind" on the raw jade, which can be boulder-sized with a rough brownish exterior. Chu paid a premium to have a corner of the stone cut off, so he could have a clue as to what kind of jade was inside. "There is a tremendous amount of competition at these markets," Chu explains. "It's like a gamble. I paid more to make sure I wasn't

gambling as much."

The Nine Dragons pen is a remarkable achievement and a project of which Chu is justifiably proud. "I tried to keep an easygoing attitude about my Nine Dragons pen through all the trials and tribulations," he says. "A pen like this has never been made before, so it is a serious pen, but the people who will own it should have fun as well."

Next up for Chu is a porcelain pen, although that is down the road a bit. After so many years focusing on the Nine Dragons, he's earned a bit of a respite.

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Guangzhou is an important but mysterious center of the jade trade.

THE CHINESE JADE MARKET

NO ONE KNOWS BETTER than jade traders the challenges of buying and selling jade. It is nearly impossible to determine the quality of an uncut block of jade, and uncut is exactly how the jade arrives at auction. Buyers travel to the Guangzhou (Canton) countryside, where the jade auctions are held, to bid blindly on the uncut stones, hoping to acquire quality jade. The competition at these auc-

One wrong move and the piece, the precious jade, will be ruined.

"There is almost a mythical quality to jade," says Patrick Chu of Loiminchay. "You look at it in the light, hold the jade in your hand to feel the warmth, and determine if you want to own that jade, emotionally. People who know jade consider the grain and the texture, the softness and the hardness of the jade. Green jade is a



from left—The unfinished surface of a piece of black jade; view of a temple; Hong Kong street scene. Traditional Chinese architecture often includes elaborate carvings.

tions is intense, and outsiders are not allowed to participate in, or even view, the proceedings.

Once the jade is purchased, the block is transported to the jade cutters and sculptors who will transform it into finished pieces of jewelry or art objects. These artisans typically live and work in small villages. Some specialize in Buddhas, others in dragons. Although the jade trade is very much a business, these artisans are definitely old school—they work when they feel like it and determine the pace of a project independently of what clients may expect. Carving jade is delicate work that requires great skill and patience.

hard jade, while white jade is softer; purple is in between. The hardness alone, however, doesn't tell you whether it is a good piece of jade."

Some of the best sights to see in China have a direct link to jade. Though tourists cannot go to the jade market in Guangzhou where Chu bought his raw jade, there are several markets where finished jade pieces can be found. Although these markets—in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Taipei—are a lot of fun to visit, they don't necessarily offer the highest quality of jade. To find the best jade, shop jewelry stores or any of China's state-operated department stores.

MUST-SEE SITES FOR JADE LOVERS

The Jade Buddha Temple in Shanghai, where tourists can view an exquisite reclining Buddha and a sitting Buddha made entirely of white jade.

The Beijing Palace Museum, where many of the world's finest jade pieces are on display in the different halls and buildings.

The Old Town in Shanghai, where walking through the jade market takes visitors back in time.

The Jade Market in Hong Kong, at the end of Temple Street. The Jade Market is open only in the mornings, so get there early for the best selection.

The National Palace Museum in Taipei, Taiwan, is by far the best place to see extraordinary jade pieces relating to China's long history. Art treasures removed by the Nationalist government to Taiwan in 1949 are now in this museum's collection.



THE COLORS OF JADE

Of the two gemstones that are considered jade, jadeite is considered to be the more valuable one. It is more translucent than nephrite and is usually a light green, while nephrite is dark green with little or no translucence. True jadeite cannot be scratched with a steel object. Color is what determines the value of jade more than anything else. White jade is the purest; the other colors of jade are created through impurities in either the aluminum and sodium that make up jadeite or the calcium, magnesium and iron that make up nephrite. Found in nature, the rock surface belies its interior and is usually a neutral shade of gray when it is found. The light and dark shades of green are the most well-known and sold, but jade can also be found in orange, yellow, red, black, brown and blue. The other colors, while less common, can be just as valuable and attractive as the two shades of green.

JADE ACCORDING TO CONFUCIUS

One of the most renowned Chinese scholars was Confucius, who lived from 551 to 479 BC. During a discussion about jade, a disciple asked Confucius, "Why do men value jade much more highly than serpentine? Is it because jade is scarce and serpentine is abundant?" "It is not," replied Confucius. "It is because men of olden days regarded it as a symbol of the virtues. Its gentle, smooth, glossy appearance suggests charity of heart; its fine, close texture and hardness suggests wisdom; it is firm and yet does not wound, suggesting duty to one's neighbor; it hangs down as though sinking, suggesting ceremony;

struck, it gives a clear note, long, drawn out, dying gradually away and suggesting music; its flaws do not hide its excellences, nor do its excellences hide its flaws, suggesting loyalty; it gains our confidence, suggesting truth; its spirituality is like the bright rainbow, suggesting the heavens above; its energy is manifested in hill and stream, suggesting the earth below; as articles of regalia it suggests the exemplification of that of which there is nothing in the world of equal value, and thereby is Tao itself."

Source: Gary N. Davis, The U Lian Collection, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.



JADED?

There is a wealth of color and composition to explore in jade.

EVEN THOUGH IT IS OFTEN ASSOCIATED with the Far East, jade has long held a sacred place in civilizations around the world. Spanish conquistadors observed Central American natives grinding jade into a powder that they used to treat kidney problems and gave it the name *piedra de ijada* (loin stone), from which the word *jade* derived. In addition to Myanmar (Burma), Japan and China, Central and South America and Canada are also sources for jade. Two US states, Alaska and Wyoming, have named jade as their state gemstone.

Jade comes in many different colors, including white (the highest quality with the fewest impurities), green (which signifies prosperity), blue, red, purple, yellow, brown and black. Nephrite and jadeite are the minerals commonly known as jade, and no two stones have exactly the same makeup. The material is extremely difficult to cut, with white jade being the softest and green jade being the hardest. To the Chinese, it is a traditional material, its first use dating to around 5000 BC. Because jade is thought to have protective qualities, children are given jade at birth, and most babies wear jade somewhere on their bodies. The Chinese and Mayan cultures also often bury the dead with a piece of jade for luck.

Bowenite, also known as serpentine or Hunan jade, is similar in appearance to jade, but is much softer; unlike jade, it can be scratched with a sharp knife.

Written by Sarah Mertins. Photos courtesy of the National Palace Museum in Taipei, Taiwan, and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; additional photography by Carole Wilmot.



Collection of the National Palace Museum

opposite and this page—A “hidden meanings” talisman in white jade; a Central American piece in black jade; bok choy carving of mixed color; red and green jade necklace; the carved jade clip of Loiminchay’s Mandarin Supreme fountain pen.

