



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE**  
Early Coalport John Rose dish, c1805;  
18th-century Japanese plate that Willa  
had as a child; Staffordshire transferware  
plate, c1820; teapot and jug from an early  
Coalport Thomas Rose tea service, c1800.  
**BELOW** Chelsea teapot, c1750.



## FIRE BREATHERS

*When dragon-like beasts began to appear on 18th-century porcelain they were often rather strange, says **Willa Latham***

**H**ave you ever thought about the weird and wonderful beasts that can be found on British porcelain? Dragons, snakes, strange half-serpents and... well, what are they exactly?

In China and Japan, people have been decorating their porcelain with images of mythical beasts for many centuries. When Europeans began to imitate these designs in the 18th century, the beasts flew west, and were incorporated into European porcelain decorations. But this was often a journey of transformation, with some things lost in translation.

The dragon is, of course, the best known. In European culture, the dragon is a menacing, dangerous creature representing evil. It lurks in caves waiting to strike, and needs to be slain – exactly what St George did in the Christian

story, which in turn is based on a much older Middle Eastern myth. In East Asia, however, the dragon is a very different beast; a shape-shifting presence and master of transformation, it breathes the clouds, controls our waters, moves the seasons and is the bringer of rain. The East Asian dragon is a powerful yet benevolent presence, a creature to be worshipped. Here, I have included an 18th-century Japanese Imari dragon plate that I had as a child.

There are similar disparities with the snake's symbolism. Here in Europe, the snake is associated with Adam and Eve eating the apple and being cast out of Paradise. But, in pre-Christian and East Asian cultures, the snake, which sheds its skin every year, is the symbol of



Bonhams; Willa Latham; Gentile Rattle of China

healing and longevity. The Ancient Greeks had Asclepius and his snake: an emblem we still use to represent the medical profession. Taoists believe the snake represents our coiled-up healing energies, which can be awakened with the right medicine.

The *kylin* or *qilin* (pronounced chee-LIN) is a mythical beast that has a scaled ox, horse or deer body; cloven hooves; a head with antlers and large eyes; and flowing mane. In China, the qilin brings luck and prosperity. It is widely known in East Asia; you have possibly sipped a Japanese Kirin beer (sporting its dragon label) with your sushi or noodles. The qilin is well travelled; in the early 15th century the Chinese Emperor was presented with two giraffes by a Kenyan diplomat. The Chinese thought they were qilins, and they lived in the Imperial Garden of the Forbidden City.

As the imagery of Chinese and Japanese porcelain came to Europe, porcelain decorators imitated it. But in a world before films or foreign travel, how would an 18th- or early 19th-century decorator have had any knowledge about the background and meaning? Surely a dragon was dangerous and evil; a snake bad news; and a qilin, well, was it a deer, a lion or a cow?

This month, I'm bringing together some of the weird and wonderful beasts that resulted. The earliest British depictions of mythical beasts can be found on Chelsea porcelain. The dragon on the teapot here is surprisingly authentic, probably copied from a German original, in turn copied from a Japanese one. To compare, two very early Coalport items show the endearing lack of context that Shropshire painters had. There is a John Rose dish with a hilariously strange dinosaur-like creature in the centre (although they couldn't have known about dinosaurs in 1805). Thomas Rose created a tea service with a wonderful 'Japan Dragon' pattern that might actually be qilins. But these are strange grinning beasts with none of the elegance of a Chinese qilin.

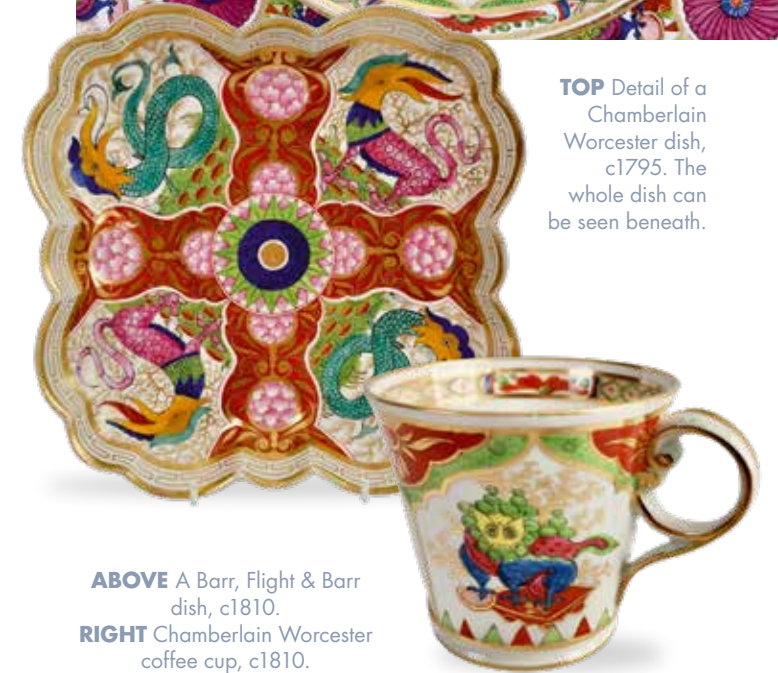
Not all decorators were clueless, though. As we saw with the Chelsea teapot, one Staffordshire engraver paid attention and created a beautiful blue transferware plate with dragons, qilins and snakes in their true Asian grandeur. And some very imaginative designs were made in Worcester. There are several versions of the famous 'Dragons in Compartments' or 'Kylin' pattern. They consist of qilins with the strangest faces – scary and like a roaring lion – and snake-like bodies. Two different versions are illustrated here, one from Barr, Flight & Barr, and one from Chamberlain Worcester. So if you happen to come across a dragon, unicorn, or snake, think again – they may bring you luck!

*Willa Latham*

Read Willa's blog [gentlerattleofchina.com](http://gentlerattleofchina.com), follow her @gentlerattleofchina



**TOP** Detail of a Chamberlain Worcester dish, c1795. The whole dish can be seen beneath.



**ABOVE** A Barr, Flight & Barr dish, c1810.  
**RIGHT** Chamberlain Worcester coffee cup, c1810.