

OBJECT IN FOCUS

Disk (*bi*) with knobs, feline, and dragon



China

Eastern Han dynasty, 100–220

Jade (nephrite)

H x W x D: 8 11/16 x 6 x 1/4 in; Diam (hole): 1 in

Gift of Charles Lang Freer. Freer Gallery of Art, F1916.155

Describe

This jade disk, or *bi*, has a flat, circular body. It has a round hole at the center and a complex, openwork design on top. The jade material is almost translucent and in a pale greenish-white color. Both front and back are carved identically. The circular body is decorated with repeating raised dots, known as “grain pattern.” Look carefully at the beautiful and elaborate design on the top. Do you see a dragon and a cat-like animal, or feline? The dragon face appears on the top right. Covered with scales, it is immersed in sweeping curves, which is how ancient Chinese artisans depicted clouds. The feline is forward-facing with round dots all over its twisted body.

Analyze

Beginning in the Neolithic period (ca. 7000–1700 BCE), Chinese artisans produced plain perforated disks, or *bi*. Their origin and purpose is not entirely known. According to early Chinese texts, they are symbols of heaven. During the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), the disks became more elaborate than their Neolithic predecessors. On some luxuriously fashioned examples, like this one, artisans would extend the circular shape of the disk by adding fantastic serpentine creatures. These intricate designs contrast with the simplicity of the disk itself.

Interpret

Both dragons and felines were considered auspicious symbols in the Han dynasty. Dragons, in particular, were believed to bring good luck and represent peace, courage, and wisdom. They came to be associated with imperial power. This disk, with such a remarkable design and exceptional quality of jade material, is extremely rare. Similar disks have been found only in royal tombs.



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Inquire

- Let your eyes wander all over the image for at least thirty seconds; use the [zoom feature](#). What five adjectives would you use to describe this work of art?
- Why do you think the artisans that crafted this jade selected a feline and a dragon as the design?
- Compare and contrast this work in jade with a work in jade from the Neolithic period: <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1956.16/>. Why do you think artisans working thousands of years later would produce a similar work of art?

Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1916.155/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>

