

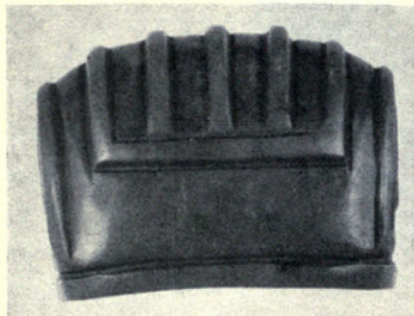


On this month's cover, the mystique of jade: Timeless beauty and appeal are carved into this delicately designed representation of a phoenix carrying a little boy on its back. Carved in soft gray jade, the piece is from the T'ang period, and is shown actual size. The Chinese quotation, from *Shuo Wen Chieh Tzu*, by Hsu Shen, reads, "Jade is the fairest of stones."

The Fairest of Stones

By Elizabeth Alanne

Field Museum Press



Even a very superficial study of jade and its use as an artistic medium brings one quickly to an awareness of the stone's *mystique*, to use a currently popular term. More ancient legends and superstitions surround jade, perhaps, than any other stone among the many gems, stones and metals prized for their rarity and beauty. Regardless of price, the other stones seem to lack the personal impact that jade has had for individuals and, possibly, even civilizations.

Reverence for jade reached its highest proportions in China and the use of the stone is most commonly associated with that country, but jade was discovered and used in several widely separated areas. It was believed to have magical properties and was used in important ceremonies and by persons of high rank.

The Mayas and Aztecs of Mesoamerica used and worked or carved jade, and objects of jadeite were used extensively in religious rituals. Body jades were put in tombs to prevent decomposition of the dead; sacrificial knives were made of jade; and jade, worn next to the skin, was believed to ward off evil spirits and cure disease. It was also used in powdered form as a medicine.

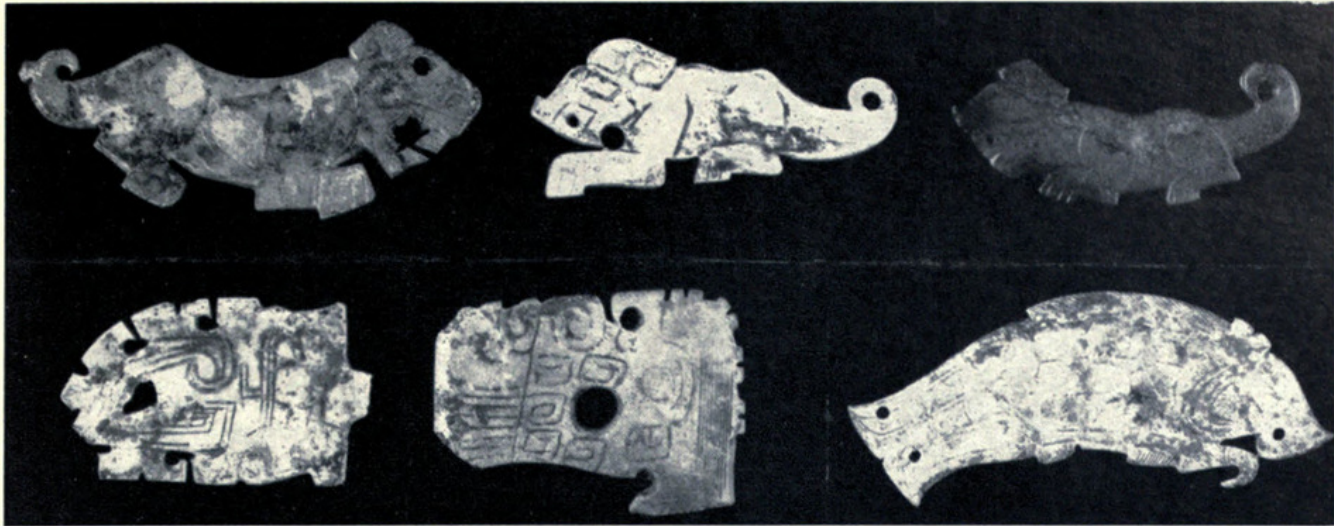
According to legend, these pre-Columbian Indian civilizations valued jade more than any other medium of exchange, including gold. Especially prized was the emerald green shade, which resembled the plumage of the sacred quetzal.

Evidently the tradition of jade carving in Mesoamerica was many centuries old when the Spanish explorers came, and it largely died out after the Spanish Conquest.

The Maoris of New Zealand also had access to jade and carved primitive pieces from it—mainly ornaments, talismans, and weapons which were used by those with prestige and high rank. There is also evidence that peoples in Turkestan, Persia and Alaska revered jade, believing that the ingestion of powdered jade would confer immortality.

But nowhere was jade more important than in China. According to one legend, recounted by Richard Gump in his book, *Jade, Stone of Heaven*, the right to rule China rested in the possession of a particular piece, the Precious Jade of Ho. Ho is described as a poor man who saw a phoenix alight on a rock. Believing the rock to be jade, Ho presented it to three successive emperors. To his misfortune, the first two did not believe the stone was jade, and each had one of Ho's feet cut off. Undeterred, he brought it to the third emperor, a man who recognized the fineness of the stone, accepted the gift and rewarded Ho. One version of the legend says the stone was carved into a *pi* (a flat ring-shaped ritual piece which represented Heaven) and another that it was carved into a seal. In any event, the Precious Jade of Ho has reportedly figured in the wars and upheavals of China since about 9 A.D. It was said to have been taken to Shanghai in 1936, along with

Carvings in the round have appeared in great numbers since the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.—220 A.D.) but are difficult to date because styles have remained quite constant. Animals, natural objects, human figures, and mythological creatures have been consistently popular subjects for jade carvers. Nearly all these pieces can easily be held in one's hand. Dating is approximate for the carvings shown: (From top) bearded sage, Han Dynasty; reclining horse, T'ang Dynasty; reclining goat, Han Dynasty; a miniature headdress, Sung Dynasty; another reclining horse, Ch'ing Dynasty; and a lion-like creature, not dated but probably Sung or earlier.



Stylized natural forms made of thin, flat pieces of jade, with some surface design, are typical of early Chinese jade carvings. Top row shows three versions of a tiger; bottom row, from left: "monster" head, bird, and dolphin.

other Chinese treasures, to keep it from the Japanese invaders. Its present whereabouts is unknown.

References to the stone's political significance stand a poor second to the testimonies for its value to the individual, however. Of utmost importance in understanding its *mystique* in China is the fact that the Chinese believed jade was an intermediary between Earth and Heaven. It was this quality that was worshipped, not the stone itself.

Originally, jade was used in China for making ritual objects and seals and insignias for kings and nobles. Jade jewelry was apparently introduced during the late Chou period (600–221 B.C.) and by the 18th century, the use of jade for personal adornments and decorative purposes far outweighed that used for ritual objects, although these were still used on formal occasions. The use of jade for purely decorative purposes was probably at least partially due to an increased availability of the stone. Nevertheless, the use of jade was largely restricted to royalty until well into the 19th century.

The use of jade was by no means limited to the outside of the man. Powdered jade, mentioned in connection with other civilizations, was a very popular medicine in China. Doses of powdered jade were swallowed to obtain a variety of highly-desirable results: as a cure-all; for prolonged life; to obtain powers of invisibility and levitation; to prevent one from being thrown from a horse; to ward off evil; and, in large amounts, it conferred immortality. It might be interesting, on quiet, rainy evenings, to ponder the possible amount of jade that disappeared into alimentary canals over the centuries for these reasons.

In the strict geological sense, what we know as jade may actually be either of two separate substances, nephrite and jadeite. Its occurrence is restricted in that individual deposits are isolated, although these may occur in widely separated parts of the world. Oddly enough, neither nephrite nor jadeite has ever been known to occur in China, the country in which it has had the most widespread use.

The original source for Chinese jade was probably a

nephrite deposit in the K'un Lun Mountains in what was Chinese Turkestan. It has also been found in Siberia, British Columbia, New Zealand, Poland, Japan, Italy, Southern Rhodesia and Brazil, and in Alaska, California, Washington and Wyoming in the United States. Jadeite is known to occur only in Burma, Mexico, California and Guatemala. Although the list of sources seems imposing, many of the deposits have jade of poor quality or have very small amounts of high quality stone which are quickly used up.

Nephrite is the more common of the two types of jade. It is a silicate of magnesium, fibrous, hard to fracture, and soapy in appearance. There are two types of nephrite: actinolite, which contains iron, and tremolite, which contains little iron. Both are called nephrite, just as nephrite and jadeite and both called jade.

Jadeite is a silicate of sodium, more easily broken than nephrite and able to take a more brilliant shine when polished. In its uncarved state, jadeite has an oxidized shell which makes it very difficult to judge the quality of the stone. The composition of Mexican jadeite is slightly different from Burma jadeite, which is called "gem quality." Jadeite was not introduced into China until after 1784.

Despite these differences in composition, nephrite and jadeite are similar in appearance to one another and there is a wide range of colors in both.

Those unfamiliar with jade often tend to think of it as being only green and, indeed, the "gem quality" jade found in some jewelry is the deep, rich emerald green found only in jadeite. Jade in its pure state, however, is white. It is an iron impurity that gives it its variety of hues. Some shades of color appear exclusively in nephrite—the whitish "mutton-fat" and "spinach" green flecked with black—while "emerald" green, mauve and light blue are peculiar to jadeite. The Chinese recognized hundreds of fine gradations of color and have given many of these highly imaginative names. Calling upon the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms for inspiration, jades of various shades



Small jadeite mask, probably from the Valley of Mexico, is an example of the vigorous carvings produced by the pre-Columbian Indian civilizations of Mesoamerica. Unlike the Chinese, the Indians had no metal tools and had to rely on less efficient instruments.

Even today, many jade deposits are in difficult areas to work and are expensive to mine. Weather is a factor, for instance, in Burma where mining operations can only be carried on successfully from March to May.

No small part of jade's *mystique* is in its artistic possibilities.

"Jade is tough, hard and heavy; it takes and keeps a good edge; its fine colors and polished surface must have been the pride and joy of craftsman and warrior alike."¹

We have mentioned carving frequently without describing this important craft, which in most cases determines the value of a piece of jade. In China the position of the jade carver was analagous to that of a goldsmith in Europe, much as jade held the position of value in China that gold does in the Western world.

Jade is, in fact, not literally carved but is formed through the use of an abrasive. It resists chiseling, but it can actually be cut with sand, water and a piece of string as the only tools. This method is used to cut large boulders of jade into smaller pieces, using the string as a two-man saw.

¹Hansford, S. Howard, *Chinese Jade Carving*, p. 57.



A green nephrite spoon, Ming period. Jade vessels for serving food and drink became popular under the Mongol rulers (Yuan Dynasty), emperors who stressed the practical, even in the use of jade.

are identified as: "chicken bone," "rice," "ivory," "young onion," "pearl," "egg," "apple," "imperial," "peach," and, in the case of the two-tone jades, such picturesque phrases as "sky-after-the-rain" and "moss-entangled-in-the-snow." The color range includes yellows, greys, greens, browns, reds, and more rarely, mauves, blues and pinks. Colors are frequently mixed with white in a single piece of jade, creating a cloudy two-tone effect. Almost every piece of jade, therefore, has its own individual color characteristics.

Lumped under the name jade, nephrite and jadeite both possess toughness, a strangely attractive "coolness" to the touch, and an affinity to exquisite carving work.

The small size of the earliest jade carvings are indicative both of the limitations of early tools and of the scarcity of the stone, not only in its natural state, but in the amount that could be successfully mined. Evidently the first pieces used in China were actually pebbles, fished out of streams that carried bits of jade from its mountain sources.

In the mountains, primitive—and often wasteful—methods were used to obtain the stone, such as heating it by fires during the day so that the jade might be cracked by the cold night temperatures acting upon it, and other similar methods.

This Maori hei-tiki neck ornament is unusually large, about 8½ inches high, but the design is one often repeated by the native jade carvers of New Zealand. This specimen, with abalone shell inlays, is from the A. W. F. Fuller Collection.

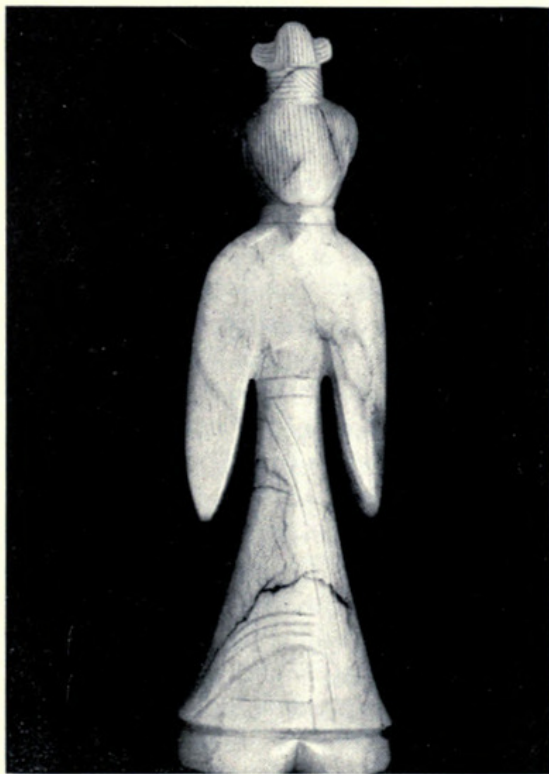


Earliest carvers probably used quartz sand and water, a very slow abrasive, in working jade and their finished pieces were usually flat, and thin with some surface relief.

Carving in the round—which included vessels for food, statues and many personal adornments—were not done until after the advent of the rotary tool. The discovery of the treadle-wheel also made jade carving easier and increased the artist's freedom since he no longer had to use one hand to hold the piece while working it with the other. The introduction of harder and more efficient abrasives over the years also produced changes in aspects of the jade working craft. When S. Howard Hansford visited Peking in 1939, carborundum, which came into use between World Wars I and II, was the most widely used abrasive, but other, older ones were also used for special effects. Some connoisseurs of jade carving believe that pieces worked with sand, crushed garnets or corundum, the slower abrasives, show more control of the carving and produce a finer finish.

The carver's tools have remained largely unchanged over the years, consisting of drills, gouges and grinders, used with the treadle wheel. The Chinese have had the use of metal tools and diamond points on some of their tools for many centuries.

In Mesoamerica, jade workers produced some excellent pieces without the benefit of metal tools, which were not introduced until after the Spanish Conquest. Bone, wood and even cactus needles were evidently used by jade carvers in the pre-Columbian Indian civilizations.



One of very few jades from the long transitional period in Chinese history, which saw many short-lived dynasties, is this beautifully designed and crafted white jade lady, Wei period (about 386–589 A.D.). Despite apparent internal turmoil, the period was a creative one which brought the first landscape paintings, prose literature, and advances in the jade carving art.



Incredibly intricate and delicate openwork is an example of the elaborate designs popular during various periods of jade carving. White nephrite incense burner is from the Ming period.

When brought to a carving shop, the stone is carefully examined for flaws and quality before being cut into smaller pieces. The artist will study one of these cut pieces until he decides what design will best suit its individual qualities. The design is drawn on the stone and an apprentice will “rough cut” the stone. If flaws appear, the design must be changed or reworked. The artist then begins the laborious fine carving process, slowly forming the jade by use of abrasives and the various tools of his craft. Polishing is the final step, accomplished with a “secret” paste called *pao yao* and the use of leather polishing wheels and points.

Jade carving is a highly regarded craft and there is a long period of apprenticeship involved in becoming an expert. Many carvers become so specialized that they do only one type of carving, such as making rings, or doing a particular type of openwork design.

Jade's history as an utilitarian and artistic medium indicates that even prehistoric man appreciated its workability. Neolithic tools have been found in China, apparently made near the jade source in Turkestan and brought into China. The pieces are usually tools or weapons, but a few are believed by some scholars to be ritual pieces.

The dating of Chinese jade artifacts is a very tricky business. “There is no branch of Chinese antiquarian studies so deficient in reliable chronological data as that of the jades. . . .”²

Most ancient jades have turned up in markets or were sold to dealers or collectors by individuals. They were found by farmers while plowing, or carried off from a site by tomb robbers, and in various ways removed from their original settings without any scientific supervision or documentation. Dr. Kenneth Starr, Curator of Asiatic Archae-

²Hansford, *Chinese Jade Carving*, preface.

ology and Ethnology, notes that in recent years there has been a great deal of scientific excavation and dating of ancient jades by Chinese archaeologists. Although China is closed to American scientists, the reports of these findings appear in professional journals.

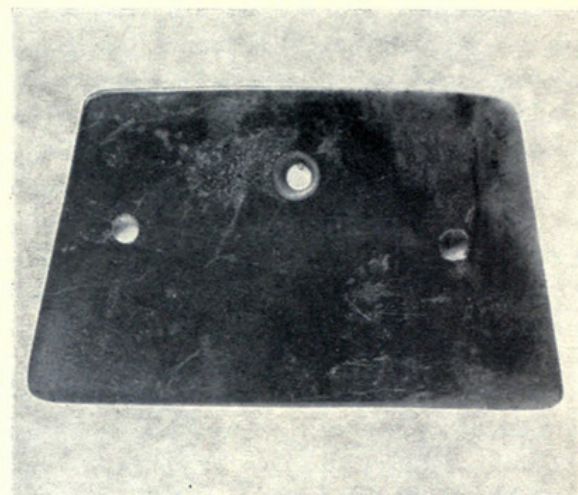
For the most part, jades are assigned to periods by styles in which they are made, and they reflect the tastes of a specific period. Animal carvings are an exception, because their form and styles often reflect the peculiarities of the particular pieces of jade used, rather than the will of the craftsman.

Judging from the earliest carved jades known from

Dynasty (960–1279 A.D.). Interest in ancient forms and designs continued but the lavish ornamentation was replaced by simpler, sturdier pieces.

Jade carving reverted to realism and practical uses under the Mongol rulers of the Yuan Dynasty, but at the sacrifice of Chinese symbolism in design and form. Jade was used increasingly for bowls, cups and other pieces used for serving food.

In the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 A.D.) which followed, jade working on the whole was expanded, but, under the influence of Confucianism, artistic creativity was restricted. A few new forms emerged, including the first few snuff



Two enduring ritual designs found in Chinese jade carving are the ts'ung (left), the symbol for Earth, which appeared during the Chou Dynasty, and the pi (center), the symbol for Heaven, which has been constant in jade carving since neolithic times. The early ritual jade (right) is probably a knife blade, with holes believed to be used for lashing the object to a handle.

China, the tradition of jade carving was already established by the Shang Dynasty (?1523–?1027 B.C.). Characteristic of this period are thin representational weapons, tomb jades and accessories of early nature worship. The thin, flat stylized form of carving persisted into the middle of the following Chou Dynasty (?1027–221 B.C.). Whether this was due to technical limitations and the scarcity of jade or because of tradition is unknown, but carvings in the round are very rare during this time.

In the late Chou period, the designs on jade pieces shifted from simple to extremely ornate, so much so that some of the objects are unrecognizable.

Many jades were destroyed during the brief reign of the Ch'in Dynasty emperor, a man who wished to eliminate all records of previous emperors.

A renewed interest in naturalism and return to simpler design occurred during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.—220 A.D.). Sculptural full rounds appeared, an indication that the rotary tool had come into common use.

The next 400 years were transitional ones, filled with turbulence, and the history of jade carving is obscured. Establishment of the T'ang Dynasty (618–907 A.D.) ushered in an opulent period with jade appearing in many personal adornments, such as belt buckles, combs and jewelry.

The pendulum swung back again during the Sung

bottles and an assortment of musical instruments of jade—flutes, bells and chimes.

The elevation of the jade carving art to its highest level occurred in the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644–1911 A.D.). The emperor K'ang-hsi (1662–1722 A.D.) established jade carving studios on the palace grounds. The demand for and interest in jade carving increased greatly. Some of the largest jades ever made emerged from these palace studios in the reign of a later emperor Ch'ien-lung (1736–1795 A.D.), although he personally favored, small, delicately carved objects in pure white jade. The artists were encouraged to be as creative as they wished in developing the possibilities of jade as an artistic medium. It was also during his reign that jadeite was introduced into China.

From the close of Ch'ien-lung's reign through the present innovations in jade working and carving have not been notable. Much as the rise and fall of hemlines is cyclical, ornamentation on jade pieces shifted from the simple to the extra-elaborate from time to time, but the designs and general approach to working the stone have remained essentially unchanged.

While jade has had a long history of use in China and in ancient civilizations elsewhere in the world, its entire "history" as an item of any importance in the United States could be contained in the memory of a person now living.

The western world as a whole seemed disinterested in jade for hundreds of years although there were certainly individuals who were aware of its existence and use. Marco Polo, the Venetian merchant who spent many years in China, must have realized the esteem the Chinese held for jade, yet it apparently had no value for him since he did not introduce it into Europe when he returned. Spanish sailors connected with the conquest of the New World purportedly carried bits of jade as a superstitious protection against kidney ailments, but the Spanish nobility, who coveted a great many things they found in the Americas, were apparently unimpressed by jade even though the Aztecs placed it high among their treasures.

Not until the Boxer rebellion in China at the turn of the century did pieces of worked jade begin to appear in the United States in any numbers. Brought back by American soldiers who fought there, and later by missionaries who went to China, it affected whatever caprice dictates the moods and fancies of art collectors and it experienced a mercurial ascent into favor. This popularity is presently combined with a relative scarcity of the stone, particularly jadeite. An embargo on trade of any items from Communist China interdicts the importing of all jades from the Far East that cannot be proven as coming from outside China.

Uninfluenced by any religious or superstitious traditions, in America the value in jade lies with the individual finished object. The quality of the stone, the artistry of the design, the workmanship, and the age of the piece are all factors in determining its worth.

Still, the stone has a *mystique* for Americans as well as Chinese. Virtually unknown here a century ago, jade is sometimes now as costly as diamonds. C. D. Peacock, Chicago's oldest retail jewelers, reports that the demand for jade jewelry is increasing every year and the market value of the stone is at its highest level in history. However, the price range for jade jewelry is astonishingly wide. One can buy a jade ring for \$125 or for \$17,000. A string of polished nephrite beads may cost up to \$20,000. As with other jade carved pieces, jewelry is evaluated individually in terms of the quality of the stone, its color, its size and the finished piece, including the use of other valuable materials. Jade is ill-suited to mass production and the will of the artist must bend to the nature of the stone. It is not only the fairest of stones, but perhaps the most demanding as well.

A major American figure in the early study of jade and jade carving was Berthold Laufer, who began his career with the Museum in 1907 and was Chief Curator of Anthropology from 1915 to 1934. His monograph *Jade*, published by Field Museum Press in 1912, was a pioneer work in its field. Laufer's enthusiasm for and interest in jade led to the acquisition of about three-quarters of Field Museum's jade collection, one of the finest in the United States. Fortunately, the collection was developed when there were still many pieces available representing not only the various periods of jade carving in China, but the many variations of color and quality found in jade as well.

The foundation of the jade collection was acquired by Laufer on two separate expeditions to China, the Blackstone Expedition in 1908-1910 and the Marshall Field Expedition in 1923. The largest single acquisition, at least half the present collection, was the Bahr Collection, purchased in 1927. This was made possible primarily because of a large contribution from Mrs. Frances Gaylord Smith, who later bequeathed her personal collection of jades to the Museum as well.

During the next six months or so, the Hall of Jades will be closed so important arrangement and labeling changes can be made to conform with more recent discoveries made in the field of dating these artifacts.

From the ancient, flat-cut ritual *pi*-rings to an intricately carved censer of modern times, the history of jade is contained in the Hall of Jades. As for its *mystique*, this lies within the fairest of stones and in the eye and mind of the beholder.

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Virtually unrestricted freedom of artistic expression was enjoyed by jade carvers of the Ch'ing Dynasty, many of whom worked in studios on the palace grounds. Jade was utilized in many ways—not always with the most pleasing aesthetic results, however, but with an eye to exploring every artistic possibility of the stone. Such diverse pieces emerged as (from top) an unornamented translucent bowl of rare blue jade; representation of natural forms in a "jade mountain" placed on a carved wood pedestal; and an elaborately carved green censer dominated by mythological lion-dogs and stylized plant forms.



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