

## The Dragons

### Origins

Dragons are the most favoured, worshipped and feared mythological creatures in Chinese history. They are also symbols of national pride and tradition.

Featuring prominently in personal names, dragons also appear widely in architectural decoration, jadeite carving, wine and food containers, dragon boat races, Chinese New Year celebrations, novelty paper cutting and embroidery.



Dragons first became a symbol of supreme power and absolute authority for emperors of China in the second century BC, later becoming an exclusive icon of royalty. Emperors enforced strictly a rule that dragon designs only be used on the clothes and personal adornment of the emperor and on buildings in the imperial palaces. Royal relatives were allowed to use dragon designs but were required to exclude the dragon's head. Those who violated the rules were executed.

Chinese dragon designs have been part of the orientalist design tradition of Britain for more than two hundred years, and have enjoyed many revivals over that time. Having dragons in its own mythology has probably encouraged the fascination and attraction in the United Kingdom towards these legendary Chinese creatures.

### The 1920s and 30s

The shadow of famous Wedgwood designer, Daisy Makeig-Jones, appears whenever one looks at earlier Crown Devon lustrine and lustre ware designs. Dragons, as a feature on Crown Devon wares, are no exception. This is not to say that Makeig-Jones was the only inspiration for orientalist design in the early twentieth century, but it is reasonable to argue that her 'Ordinary Lustre' pieces produced from 1913 onwards influenced other potteries of the day. Some of her earliest designs drew on Chinese and Japanese themes, one of which was the Chinese dragon.



Wedgwood Lustre Dragon Bowl Z4829 by Daisy Makeig-Jones



Dragon Pattern 2069

The first mention of dragons in surviving Crown Devon records appears in Lustrine pattern books as L56, produced in the 1920s. The pattern is recorded as *“Dragons; printed in smoke, filled up solid in green; stencilled and blown in oven blue. Dragons registered in gold; gold edge.”*

Most dragon patterns, however, were produced in the thirties and bear the 1931-65 back stamp. They were perhaps some of the most exquisitely rendered of all Crown Devon pieces. Pattern 2069, for example, boasted brilliant underglaze colours, a deep stippled blue lustre ground, finely applied enamelling in oranges and yellows and web thin gold registering over the designs. The same pattern appears on a brilliant orange ground that exudes thirties style of the highest order.



Orange Lustre Dragon Vases Pattern 2078

Crown Devon dragons were bold, terrifying and executed faithfully in the Chinese manner. The most complex dragon designs included stylised and colourful clouds of steam, pagodas, beautifully enamelled blooms, gnarled trees and assorted Chinese motifs.

Other designs featured gilded dragons and sun motifs highlighted with sprays of gilded and enamelled flowers over underglaze colours that cascaded from the rim or lip of certain shapes.

The grounds, particularly the brilliant orange lustre and Matajade grounds were breathtaking, while the ruby and blue lustres exuded depth and richness.

The Dragon patterns, while ‘modern’ in style, reflected the sybaritic stream of Art Deco. They owe their inspiration more to the opulence and splendour of Art Deco’s ‘Ballets Russes’ origins than the geometric fixations of the modernists. The Art Deco Sybarites opted for rare woods, precious metals, marbles, ivories and animal skins in furnishings and decorative home wares. The Dragons with their singular beauty, eye-catching colour and exotic designs were the perfect accompaniment to sybaritic style.



Matajade Dragon Jug with heavy gilding with abstract underglaze and enamelled design around the rim

Dragon designs in lustre and other grounds appealed to the luxury sector of the decorative home wares market and were labour intensive. First firing was for the biscuit and the wares underwent a number of other firings for underglaze colouring and grounds before a final firing after application of the gilding and lustre film.



Ruby Lustre Dragon Vase Pattern 2069

Dragons graced a wide range of ornamental wares including lamp bases, magnificent bowls, jugs, chargers, comports, ginger jars, candlesticks, bookends and dishes. They also featured in a range of 1930s tableware under the pattern number 2341. This delightful pattern appeared on bowls coffee pots, cup, saucers and other tableware.

Crown Devon dragon patterns of the 1930s rightly have a place on the top shelf of Crown Devon wares of the period. They represented the best of craftsmanship and style. As an advertising brochure of the time proclaims, they gave *“That keynote of individuality which makes an instant appeal to lovers of pottery who desire dignity of design.”*



Dragon Bowl in Pattern 2341



Orange Lustre Dragon Candlestick

## Dragons Post War

The days of the magnificent Art Deco dragon patterns ended with World War Two. All art pottery manufacture was banned from June 1942. Post war conditions in Britain for a number of years after the cessation of hostilities made the price that had to be paid for opulence too high.



Post War Art Deco influenced Dragon Pattern Dish

Restrictions on decorated pottery for the home market in the United Kingdom were in place until 1952. This meant that all of Fieldings' limited output of fancy ware had to be exported. Further, competition in the early 1950s from Europe and the Orient demanded that a number of the Staffordshire potteries produce lines that were less costly to manufacture.

Fieldings, however, did not desert dragon designs altogether. Cheap imports from the orient, particularly Japanese decorative wares and tea sets featuring crudely rendered overglaze dragon designs, flooded into many of the Staffordshire potteries' traditional markets.

The competition from the Far East reignited interest in oriental design and Fieldings capitalised on this renewed appeal with 'leaner' dragon and Pagoda lustre wares.

Many of the post war shapes did not include a pattern number, which makes precise dating extremely difficult. All bear the 1931-65 back stamp. Some pieces, however, did carry the pattern number 5260. This pattern number appears to be associated with the single dragon pattern that had generous gilding around the rim or lip, under which was a lace-like gold transfer showing abstracts of clouds, suns and banners. In Chinese design, dragons are usually linked with steamy clouds and suns.

Sometimes, dragon pieces featured a curious motif on the rear of the piece. This motif also appeared on some of the earlier and more lavish 1930s pieces. The design on the back of the vase shown below is a representation of the ten dragons in Chinese mythology, all but one of whom perished, leaving the final one to become the Sun. The circular part of the design represents the sun dragon and there are nine points surrounding the sun that represent those who did not survive.



1950s Dragon Jug Pattern  
5260



Chinese Dragon motif on rear  
of vase

The post war lustre wares did not have the texture of the earlier lustres and many pieces show no stippling at all on the ground. Some pieces do have minor stippling, as shown above in the double dragon dish. The rich ruby lustre was generally very constant in overall colouring and enamelling was kept to a minimum. The double dragon pattern had a more generous application of the orange, yellow and sky blue enamels, but most of the pattern was made of up gold transfer with generous gilding of the rims or handles of the pieces.



1950s Enamelled Tea Caddy

The post war dragons have a special appeal of their own. While lacking the opulence of their ancestors, they are striking, dramatic and colourful. They are likely to increase in value as orientalism in design makes its comeback with the advent of the Beijing Olympics.

