

Boy Holding a Black Cat

BATEA 502

As I look at this small Song Dynasty jade carving I can almost hear the cat give a rather disgruntled 'miaow'. The carver has accurately observed the typical manner in which a child lifts the animal, with its back legs dangling down somewhat uncomfortably.

The piece is the work of a talented, but sadly anonymous artist, who has cleverly utilised the two different colours naturally occurring in one piece of stone. The off-white part becoming a boy with the greyish-black forming the feline.

Imagine the craftsman handling the piece of material in its rough state before he began work when it offered only a glimpse of the special promise within.

The cat in Chinese symbolism is associated with the wish for a long life because the pronunciation of the word for cat [mao] is the same as someone eighty years old, although they are written with different characters. Many animals are regarded as auspicious in Chinese artwork for this same reason, the visual puns they create are known as rebuses.

Realistically modelled animal carvings and bi-coloured jade stones were particularly popular during the Song Dynasty, so perhaps aware of these factors it was the area of darker stone which inspired the design.

Working with only the basic tools and abrasives available at the time the design was no doubt refined as work progressed, ensuring the best separation of colours between the elements. The end result is this 7cm high, thousand year old treasure of the museum's collection.