



NOVEMBER 2016

## One Jar, Three Cultures

### *Large Amphora with Dragon-Head Handles*



#### VISIT THE BMA

and see *Large Amphora with Dragon-Head Handles* in the Asian Art Galleries.

Artist unidentified. Detail, *Large Amphora with Dragon-Head Handles*. Early 7th century. Tang dynasty (618–907). China, probably Henan or Hebei province. Stoneware with straw-colored glaze over white slip. 22<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches high. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Julius Levy Memorial Fund, BMA 1994.249

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In today's world, up-to-the-minute changes in fashion and style make their way around the globe electronically in the blink of an eye. In the ancient world, new ideas moved much more slowly by land and sea. Ships carried valuable cargo from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean and all the way to China, while traders drove camel caravans of precious goods across rugged mountains and parched deserts from Europe to Asia and back again. This Chinese storage jar tells the story.

The jar is called an amphora—a tall container with an oval body and handles on either side of a long, slender neck. In ancient Greece, huge numbers of amphoras were produced in clay. Some were beautifully painted with scenes of gods, goddesses, and athletes. But most remained plain and were used for storing or transporting water, wine, oil, olives, and grains. (See [ancient.eu/Amphora](http://ancient.eu/Amphora))

For hundreds of years, traders journeying east through the vast territory of the Greek Empire and Central Asia stopped to exchange amphoras filled with wine or olive oil for spices and silks. Along the way, Persian metalworkers noted the amphora's shape and adapted it to their own culture, transforming its plain handles into winged lions with goat horns. (See [bit.ly/2eiARfd](http://bit.ly/2eiARfd))

Farther along the overland route, Chinese potters saw examples of Persian metalwork and used clay to refashion the amphora once more, this time creating handles in the form of Chinese dragon heads with pointy ears, bulging eyes, and curled topknots. On this amphora, two dragons bite the rim of the jar, stretching their long necks up and over the jar's mouth. Beloved in China, mythical dragons are powerful creatures of good fortune that rule over the seas and rivers and provide rain to make the crops grow.

#### CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS

Trace the routes of traders along the Silk Road that connected the Greek Empire with China. [bit.ly/2flpwKE](http://bit.ly/2flpwKE)

Design a jar with handles that look like an animal.

Learn about five powerful mythological dragons from around the world in this lively video. [bit.ly/2fjYTz](http://bit.ly/2fjYTz)

**PRINT THE IMAGE ON PAGE 2 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.**



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