

From Ore to Icon

by Steve Dodge

On one wall of the workshop, like the fevered imaginings of a nightmare, creatures, grinning and snarling, odd combinations of deer, lion, dragon and dog. On another side, fire burns and a cauldron spits and steams as molten metal glows inside.

The air is hellish too, heavy and hot, full of the acrid odors of heated stone, copper, tin and lead. Toward the center of the room, as the mythical beasts look on from their cooling shelves, workmen, honored specialists in this delicate task, place ceramic molds in a sand pit and secure them against movement. The molds are hollow inside where intricate wax or clay models once fit snugly before melting out to leave a cavity.

Slowly, and with great care and precision, the workmen move the cauldron from the fire and place it near an opening in the mold. They tip the cauldron and pour the molten bronze, hissing in a great cloud of steam and smoke, into the mold.

When cooled, the bronze figure, this one a single-horned dragon dog called a qilin (pronounced "chee-lin") will be filed, sanded and polished before leaving the workshop. Usually such figures, believed to have the power to ward off evil spirits, are placed on the paths leading to imperial tombs or at gates to royal households. But this one, likely after serving similar duties for nearly 400 years, will be spotted by an American missionary in a Chinese drug store, purchased and shipped home to Forest Grove, Oregon. The long and curious history of Boxer, the University's mascot and symbol, had begun. —SD

—Steve Dodge is editor of Pacific magazine.

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