Hiss, Crack…KaBoom! – History of Chinese Fireworks



July 4th Fireworks at Navy Pier in Chicago

By Misaki Imagawa

July 4th is upon us, so how about taking a glimpse back in time to the origin of fireworks in China. Although fireworks are now mostly used for entertainment and celebratory purposes, this was not always the case. The origin of fireworks goes back over 1,000 years; in fact, long before gunpowder was ever invented.



Antique Chinese fireworks launcher on base

Item #A0506-1717

Like many “inventions,” the first ‘fire cracker’ was discovered by accident when green bamboo was tossed into a fire after dried stalks ran out. The air and sap trapped inside the bamboo segments heated and built up pressure, eventually splitting the bamboo open with a loud *crack!* The noise frightened the people, but they hoped it would terrify evil spirits even more; especially those known as *Nian* – spirit beasts that emerged in spring around the Chinese New Year to eat humans and destroy the crops. It is said, firecrackers succeeded in scaring Nian off and for this reason came to be associated with celebration and joy.

Historical documents indicate explosive powder was discovered while Chinese alchemists endeavored to create an elixir of longevity and immortality. When bamboo shoots were filled with this powder and heated, it created a great explosion. According to one legend, Li Tian of Liuyang, a monk from Hunan Province, created such a firecracker to ward off an evil dragon and subdue an angry spirit. Consequently, the people of Liuyang celebrate April 18th with offerings to Li Tian as the creator of firecrackers. They even erected a temple in his honor.



Wood and iron antique Chinese fireworks launcher repurposed into a candle stand

Item #A0506-1709



Fireworks Launcher · China · 19th C. · Wood and iron · 59 H inches
Item #A0506-1717

Since then, fireworks have evolved into an art form with new innovations incorporating vibrant colors and designs to displays. Traditionally, fireworks were ignited from the ground or from custom made launchers that could reach several tiers in height. The simplest of these can be found among the antique Chinese fireworks launchers in PRIMITIVE's collection. In their simplicity lies beauty. Today, these same launchers have been repurposed into candle stands and light sconces.

Just as the Chinese continue to use fireworks as a symbol of victory over Nian, the United States continues a tradition of celebration to mark its own day of victory and independence from Great Britain. In 1777 the first 4th of July celebration took place and though the war was still being fought, fireworks lit up the sky, boosted morale and gave hope to the people of the newly established nation. Fireworks are lit today for much the same reason. They are no longer merely a *crack* in a camp fire, but instead, a brilliant *kaboom* of light illuminating the night sky and most prevalent on this special holiday. Happy Independence Day!



Three cylinder shaped antique Chinese fireworks launchers

Item #s A0506-1718, 20 & 22