A Fêng Huang in a Rock Garden:
A MING K’O-SSU PANEL

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There is a bird whose shape is like a cock. It has five colors and stripes. It is called fêng huang. (As the dragon is the chief of the animals, the fêng huang is the chief of the birds. It is the symbol of happiness.) The stripes on the head are called virtue; the stripes on the wings, justice; on the back, politeness; those on the breast are called humanity; those on the stomach, honesty. This bird drinks and eats, sings and dances, by itself. When it appears, the world enjoys peace.1

The fêng huang appears in a bold and beautiful Ming incarnation (Figure 2) on a panel of silk and metal tapestry (k’o-ssu) seven feet high, dating from the first half of the seventeenth century, and acquired recently by the Metropolitan Museum.

The fêng huang in the flowery rock garden surrounded by pairs of smaller birds may reflect the ancient legend of the fêng huang and the Hun-

dred Birds, pictured on screens, porcelains, paintings, and on another large k’o-ssu hanging in Honolulu. The Chinese Classics, dating from the Chou (1027-256 B.C.) and Han (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) periods, tell us that when the great bird flies, a crowd of birds follows it; when it dies, they bury it. When it appears in gardens and groves, this is an indication that princes and monarchs are equitable; the people, submissive and obedient. After centuries it gradually became associated with the empress, as did the five-clawed dragon with the emperor. The charming pairs of birds circling the fêng huang in this hanging, as well as being, many, from the civil rank-badge series, are those often used as decoration on women’s stoles and informal robes. This additional feminine connotation suggests that the panel, alone or in a series, may have been a screen or wall panel in the empress’s apartments.

In the few other known large tapestry panels and on the badges of rank, usually called mandarin squares, of the Ming period (1368-1644), a pair of these powerful birds appears, one representing the male (fêng) and one the female (huang) aspect, carefully differentiated by their tail feathers. In the Museum’s panel, a single majestic bird, in brilliant shades of the five colors ascribed to it by ancient tradition, stands with freedom and grace, one foot on a rock, the other drawn up, wings partially spread, head on feathered snakelike neck back-turned, and long serrated pheasantlike tail feathers streaming behind. Among the bold blue rocks of various shapes and shadings and with strong black outlines surrounding them grow rich tree peonies; oranges, peaches, and pomegranates bearing fruit and flowers; daisies, camellias, plum blossoms, and lotuses, against the mellowed cinnabar
ground. Rocks are dear to the Chinese heart. Garden rocks, they say, must be irregular and fantastic to approximate mountains and "wild" rocks, symbols of the creative forces of nature. The most sought after are T'ai-hu stones, limestone pieces modeled by water into ridges, hollows, and holes, ranging from white to blue black, and taken from the bed of Tai-hu or one of the other lakes of south China. It is one of these most precious rocks that we see here under the foot of the féng huang. An irregular ground contour behind the féng huang, dividing the panel

Fig. 2. K'o-ssu panel with a féng huang. Ming dynasty (1368-1644), first half of the xvii century. Height 7 feet 5½ inches Seymour Fund, 1960
approximately in half horizontally, is blocked in with pale greens and blues and outlined with the same heavy black line. In a narrow section above is a Ming sky of curly horizontal cloud bands in light colors vividly outlined with darker ones. Across the top, a dark blue valancelike band with the Pao pa, the Eight Precious Things of Buddhism, in brilliant colors and gold detail is separated from the garden scene below by a narrow guard band, also once gold, with Precious Image Flowers (Pao hsiang hua) and leaves.

Striking and distinctive are the pairs of birds playing around the central bird in the flowery setting. Seven of these pairs belong to the Ming civil rank-badge series, in which the fēng huāng is the insigne of the empress: the Manchurian crane and the golden pheasant are the symbols of the first and second ranks; the peacock and the wild goose, third and fourth ranks; the egret and the mandarin duck, sixth and seventh ranks; the paradise flycatcher, eighth and ninth ranks. The bird of the fifth rank, the silver pheasant, has been for some reason omitted here. Two kinds of birds not in the rank-badge series are included: a pair of swallows flies under one wing of the great central bird; a magpie, symbol of happiness, plays in the orange tree and another perches on a nearby rock.

According to studies of the chronology of the rank badges worn on the front and back of court robes to indicate civil or military rank, pairs of birds are used in Ming badges, as a rule; single birds, in Ch’ing (1644-1912). In early Ming (1368-1527) the pair flies in balanced composition against a sky of brilliant clouds; in the later Ming period (1527-1644) one perches or stands on the ground, the other flies close above, their heads always turned toward each other. In the Metropolitan Museum hanging, the paired birds appear in both types of pose, though they are drawn with greater sensitivity and liveliness than in the badges, a few suggesting the treatment in paintings. The wild geese fly together just below the clouds. The peacocks, Manchurian cranes (Figure 1), golden pheasants, and egrets appear in close pairs, one standing or walking, one flying. The mandarin ducks, however, here seen as in paintings rather than in the rank-badge pose, swim together under bending lotuses in an eddy of water set with water lilies. And the magpies and paradise flycatchers are almost identically disposed, as they are seen in many paintings, one playing on a fruit branch, with raised tail and sharply turned head, the other, at some distance in the case of the magpie, perched on a rock with only his head and upper body showing over it.

The pose of the fēng huāng itself goes far back in Chinese decorative tradition and is a far more free and dynamic treatment than the hieratical versions in later Ming rank badges. Thus the treatment in the panel is probably basically symbolical, interestingly combining the freer traditions of the past with the demands of Ming symbolism.

In the Victoria and Albert Museum there is a rectangular k’o-ssu fragment (see Figure 4) that seems to have come from a hanging similar to the Metropolitan’s but with the image reversed. The fragment shows a pair of mandarin ducks swimming together under a flowering lotus, with the tips of fēng huāng tail feathers floating above, and a paradise flycatcher sitting on a rock behind the ducks—as in the section of the Museum’s hanging shown in Figure 3. The fragment is worked in a different range of colors on a gold ground, and there are slight variations in detail: one lotus seed pod, for instance, is on a longer bent stem. Perhaps the hanging from which it came was used as a pair with the Metropolitan’s; perhaps, since the grounds of the two panels differ, they were made from the same cartoon for different uses.2

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Fig. 3. Mandarin ducks. Detail of Figure 2
The k'o-ssu or tapestry weave itself is, as far as we know, a comparative latecomer in the long history of silk weaving in China. By the Ming period it was the desideratum for costumes and accessories, furnishing and mounting silks, pictorial panels mounted as scrolls, and album leaves or fans, being skillfully manipulated in a variety of styles. A book of Late Chou date by Master Mo refers to men who made fabrics with inlaid patterns. These may have been tapestry-woven, but the first actual evidence in China of this weave long popular in the Near East is the small pieces in silk or wool on silk or linen warps found in T'ang (618-906) trade routes and burial sites and in Japanese treasures of the same date. Some of these, from their style and material, must certainly have come from the Near East; others appear to be Chinese. The Chinese term k'o-ssu, “carved silk,” first appears in Sung (960-1279) sources, and Sung scrolls with a characteristic style of tapestry used as a mounting silk are known. These tapestries are woven in silks of white, turquoise, aubergine, ochers (once reds?), and greens on undyed hemp warps; they have a densely packed, symmetrical patterning of stylized birds and animals among leaves and flowers. A few pictorial album leaves of silk tapestry in a style of great delicacy and restraint are also believed to be Sung.

The first great development in Chinese silk weaving in the Chou period was drawloom weaving, where a patterning arrangement controls individual warps and elaborate patterning sheds may be tied into the warps before weaving. Unlike this, tapestry weaving was probably done on a simple frame of the desired size set with pegs or thorns on which to string the warps. Chuang Ch’o, a Sung scholar of the early twelfth century, describes the process:

K'o-ssu is woven in Ting-chou and large looms are not employed. A wooden frame is warped with colored threads and the design of flowers, grass, birds or animals is woven wherever required. When the weft is woven with a small bobbin, one for each color is assigned each to its own place. The design is executed with the warp and weft in various colours. Where the design ends, a narrow space appears around each mass of colour in the design, and it looks as if the design was carved in the pierced-work fashion; hence the name k'o-ssu (which literally means “carved thread”). So laborious is the work that if a woman’s dress were to be made of tapestry, it would require the work of a whole year. In making the various flowers in the design, it does not matter even if they do not resemble the originals. In weaving the weft-threads the bobbin does not pass across the entire width of the fabric.3

In other words, a shuttle with the desired color is woven back and forth in a given area of the design, another shuttle with another color in another area, and so forth. The wefts are usually beaten down with some kind of comb as the weaving progresses so that the warps are covered, and a slight ribbing in the warp direction (from top to bottom of the design in Chinese tapestries) is seen on the finished surface. Hatching or shading in tongues or strips occurs horizontally. Wefts from adjacent areas dovetail or interlock around a common warp at the edges of each color area. The slits in the warp direction that produce the “carved silk” effect occur where wefts from two different color areas meet; the wefts of one color turn back over one warp, those of the other color turn back in the opposite direction over the adjacent warp, instead of interlocking around a common warp. The areas irregularly striped or mottled in two colors represent no change in the regular weaving pattern; they result from the use of a thread made by twisting two contrasting colors together. In the Metropolitan Museum’s k’o-ssu hanging, undyed stretches of the blue silks are pulled out into small loops on the reverse, in order to keep the color on the

Fig. 4. Mandarin ducks. Detail of a k’o-ssu fragment. Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
Victoria and Albert Museum
face continuous. The undyed spots were probably caused by a tight loop, an unplanned resist agent, tied around the hank of thread as it was put in the dye bath.

While drawloom weaving, the great weave of silk, has the advantage of reproducing elaborate repeat patterns with comparatively little effort, once the preliminary tie-ups are made, tapestry weaving makes possible infinite variation in detail as the weaving progresses. In that, it is like painting or embroidery, but with its own technical and aesthetic conventions.

The style of these large Ming k'o-ssu hangings is not, like that of many k'o-ssu scrolls of the period, an effort to produce various painting effects in another medium. They are predominantly decorative. Their rich detail, vivid colors often in flat, boldly outlined areas, and their horizontal hatching in strips and tongues reflect the Ming taste seen in cloisonné and certain lacquer of the period. A kind of contemporary ceramics, with threads of clay outlining the motifs that were then filled with strongly colored glazes on a brilliantly contrasting ground, shows the same rich, outlined flat decoration that we see here. But peculiar to tapestry as a tech-

**Fig. 5.** K'o-ssu panel (one of a pair) with five feng huang. Ch'ing dynasty, K'ang-hsi period (1662-1722). Height 9 feet 10 inches

Gift of Mrs. John F. Seaman, 1925

notique are the variety in texture and shadings, the combining of sensitivity with strength in drawing.

It is interesting to compare this Ming panel with the Museum’s pair of slightly larger k'o-ssu hangings (see Figure 5) of the K'ang-hsi period (1662-1722) with the same subject. These, too, are purely decorative in intent, but taste has changed. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, China and Europe, closely bound by trading interests, were becoming more and more fascinated with each other. The taste of both East and West grew increasingly delicate and rococo: the colors of the brilliantly enameled porcelains developed in China at this time tended to pale at the close of the seventeenth century. This is the period of famille verte and famille jaune porcelains, whose color schemes are somewhat reflected in these K'ang-hsi panels. On each of the two panels, apparently designed to be seen together or as part of a series, five feng huang appear in a much paler, flatter garden with delicate cherry, peony, and magnolia trees, and with few rocks besides the off-center one on which one bird stands in a cramped and stylish echo of the bold free Ming bird. The other birds fly among the flowering branches against the pale imperial yellow sky, which is sparsely patterned with narrow horizontal clouds and three tiny high-flying bats.

**NOTES**

1. *Shan Hai Ching* ("Mountain and Seas Classic"), dated Late Chou or Han dynasty (500 B.C.-A.D. 220), rendered into English by Han Shou-hsuan with the aid of the French edition of Léon de Rosny.

2. There are three other known Ming k'o-ssu hangings with paired feng huang. One is in the Cleveland Museum of Art (16.1934); it is approximately half a panel, being 6 ft. 6 in. high by 2 ft. 2 in. wide. It has strong brilliant hues, with blue, orange, and green predominating, on a heavy-textured gold ground. There are ju-i heads in the upper and lower left corners. Another is in the Newark Museum and measures 6 ft. 1 in. by 4 ft. 4¾ in. It has a pale blue-green ground, with many faded shades of salmon, soft brown, tan, and yellow, and a vivid blue, black, and brown. There are wrapped gold outlines on the tail feathers, crests, goattees, rocks, and major landscape divisions. The third panel is in the Victoria and Albert Museum (T. 844-1919). Measuring 6 ft. 6 in. by 4 ft. 8 in., it is done in colored silks and wrapped gold thread on a black ground, with cream, buff, yellow, blues, and greens predominating.