Symbolism in Chinese Porcelain:

THE ROCKEFELLER BEQUEST

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Every year hundreds of thousands of people enjoy the fruits of the philanthropy in the field of art of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., from the reconstructed town of Colonial Williamsburg to the treasures of The Cloisters. Now, for the first time, the public can share his private love—the superb Chinese porcelains that he collected, slowly and selectively, during the last fifty years of his life. With the help of Theodore Hobby, late Keeper of the Altman Collection in the Metropolitan Museum, Mr. Rockefeller acquired over four hundred pieces that, combined, make up the most important private collection of its kind in the world. Although many are from the same period, there are no duplicates: those who know and love such works find they vary as one Rembrandt does from another. Seventy-four pieces from this matchless collection were given to the Museum in 1960 as part of the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Bequest; over sixty of them are now on display in the Room of Recent Accessions.

These seventy-four Chinese porcelains are principally of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, representing the brilliant polychrome technique of the late Ming to early Ch'ing dynasties: the three-color or Fa-hua stoneware and the famille noire, famille jaune, and famille verte porcelains. Compared to the quiet monochrome vases, these pieces seem overelaborate in form and decoration. But this intricacy was meant to be studied and enjoyed bit by bit, as Mr. Rockefeller knew: he would place a piece of porcelain on a revolving stand and sit by the hour watching its details unfold before him like a miniature tapestry. With the exception of religious and human subjects, the decoration of these porcelains invariably deals with landscapes, animals, flowers, fruits, insects, and birds, which came into their own in Chinese painting in the Sung dynasty (960-1279). To the Chinese, these things from nature are not only elegant and beautiful, but symbolic as well.

A symbolic approach to nature is not, of

1. The civil and military gods of wealth. Figure 275 in Recherches sur les Superstitions en Chine by Henri Dore’. Rogers Fund, Library

2. The god of wealth in his military aspect. Ch’ing dynasty, K’ang-hsi period (1662-1722). Five-color enamel on biscuit, with gilded silver crown and throne. Height 24 inches. 61.200.12. All the Chinese porcelains illustrated in this article were bequeathed to the Museum by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. in 1960
3. Pair of fēng huáng, often called the Chinese phoenix. Detail of a club-shaped vase (one of a pair) of the K'ang-hsi period, with decoration in seven-color enamel. Height of vase 28 inches. 61.200.59

4. Fēng huáng. Detail of a famille noire vase of the K'ang-hsi period. Height of vase 32 inches. 61.200.6

5. Crane. Detail of a K'ang-hsi vase with decoration in seven-color enamel. Height of vase 28 1/2 inches. 61.200.63

6. Lion. Detail of a famille verte bottle (one of a pair) of the K'ang-hsi period. Height of bottle 21 inches. 61.200.25
course, foreign to the Western mind. The series of the late medieval Unicorn tapestries, given to The Cloisters by Mr. Rockefeller in 1937, illustrates a similar inclination. The unicorn, hunted through the flowering meadows filled with birds and animals, is intended to represent an allegory not only of the Incarnation but also of courtly love. As in Chinese porcelains, many of the birds, beasts, and flowers in these tapestries have a significance that reinforces the allegory. With equal skill both the European and the Chinese artists interwove myth and reality. Looking at the tapestries, a Chinese feels immediately at home, for unicorns, lions, leopards, deer, pheasants, ducks, flowers, fruits, and insects are all symbolic motifs familiar to him.

Sometimes the Chinese artist uses symbolic creatures or plants individually, but more often symbols are combined to enhance the significance of the object decorated, a technique we find in the ornamentation of a pair of K’ang-hsi figurines (Figures 2 and 7) that are outstanding among the porcelains in the Rockefeller bequest. No others exactly like them are known. Each figure, seated on a gilded silver throne, represents a man—one grimacing fiercely, the other more youthful and milder in expression. Both are clad in ceremonial regalia and wear elaborate, crown-like official hats (Sha-mao) made of gilded silver filigree adorned with kingfisher feathers, jade, and pearls. In the decoration of their clothing symbols of power and good omen occur repeatedly: the dragon, which ranks highest in the hierarchy of Chinese emblems, appears on the robes of both pieces; the feng huang (sometimes known as the oriental phoenix) decorates the shoulder cape of the older man; and the crane, a bird second in power only to the feng huang, decorates the overskirts of both.

The oriental dragon is usually a beneficent creature which brings rain to the crops; it cannot be compared to the gruesome medieval monster so often portrayed with St. George. The dragon was the emblem of the emperor, just as the feng huang (Figures 3 and 4) was the symbol of the empress. When they appear together, as on the clothes of the older figure, they are a sign of good omen. According to a book of ritual of the Chou dynasty, conceived over three thousand years ago, the “azure dragon” rules the eastern quar-
Chrysanthemums. Detail of a square green-ground vase (one of a pair) of the K'ang-hsi period. Height of vase 19 1/2 inches. 61.200.42

These mythical motifs were used through the ages for ceremonial costumes and the decoration of temples and tombs. The crane (Figure 5) is the most common emblem of immortality: when it reaches six hundred years of age, according to Chinese myth, it no longer requires food but only drinks water, and lives to be a thousand years old.

The decoration of the figures' thrones and crowns, on which both the feng huang and the dragon appear, carries further the theme of power: dragon's heads occur on the armrests, while the legs of the thrones are made up of a lion's head and paw. The Chinese did not know much about lions in early times, and it was not until the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220) and later that the winged lion of the Near East and the Buddhist lion of India were introduced into Chinese art as the protectors of sacred buildings and defenders of the law. Although the lions that guard many entrances to temples and palaces in China resemble colossal Pekingese dogs rather than fierce predators, nevertheless the lion was considered a symbol of valor and energy (Figure 6).

Ch'i-lin, often called the Chinese unicorn. Detail of a famille verte bottle (one of a pair) of the K'ang-hsi period. Height of bottle 20 inches. 61.200.34
The united significance of these various symbols makes it clear that our two figures are beings of power and importance, but the very uniqueness of this pair makes it difficult to decide exactly what they were intended to represent. The four-clawed dragons on their robes rule out the possibility that the statues represent emperors, for the “imperial” dragon of the Ch’ing dynasty—used only on the belongings of the emperor himself—always has five claws. Some people identify them as high-ranking officials in the military and civil courts; another opinion is that they are the Taoist gods of affluence and happiness, who together with the god of longevity make up a popular triad known as the “Three-Star Gods.” On the other hand, they may represent the two aspects, civil and military, of the Taoist god of wealth, Tsai Shen. There is no deity more worshipped than Tsai Shen, for his shrine was found in many homes in China. In a Chinese color woodcut (Figure 1), the civil and military gods of wealth are depicted enthroned; the military god holds a whip-like weapon while the civil god holds the ju-i scepter, which grants every wish and is often carried by divinities. (The ju-i, in the shape of the fungus that is supposed to give immortality, is often represented in the form of the “ju-i head,” which resembles somewhat the scroll of a Greek Ionic capital and can be seen on the shoes of the two porcelain figures.) Perhaps our statues once held similar emblems, now lost, for there is a space in the hands of both. Without these attributes it is difficult to identify them positively as the gods of wealth. A clue that encourages this interpretation, however, is the Chinese lock that hangs from their necks: this symbol of “locked wealth” may have changed through the ages, but until recent times a miniature gold or silver lock suspended from a child’s neck was believed to keep him safe and bring good luck.

A third K’ang-hsi figurine from the Rockefeller bequest (Plate III) probably depicts another Taoist deity, Er Lang Sheng. Here Er Lang is shown with a third eye, or “eye of wisdom,” on his forehead; he holds the ju-i scepter, one of the most popular Taoist motifs.

According to the popular novel Hsi Yu Chi, Er Lang, prefect of a town in Szechwan province whose two rivers inundated the countryside yearly, fought and killed singlehanded the monster dragon who caused the flood. In memory of his...
Plate II. Famille noire temple jar with cover. K’ang-hsi period. Enamel on biscuit. Height 27 inches. 61.200.49
Plate III. The Taoist god Er Lang Sheng. K'ang-hsi period. Seven-color enamel on biscuit. Height, without base and pedestal, 15 3/8 inches. 61.200.31
Plate IV. Club-shaped vase (one of a pair), with a landscape, pairs of feng huang and peacocks, and tigers shown in “reserves” on the rare yellow ground. K'ang-hsi period. Seven-color enamel on porcelain. Height 30 inches. 61.200.58

Deed the people there built him pagodas and temples, and since then he has become one of the favorite gods of China.

The four-claw dragon that swoops down each side of the sleeves of this statue, however, is probably not the unfriendly beast that Er Lang slew: it is rather the popular motif of the dragon chasing a flaming pearl. The flaming pearl may remotely symbolize the sun or the moon (the latter was also known as the “Night-shining Pearl”). The idea, however, may also be traced to the story of Chi Liang, a minister of state who, “walking abroad on a certain occasion, found a wounded snake, to which he gave medicine and saved its life. Afterwards when he was again abroad in the evening, he saw the snake holding a brilliant pearl in its mouth, and as he approached it, the snake is said to have addressed him thus: ‘I am the son of His Majesty the Dragon, and while recreating myself was wounded; to you, Sir, I am indebted for the preservation of my life, and have brought this pearl to compensate you for your kindness.’ The minister accepted the pearl and presented it to his sovereign, who placed it in his hall, where by its influence the night became as day.”

Sometimes the dragon is represented in its archaic form, as the lizard-like beast called the chih lung with a divided, scrolling tail, as shown on the handles of a rare three-color Ming vase (Figure 13).

Unquestionably the king of the quadrupeds in Chinese art is the ch'i-lin (Figure 9), called by some the Chinese unicorn since, like its Western counterpart, it has a single horn in the middle of its forehead. Otherwise the two look quite different: the ch'i-lin resembles a varicolored lion, with its skin of five colors: red, blue, yellow, black, and

10. Pheasant, magnolia, peony, and butterflies. Detail of a famille verte vase of the Kang-hsi period. Height of vase 28 inches. 61.200.28

11. Vase with lotus decoration. Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Fa-hua stoneware, with three-color glazes applied within the trailed slip outlines. Height 14 3/4 inches. 61.200.52

12. Pair of peacocks. Detail of the same vase as Figure 3
Vase with aubergine ground, decorated with chrysanthemums. Each handle is in the form of a chih lung, the archaic dragon with divided tail. Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Height 6\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. 61.200.22

and white. This fabulous creature of good omen is said to appear only when a sage is about to be born or when a king of the highest benevolence sits on the throne; and it has never shown itself, so the Chinese believe, since Confucius was born in the sixth century B.C. Thus the ch'i-lin is a symbol of grandeur and wise administration and is often used as the emblem of a Confucius-like administrator or a good king.

Perhaps the most significant use of such animal symbolism in China was in connection with the “rank badges” of the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties. Each of the ten ranks in the military hierarchy was assigned an animal—the ch'i-lin, lion, tiger, leopard, and six others—and the ten ranks of the civil hierarchy were assigned birds—the crane, pheasant, peacock, and goose among them. These animals appeared on the front and back of an official's clothing to designate his status and, used independently, signified the characteristics of the various ranks. For instance, the tiger (Plate IV) and the panther, much admired by the Chinese for bravery and martial ferocity, are symbols of power and the emblems of the third and fourth military ranks. Peacock feathers were used in some of the official hats to designate rank conferred because of meritorious services and charity. Although in the West the peacock is symbolic of pride, in China it represents dignity and beauty (Figure 12). Another symbol of beauty is the kingfisher (Figure 14), whose blue-green plumage was used on wedding headdresses and jewelry for ladies and in appliqué work, as on the crowns of the gods of wealth. The pheasant (Plate II and Figure 10), a sign of good fortune, often takes the place of the fêng huang in symbolic decoration; the form of the fêng huang, in fact, can be traced to a rare variety of pheasant: Reinhardt’s ocellated pheasant.

In Christian art the three stages of a butterfly’s life—caterpillar, chrysalis, and butterfly—represent life, death, and resurrection. To the Chinese, the butterfly (Figure 17) is both a symbol of summer and of joy, an interpretation derived from a dream of the philosopher Chuang Tzu, in which he was transformed into a butterfly and found great happiness flitting from flower to flower. Another emblem of summer is the dragonfly, a favorite subject of Chinese painters as well as poets.
14. Kingfisher and lotus. Detail of a plate (one of a pair) of the Yung-chêng period (1723-1735) of the Ch'ing dynasty, with decoration in seven-color enamel. Diameter of plate 22 inches. 61.200.72

15 (right, center). Bowl of pomegranates. Detail of a plate (one of a pair) of the Yung-chêng period, with decoration in seven-color enamel. Diameter of plate 22 inches. 61.200.71

16 (above). Detail of the tapestry of the unicorn in captivity, showing a tree bearing pomegranates. French, early XVI century. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 37.80.6

17. Butterfly and rose. Detail of the same plate as Figure 14
Flowers, the most universal of symbols, are found in profusion in Chinese art, and outstanding in the Rockefeller bequest are vases with floral decoration. Each panel of a pair of rare green-ground square vases represents a season by its flower: peony for spring, lotus for summer, chrysanthemum for autumn (Figure 8), and prunus for winter. As a symbol of spring the peony is often seen with the magnolia. Known as the king of the flowers because of its richness both of color and form, the peony is also an emblem of love and feminine beauty, and of wealth and rank.

The lotus (Figure 11) is admired for its beauty and usefulness, for in China nearly every part of the plant is used: lotus seeds and roots are a favorite ingredient for desserts; in the market the leaves take the place of wrapping paper for food; and the empty seed pods and stem are used in medicine. The lotus frequently carries a religious connotation: as a Buddhist symbol it is used more in Chinese decoration than in the art of any other ancient civilization, with the possible exception of Egypt and India. Growing out of murky waters, yet beautiful and unblemished, it exemplifies the Buddhist teaching, “Rise above the dusty world;” and the shape of the flower resembles the Wheel of Life or the Wheel of Truth. Buddha, as well as lesser divinities, is often represented standing or seated on a lotus throne.

The chrysanthemum, symbol of autumn, designates the time of good harvest and joviality.

The symbol of winter, prunus, occurs very frequently on vases of the K’ang-hsi period; among the porcelains of the Rockefeller bequest are three magnificent vases with prunus decoration, two with a green ground (Plate I) and one with a black ground. Erroneously termed “hawthorn,” prunus is actually a large family of flowering trees—plum, peach, apricot, and sometimes a remarkable hybrid form of apricot-plum found in north China. The fragrant and snowy-white prunus flowers, appearing on the leafless and apparently lifeless branches of old trees in the winter, symbolize rebirth and longevity. The millefleurs effect, probably of Near Eastern origin and often used in medieval Western tapestries, is a treatment much favored by the Chinese. It can be seen in some of Mr. Rockefeller’s porcelains, especially in the large black hawthorn jar shown in Plate III.

One often sees fruits with flowers in Chinese art, and the pomegranate and the peach are the two favorites in Chinese decoration. In China the pomegranate (Figure 15), a fruit indigenous to the East, is a symbol of fertility because of its many seeds; it also appears with this significance in one of the Unicorn tapestries (Figure 16), although the French artist has grafted the fruit on a different kind of tree. The peach, sometimes called the “immortal fruit,” is said to give everlasting life to the immortals, who are to Taoists what saints are to Christians, and thus is used in the decoration of the robe of the figurine of Er Lang Sheng, mentioned before.

The Eight Immortals, representing the different conditions and walks of life such as wealth, poverty, age, youth, the male, and the female, are the best known of the immortals to the Chinese people. Favorite subjects in paintings, porcelains, and ivory carvings, they are represented clearly in a Rockefeller jar of the Ming dynasty. In the illustration (Figure 18) three of them are shown. At the far right is Chung Li-chuan, chief of the Eight, depicted as a stout man carrying a fan with which he is believed to revive the dead. In the center is Lu Tung-pin, who usually carries a sword on his back and a magic fly whisk in his right hand, though neither is shown here. At the left appears Han Hsiang-tsu, the patron of musicians, busily playing his emblem, the flute.