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HIDDEN MEANINGS: SYMBOLISM IN CHINESE ART
October 7–December 31, 2006

Exhibition Decodes Auspicious Symbols found in Chinese Porcelains, Jades, and Textiles

SAN FRANCISCO, CA, AUGUST 11, 2006: Symbolism abounds in the decorative arts of China, rendering clothing, personal adornment, and household objects rich with meaning. A Qing dynasty plate decorated with bats and peaches is more than just ornamental: it is a promising omen, as the word “bats” is a pun for “blessings,” and peaches are the standard symbol for longevity. The combined imagery implies the sentiment "May you have both blessings and longevity." By surrounding themselves with such symbols, many Chinese believe that their wishes can be fulfilled. Beginning October 7, 2006, the Asian



Plate with peaches and bats. China. Qing dynasty, approx. reign of the Qianlong emperor (1736–1795). Porcelain with impressed and overglaze polychrome decoration. *The Avery Brundage Collection*, B60P1707.

Art Museum of San Francisco will present *Hidden Meanings Symbolism in Chinese Art*, an exhibition unlocking the mysteries of these propitious signs, offering a fascinating glimpse into the time-honored importance of auspicious symbolism in Chinese culture. More than 140 porcelains, jades, and textiles from the museum's acclaimed Avery Brundage Collection—most of which were originally made for imperial courts—illustrate the many pictorial motifs that represent wishes for fertility, a harmonious marriage, wealth and prosperity, long life, and more.

On view in the museum's Osher Gallery through December 31, 2006, *Hidden Meanings* is curated by the Asian Art Museum's curator of Himalayan art and Chinese decorative art Terese Tse Bartholomew, and culminates nearly four decades of research on the subject. The opening of the exhibition also coincides with the Chinese community's celebration of the Autumn Moon Festival, one of the two most important holidays in the Chinese calendar. The museum will hold a Family Festival on Sunday, October 8 that explores auspicious symbols and rituals used during the holiday.

In 1966, while still a graduate student in the art history department at UCLA, Ms. Bartholomew discovered a pioneering 1928 study by the Japanese scholar Nozaki Nobuchika in which he revealed some of the pictorial puns that lend auspicious meanings to many Chinese

artworks. Auspicious symbols in Chinese art are often in the form of *rebuses*—visual puns in which pictures represent words and messages. Because many words in Chinese share pronunciations, there is a wealth of opportunities for such punning, and over the centuries many rebuses have established conventional meanings in Chinese based on such wordplay.

Ms. Bartholomew was inspired to devote her thesis to such hidden meanings; at the time, however, there was no one at UCLA capable of supervising this subject. Fortunately, René-Yvon d'Argencé, the Asian Art Museum's first director, encouraged Ms. Bartholomew to continue her research after she came to the museum in 1968. But it wasn't until decades later, under the directorship of Emily Sano, that the project took shape in this exhibition and the accompanying 352-page publication, which serves as an indispensable resource guide on the subject.

The exhibition is organized into eight sections, seven of which are governed by the three Star Gods: *Fu*, *Lu*, and *Shou*. *Fu* (“blessings” or “happiness”) governs blessings, marriage, and children. *Lu* (literally, “official salary”) governs passing exams, gaining official rank, and obtaining wealth. *Shou* governs longevity. *Hidden Meanings* concludes with a display of objects related to peace and wish granting.

Blessings

Many traditional Chinese objects are decorated with motifs that imply the bestowing of blessings. Bats are foremost among such motifs. This is because the word for “bat” (fu 蝠) is pronounced like the words for “blessings” (fu 福) and “riches” (fu 富). The exhibition features a circular nephrite pendant from the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) with four bats surrounding a coin. The Chinese word for “coin” (qian 錢) serves as a pun on the word for “before” (qian 前). Together, then, the bats and coin compose a rebus that may be read as “blessings before your eyes.”

Marriage

Harmony in marriage is a cherished ideal for which many motifs exist—among the most popular are lotuses, fish, and mandarin ducks. In a jade piece, the carver has utilized the contrasting colors of the nephrite to depict an intimate pair of badgers. The word for “badger” (*huan* 獾) sounds like the word for “joy” (*huan* 歡). Popular motifs are often intensified by doubling; *shuang* (雙) is the word for “two” or “double.” The rebus formed by the compound word for “two badgers” (*shuanghuan* 雙獾) implies a couple rejoicing or enjoying connubial bliss (*shuanghuan* 雙歡). Here, the unexpected addition of a bat on top of the white badger offers even more blessings to the marriage.

Children

Traditionally, the hallmark of a happy marriage was the arrival of sons. While in Western culture the stork is associated with the delivery of children, in China this role is assigned to the *qilin* (麒麟), a mythical unicorn. On a Qing dynasty jar, a boy is depicted riding such an animal; this rebus implies the blessing “May the *qilin* bring you a son” (*qilin songzi* 麒麟送子). It was not enough, however, simply to have a son to carry on the family name. It was also hoped that the son would be a distinguished scholar or official. The boy depicted on the jar is recognizable by his red dress and gold crown as a First Scholar (one who has achieved the highest rank in the official examination).

Passing Exams

The pomegranate, because of its numerous seeds, is a symbol for many sons. On a plate from the Qing dynasty made approximately during the reign of the Kangxi emperor (1662–1722), incised dragons (representing *yang*, the male principle) are overpainted with branches of citrons and pomegranates. The words for “citron” (*xiangyuan* 香櫞) and for “continuously coming first” (*lianyuan* 連元) are near homonyms. The combination of citrons and pomegranates (*shiliu* 石榴), then, suggests the expression “May you have many sons who will continuously come first in the civil service examinations” (*duozi lianyuan* 多子連元).

Rank

The words for “fish” (*yu* 魚) and “abundance” (*yu* 餘) sound alike, and this association is reinforced by the fact that fish lay many eggs. It is natural, then, that fish are associated with the wish for many children. A nephrite carving depicts a large fish together with a smaller fish in a tidal composition, a pairing that suggests “leading one’s son to court” (*daizi shangchao* 帶子上朝), since “tide” (*chao* 潮) and “court” (*chao* 朝) also sound alike. The phrase “Leading one’s sons to court” is shorthand for wishing that sons will follow in their fathers’ footsteps and become high officials.

Wealth

A Ming dynasty porcelain jar made approximately during the reign of the Jiajing emperor (1522–1566) bears a combination of lotus and fish, suggesting a wish for wealth and honor. In Chinese, the expression for “lotus” is *shui furong* (水芙蓉), which suggests “wealth” (*fu* 富) as well as “honor” (*rong* 榮). The word for “fish” (*yu* 魚) sounds like the word for “abundance” (*yu* 餘). Together these elements suggest the wish “May you have an abundance of wealth and honor” (*fugui youyu* 富貴有餘).

Longevity

At the top of a Qing dynasty (1644–1911) silk embroidery tapestry on view in this section are the three Star Gods—*Fu*, *Lu*, and *Shou*—along with other immortals and with attendants. The central calligraphic panel conveys birthday wishes to the recipient, a high-ranking scholar. (The calligraphy on the left lists the names of students and friends of the scholar who collectively gave this wall hanging to him.) Below the central panel embroidered cranes are shown in an auspicious landscape of clouds, water and rocks, pine with creepers, peonies, and the fungus of immortality. Traditionally, the crane’s white feathers were associated with old age, and this bird was believed to live for centuries. As a result, images of cranes often accompany wishes for long life.

Peace and Wish Granting

In China, people commonly exchange the expression: “I wish you good fortune and hope your wishes will be granted” (*jixiang ruyi* 吉祥如意). A *ruyi* (如意) is a wish-granting wand. Because the shape of the sacred “fungus of immortality” resembles that of the head of the wish-granting wand, the fungus also serves as a wish-granting symbol. A branch of fungus can be seen in the foreground of this chalcedony and carnelian object. On the right is the white lily, behind which are two persimmons. The container itself appears on the left. The bulb of the lily has many overlapping scales, so it is called “hundred together” (*baihe* 百合). When the lily and fungus are combined, they symbolize the phrase “May a hundred wishes come true” (*baishi ruyi* 百事如意). Similarly, the combination of “lily” and “box” (*he* 盒) signifies the expression “May you have a hundred years of good union” (*bainian haohe* 百年好合), the words for “box” (*he* 盒) and “together” (*he* 合) sounding alike. Now add a couple of persimmons, which, with their cheerful bright color, express joy. Pronounced *shi* (柿) in Chinese, the persimmon is also a homonym for “things” (*shi* 事) and for “market” or “business” (*shi* 市).

Hidden Meanings reveals that oftentimes in Chinese art, there is more than just meets the eye: put it all together and one will see that various visual elements can make up promising rebuses meant to increase one’s wealth, happiness, longevity, and much more.

Media Preview:

A media preview for *Hidden Meanings: Symbolism in Chinese Art* will be held on Wednesday, October 4, 2006, from 9:30 AM to 1:00 PM, with a gallery walk-through at 10:00 AM led by exhibition curator Terese Tse Bartholomew. Complimentary refreshments will be served. Please RSVP to pr@asianart.org or call (415) 581-3712.

Exhibition publication:

Hidden Meanings: Symbolism in Chinese Art is accompanied by 352-page publication featuring photographs of art objects and original hand-painted drawings by the author and by Mulan Bartholomew. The publication is organized in numbered sections for ease of reference, and enhanced with extensive bilingual indexes and other supporting materials, making it an essential sourcebook for anyone interested in exploring Chinese art and culture.

Acknowledgments:

Hidden Meanings: Symbolism in Chinese Art is made possible by generous support from the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation; the Bei Shan Tang Foundation; Mrs. Elsie R. Carr; Fred M. and Nancy Livingston Levin, The Shenson Fund; a gift in memory of Dr. K. S. Lo; and the Jade Circle, celebrating ten years of philanthropy. Media sponsors: KQED Public Broadcasting, KTSF Television.

About the Asian Art Museum

The Asian Art Museum is a public institution whose mission is to lead a diverse global audience in discovering the unique material, aesthetic, and intellectual achievements of Asian art and culture. Holding nearly 16,000 Asian art treasures spanning 6,000 years of history, the museum is one of the largest museums in the Western world devoted exclusively to Asian art. Once located in Golden Gate Park, the museum now resides at its new, expanded facility at Civic Center Plaza. An architectural gem featuring a dynamic blend of beaux arts and modern design elements, the museum's new home is the result of a dramatic transformation of San Francisco's former main library building by renowned architect Gae Aulenti (designer of Paris's Musée d'Orsay) into a showcase for the museum's acclaimed collection and exhibitions.

- **Information:** (415) 581-3500, or www.asianart.org.
- **Location:** 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102.
- **Hours:** The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm, with extended hours until 9:00 pm every Thursday.
- **Admission:** \$12 for adults, \$8 for seniors, \$7 for youth 13–17, and free for children under 12. Thursday evenings after 5 pm admission is just \$5 for all visitors except those under 12 and members, who are always free. **Target Tuesdays:** The museum offers FREE admission to all on the **first Tuesday** of every month, courtesy of Target Stores
- **Access:** The Asian Art Museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information regarding access, please call (415) 581-3598; TDD: (415) 861-2035.

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