



CHINESE DECORATIVE ARTS

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Director's Note

It was with intense pride that we opened our new Chinese galleries this spring, for we were keenly aware that the beauty of the art on view, the harmony of the design, and the underlying scholarship of this enterprise raised the norm of excellence in the presentation of our collections and set new standards for the future. Moreover, with this opening our goal of a grand Asian museum within the Museum has practically been reached; now only the completion of the Arts of Korea Galleries next year remains.

A “crown jewel” of our Chinese reinstatement is a new third floor, with four handsome rooms—The Florence and Herbert Irving Galleries for Chinese Decorative Arts—the Metropolitan’s first permanent display of such works. Like the redesigned paintings galleries, these rooms are proportioned in accordance with classic Chinese architectural principles and utilize ceramic tile, soft wood tones, and earth colors that complement the works and create an atmosphere of serenity in which to view them. State-of-the-art technology has been used in the design of flexible cases that adjust to the right viewing environment for objects no matter what their size and shape; pure water-white nonreflective glass replaces that of greenish cast, vastly improving viewing experience. These beautifully appointed spaces

will show, on a rotating and often thematic basis, objects of metal, jade, hard stones, lacquer, ivory, bamboo, and wood, as well as textiles and writing implements dating from the tenth through the nineteenth century.

Our presentation highlights the Chinese genius for adapting a wide range of materials to functional and luxury objects and for refining such techniques as metal casting and jade working to the highest degree. During the Qing dynasty, for example, foreign technical innovations, including cloisonné and enamel painting, were adapted with outstanding, sometimes whimsical, results. Seventy-three pieces have been selected for discussion and illustration in this *Bulletin*, as a brief introduction to Chinese decorative arts. We hope this publication will encourage you to see the objects in the new galleries, where their exuberant spirit and fine craftsmanship will provide many hours of appreciation and enjoyment. A section of the Irving Galleries will be devoted to the permanent display of the renowned Bishop Collection of Chinese jades, bequeathed to the Museum in 1902.

Florence and Herbert Irving, whose longstanding support of our Asian collection included funding for the South and Southeast Asian galleries and donations of numerous works of art, have again very

generously provided funds for the new spaces and loaned masterpieces from their own collection. Very recently the Irvings made additional promised gifts of several of the pieces illustrated here, including the brilliantly carved ivory brush holder detailed on the cover and also shown on page 44. The Irvings’ remarkable commitment to the Department of Asian Art has been one of the major factors in our realization of one of the finest Asian collections in the country and is deeply appreciated.

The conception and curatorial program for the Irving Galleries were planned by James C. Y. Watt, Brooke Russell Astor senior curator, under the overall direction of Wen C. Fong, consultative chairman of the Department of Asian Art. Denise P. Leidy, associate curator and administrator, and Wai-fong Anita Siu, curatorial assistant, also participated in the installation. They along with James Watt provided texts for this *Bulletin*. The new galleries were designed by Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates, who worked closely with members of our Design Department: Jeffrey L. Daly, chief designer; Sophia Geronimus, graphic designer; and Zack Zanolli, Museum lighting designer.

Philippe de Montebello, *Director*

This publication was made possible through the generosity of the Lila Acheson Wallace Fund for The Metropolitan Museum of Art established by the cofounder of *Reader's Digest*

The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, Summer 1997. Volume LV, Number 1 (ISSN 0026-1521). Published quarterly © 1997 by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10028-0198. Periodicals postage paid at New York, N. Y. and Additional Mailing Offices. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* is provided as a benefit to Museum members and available by subscription. Subscriptions \$25.00 a year. Single copies \$8.95. Four weeks’ notice required for change of address. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Membership Department, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10028-0198. Back issues available on microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48106. Volumes I–XXXVII (1905–1942) available as clothbound reprint set or as individual yearly volumes from Ayer Company Publishers, Inc., 50 Northwestern Drive #10, Salem, N. H. 03079, or from the Museum, Box 700, Middle Village, N. Y. 11379. *General Manager of Publications*: John P. O’Neill. *Editor in Chief of the BULLETIN*: Joan Holt. *Associate Editor*: Tonia L. Payne. *Production Manager*: Matthew Pimm. *Design*: Bruce Campbell Design

On the cover: Detail of ivory brush holder of the Qing dynasty. See p. 44. Back cover: Detail of bamboo brush holder of the Qing dynasty. See p. 50. Page 72: Detail of lacquer dish dating from the Yuan to early Ming dynasty. See p. 68

Photography by Joseph Coscia Jr. of The Metropolitan Museum of Art Photography Studio

Introduction

The term “decorative arts” encompasses objects ranging from those produced primarily for functional purposes to creative works that are realized by means other than painting or sculpture. In Chinese art the first type can be represented by the plain black-lacquer dish illustrated on page 64 that has lost its gold decoration but is still appreciated for its form. The dish was made by unknown craftsmen, most likely working at Dingzhou, a major center of manufacture in northern China in the eleventh to twelfth century. The bamboo brush holder on page 49, on the other hand, is a signed work by Zhang Xihuang, an artist who would have numbered among the great painters of the seventeenth century had he chosen to work with the brush rather than the chisel. The low-relief carving is executed with superlative skill, and the landscape and calligraphy are equal to the finest contemporaneous works on paper. The exhibits in the newly opened galleries for Chinese decorative arts can thus be appreciated on many levels.

Two important factors that determine the choice of materials for making utensils and works of art in a particular civilization are the aesthetic preference of the people and the availability of the material. The use of lacquer for the protective coating of utensils and as an artistic medium developed naturally in China because the lacquer tree (*Rhus verniciflua*) was native to the land, but its popularity can also be explained by its aesthetic appeal. The polished surface of lacquer, with its tactile qualities and soft luster, approximates that of jade, a stone that captured the Chinese imagination in prehistoric times and never relinquished its hold. The love of jade may explain Chinese reluctance to cut crystalline stones for their sparkle, preferring always a smooth ground surface. It may also explain the Chinese preference for porcelain over glass—although an

equally important consideration is that clays and other minerals suitable for making porcelain are plentiful all over China. (Yet another factor is the early Chinese advance in pyrotechnology, which enabled potters to fire ceramics at high temperatures.)

There are times when aesthetic preference plays the stronger role. Thus, ever since the native source of jade was exhausted about three and a half millennia ago, the stone was imported almost without interruption into interior China from sources in Central Asia thousands of miles away. Similarly, when the elephant became extinct in China some two thousand years ago (owing to climatic changes), ivory was imported from overseas, some coming from as far as Africa. Other organic substances that can be worked into a smooth surface with a soft sheen, from the expensive imported rhinoceros horn to the common bamboo, are all preferred for works of decorative art and for practical utensils.

Metals, including gold and silver, never played a central role in Chinese material culture—except, of course, bronze in the Bronze Age. Later Chinese bronzes, used for practical purposes such as incense burners and flower vases, took mostly archaic forms that made them acceptable as household articles by their association with antiquity. Silver vessels were used in China for the first time only in the seventh century, when cultural influences from the Western Regions (Central Asia) were strong, but for some time their forms and decorations were mainly borrowed from imported articles. Despite the fact that a native tradition of working silver eventually developed in the Song period (see p. 6), it never achieved the same degree of popularity and sophistication of design and workmanship as works in other media, such as those mentioned above. Gold and silver were again made in

some quantity in the period of Mongol rule (the Yuan dynasty) and new forms and patterns were again introduced from the West, but the vessels were used mainly at the imperial court and in Buddhist temples, as were, initially, cloisonné enamels, which were also introduced during the Yuan dynasty.

For a long period in Chinese history color was not an important element in Chinese art. However, during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the prosperous regions of southeastern China, popular taste was for colorful objects. This trend can be seen in textiles and in polychrome lacquer, as well as in porcelain decorated with overglaze enamels. The taste for color and elaborate decoration was perpetuated through the Qing dynasty.


From the Song period on wealth and status were obtained only in officialdom, and officialdom could only be attained through learning (and a fine hand in calligraphy). To satisfy the demands of scholar-officials there grew up an industry for making fine instruments and accoutrements for the study. Articles such as ink sticks, inkstones, brushes, and paper were made with such skill and care that they became luxury items. The ink sticks and inkstones now on display in the Museum, although by no means comprehensive in types and chronology, will give the visitor some idea of the artistry lavished on these articles.

All the objects in the Florence and Herbert Irving Galleries for Chinese Decorative Arts are uniquely Chinese and reflect the taste and sensibilities of a people over a long period of time—from the tenth to nineteenth century—but they also possess artistic qualities that are universal and will be readily appreciated by the casual visitor as well as by specialists.

JCYW

Chronology of Dynastic China

Ca. 16th–11th century B.C.	Shang Dynasty
Ca. 11th century–256 B.C.	Zhou Dynasty
221–206 B.C.	Qin Dynasty
206 B.C.–A.D. 220	Han Dynasty
220–589	Six Dynasties
317–589	Southern Dynasties
386–581	Northern Dynasties
581–618	Sui Dynasty
618–907	Tang Dynasty
907–960	Five Dynasties
916–1125	Liao Dynasty
960–1279	Song Dynasty
960–1127	Northern Song Dynasty
1127–1279	Southern Song Dynasty
1115–1234	Jin Dynasty
1272–1368	Yuan Dynasty
1368–1644	Ming Dynasty
1644–1911	Qing Dynasty



CHINESE METALWORK, 12TH – 18TH CENTURY

The shapes and designs of bronze ritual vessels made during the Shang and Zhou dynasties, a period recognized as one of the world's great Bronze Ages, served as primary sources for metalwork forms throughout Chinese history. Vessels holding food and wine for ceremonies linking rulers with their ancestors were later reconfigured as incense burners, flower vases, and other types of containers for palaces and homes, both as ceremonial paraphernalia and luxury goods.

The traditional forms were augmented during the fourth to the sixth century by the introduction of different types of cups, plates, bowls, and other utensils from the eastern Mediterranean, Iran, and Central Asia cast or beaten in gold and in silver. In this period large parts of northern China were under control of rulers with commercial or political ties to these regions. Shapes and techniques used in foreign gold- and silversmithing were adapted to Chinese taste during the Tang dynasty, mainly to appeal to the court and the aristocracy. Silver and gold objects continued to be manufactured after the Tang dynasty, but few examples are preserved because such wares were often melted down to reuse the precious metals.

Foreign influence also contributed to the development of cloisonné during the early fourteenth to fifteenth century and to that of painted enamels in the seventeenth. The earliest securely dated Chinese cloisonné, in which colored-glass paste is applied within metal enclosures and fired, dates from the reign of the Ming Xuande emperor (1426–35). However, cloisonné is recorded during the previous Yuan dynasty, and it has been suggested that the technique was introduced to China at that time via the western province of Yunnan, which under Mongol rule received an influx of Islamic people. A very few cloisonné objects, including the small dish with a scalloped rim in the Metropolitan's collection (see p. 15), have been dated on stylistic grounds to the Yongle reign (1403–24) of the early Ming dynasty. Cloisonné objects were intended primarily for the furnishing of temples and palaces, because their flamboyant splendor seemed appropriate to the function of these structures but was not considered as well suited for a more restrained atmosphere, such as that of a scholar's home.

Painted enamels also employ colored glass on a metal surface, but the designs are painted freehand rather than contained. The technique, developed in France during the fifteenth century, was imported into China during the seventeenth century. In addition to painted enamels produced in palace workshops, a significant number of pieces were made in Canton for trade to the West.



Silver Service

Song dynasty, 960–1279

Silver, parcel gilt

Diam. 4 3/8–7 1/2 in. (11.1–19.1 cm)

Purchase, The Vincent Astor Foundation Gift, 1997

1997.33.1–6

During the Song dynasty silver service was used mainly for formal entertaining. This set of two plates, two small bowls, and a large bowl with a stand is likely to have been produced in one of the cities along the lower reaches of the Yangzi (Yangtse) River. These prosperous cities had become centers for the manufacture of luxury goods since the beginning of the dynasty. The Metropolitan's vessels share common shapes with Song pieces in porcelain and lacquer. The flower-and-bird decoration, in chased and punched work, is in a pure Chinese manner. Particularly noteworthy is the prominence of bamboo in the ornament, as this plant became popular in the

decorative arts only in the late eleventh century. The single trace of an earlier tradition, going back to the Tang dynasty, is the use of gilding over the areas of the designs.

JCYW



Flower Vase

Jin to Yuan dynasty, 12th–14th century

Bronze

H. 7 1/4 (18.4 cm)

Purchase, The B. D. G. Leviton Foundation Gift, 1987

1987.112

The long neck, rounded body, and handles on the sides of this vessel link it to the *hu* shape first found among Shang and Zhou ritual containers. Variations on the *hu* were widely produced in ceramics during the first to the ninth century. It was revived as a metal shape as part of the rediscovery and study of early periods during the antiquarian Song dynasty.

The front and back of this example are divided by plain wide bands into five horizontal sections, with additional bands running down the sides. The top, middle, and bottom areas are covered with cloudlike forms filled with dense diaper patterns, and turbulent waves have been cast into the band at the neck. Thundercloud motifs and a loosely rendered masklike image in slightly higher relief are cast on the fourth section from the top. Both the thundercloud and the mask, which is based on the traditional *taotie* image, derive from the art of the Shang and Zhou dynasties. The cresting waves, on the other hand, derive from contemporaneous bronze vessels cast in southern China. Rolling waves with whitecaps became an independent theme during the Southern Song and are found on bronzes dating from the twelfth century and in ceramics, particularly thirteenth- and fourteenth-century wares from the Jizhou kilns. The handles are shaped like cloud scrolls, another common motif in Chinese decorative arts.

Similar vessels have been excavated in regions such as Chenbuzi, Siziwang Banner in Ulanqab League, Inner Mongolia. Like ours, they are generally less-than-elegantly cast square shapes decorated with clear, geometric patterns divided by wide, plain bands. These pieces, which were first made for the use of the Qidan rulers of the Jin dynasty, illustrate some of the regional variations found in bronze casting as part of the resurgence of this art fostered by the Southern Song court.

DPL



Vessel in the Form of a Waterfowl

Song dynasty, 960–1279, or later

Bronze with gold and silver inlay

L. 8 1/4 in. (21 cm)

Bequest of John L. Cadwalader, 1914

14.58.183

Vessels in the form of waterfowl are known from before the Han dynasty. At the height of the antiquarian movement, during the eleventh century, this form was revived—although somewhat modified. A bronze vessel very similar to this one is illustrated in the *Bogu tu* (fig. 1), a catalogue compiled in the early twelfth century and reputed to be of the Song imperial collection of antiquities. However, there is at present no way of ascertaining whether any of the existing versions of this vessel actually date from the Song dynasty or earlier. A number of the vessels shown in the *Bogu tu* have been copied down to recent times, especially after the appearance of the first woodblock printed edition of the book. The earliest known printing dates from the years 1308–11, but there may have been an edition produced during the Southern Song period (1127–79), copies of which are now lost. Nevertheless, one factor weighs in favor of a relatively early date for such animal-shaped bronze vessels with elaborate gold and silver inlay: they are stylistically distinct from all datable examples of inlaid bronzes of the sixteenth century or later, on which the patterns are more geometric and less fluid. A piece very close to the Metropolitan's, in both pattern and inlay technique, has been assigned a Song date on the basis of a thermoluminescence test on the core.

This vessel has lost the loop handle across the mouth (see fig. 1), and a circular perforation was drilled through the bird's neck before the piece entered the Metropolitan Museum's collection in 1914. JCYW



Fig. 1. Bird-shaped *zun* vessel from the Zhou dynasty, from Wang Fu, *Xuanhe Bogu tu* (Illustrations of Xuanhe Antiquities), compiled 1107–10 (*juan* [scroll] 7, leaf 10a). Reproduced from the Yizhengtang edition, 1752. Department of Asian Art Library

Mongol Passport

Yuan dynasty, 13th century

Iron with silver inlay

H. 7 1/8 in. (18.1 cm)

Purchase, Bequest of Dorothy Graham Bennett, 1993

1993.256

Metal plaques (*paizi*) in various shapes and materials (gold, silver, and iron) were essential to Mongol administration, beginning with the reign of Chinggis (1206–27), the first Great Khan. The plaques are not only important historical documents but they are also of great interest for the study of Asian metalwork during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a time of massive movements of people and rapid exchange of ideas and technology.

Two kinds of Mongol plaques were issued—to officials as patents of office and as passports for persons on state missions and for important guests. (Marco Polo on his return journey to Venice would have carried one.) The Metropolitan's example is a passport.

The plaque is of iron with inlay of thick silver bands forming characters in Phagspa script, devised for the Mongol language in 1269 by the Tibetan monk Phagspa (1235–1280), who was a close advisor to Khubilai Khan (r. 1260–95). The inscription reads in translation (by Morris Rossabi):

By the strength of Eternal Heaven,
an edict of the Emperor [Khan].
He who has no respect shall be guilty.

Above it is a lobed handle, with an animal mask in silver inlay. The mask is probably the *kirtimukha* (lion mask) taken from Tibetan art but ultimately of Indian origin; the lobed shape reflects Islamic influence. Silver inlay on iron (as opposed to bronze) is extremely rare in China before the Mongol period.

This plaque is one of about a dozen Mongol *paizi* known. Two others of the same type are in Lanzhou, China, and in Russia. (The latter example was found during the nineteenth century in Tomskaya.)

JCYW





Three Incense Burners

Ming dynasty, late 16th–early 17th century

Bronze and bronze with gold splashes

H. middle burner 3 7/8 in. (9.8 cm)

H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of

Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929

29.100.447, 29.100.548, 29.100.550

Burning incense was a highly fashionable pastime among scholars and merchants living in the prosperous cities of southeastern China during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. The active sea trade conducted with many nations of Southeast Asia from the ports of coastal China resulted in the ready availability of a wide variety of incense and aromatics. These precious materials, as well as ivory, were exchanged for Chinese goods such as silk and porcelain. The prosperity resulting from this trade generated a lively home market for fine articles for daily use, including incense burners.

Made for a sophisticated clientele, many of the incense burners were modeled after shapes common to contemporary porcelains. These shapes, in turn, were taken from those of archaic bronze vessels, such as the *gui* of the

Shang and Zhou dynasties, or were miniature versions of the large water-storage jars that stood on the grounds of temples and palaces. Great skills were employed to give them “antique” patinations, ranging from rich reddish browns to dark tea greens. As if to counter their austere shapes, some bronze vessels were splashed with gold, using the fire-gilding method, whereby the precious metal in the form of a mercury amalgam is applied to the surface and subsequently heated to drive off the mercury.

The makers of these objects traded on the legend of the fabulous ritual bronzes manufactured during the reign of the Xuande emperor (1426–35). Most of the late-Ming incense burners, as well as these three objects, carried the mark of the Xuande reign on their bases.

JCYW

Vase with Arabic Inscriptions

Qing dynasty, late 17th–early 18th century

Brass

H. 5 3/4 in. (14.6 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1907

07.205.1

During the Yuan dynasty there was a great increase in the Muslim population in China: colonies of Arab and Persian merchants settled in the coastal cities of southern China; Muslim peoples from Central Asia came to Yunnan in southwestern China with the conquering Mongol army; and Islam spread from Central Asia along the Silk Roads into northwestern China. A large number of Middle Eastern and Central Asian craftsmen were brought to China by Mongol lords, and they helped to create a new international style in Chinese decorative arts, particularly in textiles and metalwork. A major part of Yuan-dynasty export goods, including porcelain and textiles, was intended for the Middle Eastern market, and many of the articles display Islamic forms and motifs. However, it was not until the sixteenth century that a group

of objects in pure Chinese forms was produced, presumably serving their original functions but decorated with Arabic or Persian inscriptions—usually quotations from the Koran or other expressions of faith. A likely explanation for these objects, such as this vase, is that they signal a new stage in the assimilation of the Muslim population, who may have been acculturated to the Chinese way of life but retained their religious faith, as they still do. The Arabic inscription on this side of the vase has been translated as “Glory to God”, and that on the other side as “and praise be to God.”

The inscriptions are raised on a ring-matted ground within a cartouche. There are three different surface treatments. The Arabic script is left more or less in its original brass and stands out against a darkened ground; other areas are treated with a “patination” that

simulates antique bronze (see p. 10). The neck is decorated on both sides with an incised lotus flower, from which issue leafy scrolls, against a darkened ground filled with small vegetal scrolls. The handles seem to be simplified forms of the elephant-head type popular in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

In a private collection is a brass vase of a different shape, but with a similar surface and nearly identical decoration on the neck, that has a Kangxi-period (1662–1722) mark on its base.

JCYW

Vase, Incense Box, and Burner

Attributed to Hu Wenming

(act. late 16th–early 17th century)

Ming dynasty, late 16th–early 17th century

Copper (box) and bronze (vase and burner) with parcel gilt

H. vase 3 7/8 in. (9.8 cm)

Lenz by Florence and Herbert Irving



Hu Wenming and his contemporary Zhu Chenming are among the very few Chinese metalworkers whose names have been recorded. Hu’s production was so renowned that it was well documented—extolled by some authors, such as the anonymous late-Ming scholar who wrote the *Yunjian Zazhi* (Records of Yunjian), and dismissed as vulgar by others, such as Wen Zhenheng (1585–1645) in his *Zhangwu Zhi* (Treatise on Superfluous Things). Yet little else is known about his life except that he worked in Yunjian, an affluent area twenty miles southwest of Shanghai that had long been associated with the arts, and that his style was continued by his son Hu Guanyu.

There are close to one hundred pieces—some bronze, some copper—that have inscriptions bearing Hu Wenming’s name. Only two, however, are dated—one to 1583 and the other to 1613. Most of the works attributed to him



are objects for the scholar class: incense paraphernalia, brush holders, *ruyi* (mushroom-shaped) scepters, or hand warmers. They are characterized by their densely worked backgrounds covered with naturalistically rendered flowers or plants. The latter are usually cast in high relief and covered with gold leaf, giving them an almost gaudy effect that may explain in part Wen Zhenheng's written disdain for Hu's work—he may have considered such colorfulness too obvious for the refined taste of a gentleman scholar.

Five implements were commonly used for incense burning during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties: a box, a burner, a flat-bowled spoon and tongs, as well as a vase for storing these utensils. While it is not clear if this box, burner, and vase were conceived as part of the same set, all three are inscribed with Hu Wenming's name. The base of the burner has a six-character mark in seal script reading "Yunjian Hu Wenming Zhi" (made by Hu Wenming of Yunjian). Both the box and the vase are marked on their bases with the four-character inscription "Hu Wenming Zhi."

The incense burner derives its shape from the handled *gui* vessel of the Shang and Zhou dynasties. The body is decorated with a

complex diaper ground in low relief, covered with lively, flowering tree peonies that seem to grow along its surface. On the vase is a butterfly in high relief (not illustrated) between flowering roses and a single spray of *lingzhi* fungus (see also p. 53) set against a double-Y diaper background. The rims of the mouth

and foot are decorated with a single band of inlaid silver wire. The lid of the box shows an animated dragon flying amid clouds while holding the stem of a *lingzhi* fungus in his mouth. Bamboo and *lingzhi* also decorate its sides.

DPL



Brush Holder

Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–95)

Silver

H. 6 in. (15.2 cm)

Lent by Florence and Herbert Irving

Prior to the Tang dynasty, bronze, jade, and lacquer were the most highly prized materials, and silver and gold were used only sporadically, primarily for inlay. Close ties among China, Persia, and the regions northwest of India developed during the fifth and sixth centuries and led to the introduction of vessels and utensils of gold and of silver, which were frequently emulated during the subsequent Tang dynasty.

Silver vessels were also produced during the Song period, while crowns, belts, boots, and masks for corpses were made in silver and in gold during the Liao dynasty, which apparently valued such precious materials more than did the Song. Silver and gold works from the Yuan dynasty onward are rare, and it is generally presumed that many were melted down. The production of silver objects in the Qing period, particularly during the eighteenth century, was stimulated by the export trade to Europe and the United States. Most of the shapes were copies of Western silver, but the decoration was often derived from traditional Chinese motifs. Some items, such as this brush holder, were made for the home market.

A seal-shaped inscription reading “Qianlong nian zhi” (made during the Qianlong reign) is carved into the bottom of this brush holder, marking it as one of the rare examples of Qing-dynasty silver in purely Chinese style preserved outside the national collections of Beijing and Taiwan. The deep carving of the design parallels that of lacquer and bamboo, illustrating both the ties between craftsmen working in different materials during this period and the possible adaptation of silversmithing to the taste of the scholar class.

Images of scholar-officials at their leisure in an elaborate garden cover the surface of the brush holder. In one scene three men practice calligraphy around a table holding ink sticks, an ink stone, and other writing implements, while a fourth looks on from his perch on a rock. In the foreground there is a miniature tree in a tray (or *penjing*, better known in the West today by the Japanese term *bonsai*). In another scene (not shown) six men—three standing and three seated—practice calligraphy around a table, while nearby five standing gentlemen look at a hanging scroll. A solitary figure fishing in a boat on a turbulent stream is also depicted on this elaborately carved vessel.

Elegant literati gatherings were commonplace in the lives of Chinese scholar-officials and were often recorded in paintings and literature and alluded to in the decorative arts. Such meetings could be casual, among friends, or more formal, such as those of poetry societies or those held to celebrate special events—the departure of a colleague for a new position in the government bureaucracy, the completion of a new studio on one’s estate, or a sixtieth birthday. Often the parties had overtones of famous historic gatherings, like that held by the calligrapher Wang Xizhi (A.D. 321–379) and forty-one other officials at the Orchid Pavilion in 353, or the Elegant Gathering in the Western Garden attended by Wang Shen and sixteen colleagues in Kaifeng in 1087. While it is not possible to identify the specific party depicted on the brush holder, the relatively small number of figures suggests an allusion to the Gathering in the Western Garden. Like the meeting in the Orchid Pavilion, this famous event was immortalized in literature and the decorative arts.

DPL





Base for a Mandala

Ming dynasty, early 15th century

Cloisonné

Diam. 13 1/2 in. (34.3 cm)

Purchase, Florence and Herbert Irving Gift, 1992

1992.331

Mandalas were often used in ceremonies and devotions integral to Esoteric Buddhism, which is noted for its complicated pantheon and rituals. This form of Buddhism, which developed in India between the fourth and eighth centuries, flourished in Tibet from

the tenth century on and was influential at the Chinese court from the Yuan through the Qing dynasty. Mandalas are cosmic diagrams, in which a Buddhist deity functions as the center of a self-created universe. This base once supported a three-dimensional mandala that was probably made up of a group of small figures or took the form of models of temples and stupas.

The base may have been produced for the Tibetan market. Ties between China and Tibet were particularly strong during the early- and mid-Ming periods, when many lavish ritual objects were produced in China for use in Tibet. The decoration of this piece combines traditional Chinese-style patterns, such as the lotus scroll, with Buddhist symbols: the wheel and the overflowing vase placed on top of the lotus buds on the sides. The treatment of the flowing lotus scrolls is identical to that on works of art in other media that can be dated to the early fifteenth century. DPL





Dish with Scalloped Rim

Ming dynasty, early 15th century

Cloisonné

Diam. 6 in. (15.2 cm)

Purchase, Florence and Herbert Irving Gift, 1993

1993.338

In 1388 Cao Zhao (or Cao Mingzhong), in his influential *Gegu Yaolun* (Guide to the Study of Antiquities), dismissed cloisonné as fit for only a lady's chambers. Less than fifty years later, during the reign of the aesthetically inclined Xuande emperor, cloisonné became greatly prized and pieces of high quality were produced for imperial use.

Cloisonné is the technique of creating designs on metal vessels with colored-glass paste placed within enclosures made of copper or bronze wires, which have been bent or hammered into the desired pattern. Known as cloisons (French for "partitions"), the enclosures

are generally either pasted or soldered onto the metal body. The glass paste, or enamel, is colored with metallic oxide and painted into the contained areas of the design. The vessel is usually fired at relatively low temperature, about 800 degrees centigrade. Enamels commonly shrink during firing, and the process is repeated several times to fill in the designs. Once this process is completed, the surface of the vessel is rubbed until the edges of the cloisons are visible. They are then gilded, as on this dish, which also has gilding on its scalloped edges, in the interior, and on the base.

Lively scrolling lotuses and acanthus leaves are set against a turquoise blue background on the interior (and parts of the exterior) of the dish. In Chinese examples dating to the fifteenth century this background color is often combined with shades of red, yellow, cobalt blue, white, and dark green, which were not mixed but placed individually within each cloison. Scalloped dishes were first made in

porcelain and lacquer during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and the shape continued in many media into the beginning of the fifteenth century. DPL

Pair of Parakeets

Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–95)

Cloisonné

H. each 8 3/4 in. (22.2 cm)

Gift of Edward G. Kennedy, 1929

29.110.43, 44

An atelier dedicated to the production of cloisonné was one of the thirty or so imperial household workshops established in the Forbidden City by the Kangxi emperor in 1693. During the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth, cloisonné was



popular at the court for ceremonial vessels and other ritual paraphernalia, for domestic goods such as fishbowls, wash basins, and incense burners, as well as for purely decorative items like this charming pair of parakeets.

Each bird sits on a perch placed on a round base with a small seed pot on top of it. Both parakeets are decorated with delicate colors in small cloisons. On the bases scrolling lotus vines are represented in various hues against a turquoise background.

By the sixteenth century Chinese cloisonné techniques had expanded to include both complicated cloison patterns for the background and blended colors within a single enclosure. While the density of the cloisons on the birds reflects the more developed technique, the use of one color within each enclosure may illustrate the revival of fifteenth-century taste that was common in many media during the eighteenth century.

DPL

Snuff Bottles

Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–95)

Painted enamel

Hts. 2 1/8 in. (5.4 cm), 2 5/16 (5.9 cm)

Bequest of Edmund C. Converse, 1921

21.175.314a,b

Bequest of Mary Stillman Harkness, 1950

50.145.174a,b

Snuff, or powdered tobacco, was brought to China by Jesuit missionaries in the late seventeenth century or in the very beginning of the eighteenth. Its use spread quickly, leading to a need for small containers to hold it. They were produced in large numbers and in an astonishing variety of media—metal, jade, ivory, bamboo, glass, lacquer, and porcelain—during the Qing dynasty. Not all of them were functional. Many were collected for their exoticism, as the eighteenth century was a time of fascination for foreign, especially Western, taste. Others were treasured for their precious materials or their exquisite craftsmanship.

These bottles are made of metal painted with enamels, a technique popular in Europe during the eighteenth century. Both display colorful palettes, including a rosy pink first introduced to China in the eighteenth century, which was created by adding colloidal gold to the enamel. The novelty of this color led to development of the delicate Qing-dynasty *famille rose* porcelains.

A westernized woman and child in a grape arbor are depicted on one side of the smaller bottle. Another woman, holding a wineglass and again accompanied by a child, is on the other. Both scenes illustrate the eighteenth-century Chinese attraction to Western techniques such as shading and linear perspective. Scrolls and other patterns almost completely cover the rest of the body of the smaller bottle, except for roundels containing images of buildings in rural settings on the sides. Multicolored



peonies growing among rocks, against a dotted light blue background, appear on the front and back of the larger example, which is more Chinese in its themes and its painting style. Two different long-tailed birds are perched near the flowers; one is on a rock and the other (illustrated here) on a branch. Both bottles have the phrase “Qianlong nian zhi” (made during the Qianlong reign) written in blue on their bases.

DPL

Pair of Covered Jars

Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–95)

Painted enamel

H. each 10 in. (25.4 cm)

Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913

14.40.161a,b, 14.40.162a,b

Invented in Limoges, France, during the fifteenth century, the technique of painting colored glass on metal was brought by Jesuits during the reign of the Kangxi emperor (1662–1722) to China, where such pieces are sometimes known as “foreign porcelains” (*yangci*). Like cloisonné, painted enamels for court use were made in one of the specialized imperial household workshops in the Forbidden City. Many others were produced in private workshops in Canton. Beginning in the early eighteenth century, a large number of these were exported to the West, where they are commonly called “Canton” enamels.

Jars of this shape, particularly those of porcelain, are often known in the West as

“ginger jars” because they were used mainly to store and ship the plant, essential to candied ginger or to syrup. This copper pair has been completely painted with enamels. The light green bases have borders of scrolling chrysanthemums enclosing two overlapping circles containing the phrase “Qianlong nian zhi” (made during the Qianlong reign).

Variegated flowers and leaves scroll against a yellow background on the bodies. Cartouches containing lotus scrolls set against light blue backgrounds are shown on the shoulders and are partially covered by an elaborate textile-like design of green, pink, and yellow cloths joined together in a somewhat fantastic combination and tied in a knot. Such designs are also found on lacquers and jades dating to the eighteenth century. Much care has been taken here to represent the elaborate patterns of each fabric. It is possible that this motif illustrates the practice of wrapping jars with fine textiles before presenting them (and presumably their contents) as gifts.

DPL



拈花
好意
惟敬書



JADES AND OTHER HARD STONES

The use of jade from the Neolithic period to the present day is often cited as one of the defining characteristics of the continuity of Chinese culture. Although in China a variety of semiprecious hard stones are known collectively as jade (*yu*), only two are recognized as true jade: nephrite, which occurs as tremolite and actinolite; and jadeite, a silicate of sodium and aluminum. Nephrite is found near the Central Asian cities of Khotan and Yarkand, and in the Neolithic period was indigenous to parts of China, particularly around Lake Tai in eastern Jiangsu Province. It appears in shades of green, yellow, and white. Jadeite, which is bright green, is native to Burma (Myanmar) and was first worked extensively during the eighteenth century, although it may have been known in China somewhat earlier. Both stones, but more particularly nephrite, are treasured for their hardness, texture, translucency, and variegated colors—characteristics that have been interpreted as symbols of virtuous behavior, protection, magic, and immortality. Jade objects also served as emblems of supernatural and temporal powers and of wealth.

The importation of jade over vast distances undoubtedly contributed to its value, but the noble qualities of the stone itself most captured the Chinese imagination. Unrecognizable from other nondescript brown boulders in its natural, uncut state, jade hides its potential beauty within; one of the hardest of stones, it takes on a soft sheen when polished; cool to the touch, it warms when held in the hand. In China the slow working of jade was likened to the arduous process of perfecting the human mind; only through long and persistent effort could true character and virtue be developed.

Jade ornaments and ceremonial weapons were produced by some of China's earliest Neolithic cultures. Throughout the Shang and Zhou periods and into the Han dynasty, jade was worked into ritual and secular vessels, jewelry, decorations for clothing, furnishings, and vehicles, as well as small figures and animals. The use of jade in burials, including plaques sewn

onto shrouds or other coverings for the corpse, can be traced back to Neolithic times and flourished around 950 B.C.

The prominence of jade appears to have declined from the third to the tenth century, although it continued to be worn on belts, as hair ornaments, and as jewelry. Changes in fashion and sporadic access to supplies of the stone, caused by internal political disruptions as well as by vicissitudes of the Central Asian trading economy during these centuries, may provide one reason for this decline. High-quality jade was prized by the foreign rulers of the Liao and Jin dynasties for personal adornment, and, when available, at the native Song court it was turned into vessels, writing and other scholarly implements, and accoutrements of rank.

The use of jade was part of the flowering of decorative arts in China during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when luxury items in many materials were made for scholars and merchants living in southern China, partially as a result of changes in patronage because of the closing of imperial workshops. Royal patronage, particularly that of the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–95) led to a flourishing of the medium during the Qing period, when there were major centers at Beijing, Suzhou, Yangzhou, Jiangling, Huai'an, and Tianjin. Ornaments, sculptures, writing sets, and an astonishing range of ritual and functional vessels were made during this period. In addition, more luxurious objects such as jade books or chimes were also turned out, usually in the reopened imperial workshops. Agate, coral, tourmaline, serpentine, lapis lazuli, rock crystal, turquoise, and malachite (opposite) were also carved at this time, often by artisans who worked in the more prevailing medium of jade. The variety of such materials used from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century has no parallels in other cultures and attests to the power and importance granted to beautiful stones in the decorative arts of China. DPL



*Sawing Open the Crude Jade and
Grinding and Pounding the Sand
Openwork Carving and Piercing
Holes*

from *Investigations and Studies in Jade*, vol. 1, New York, 1906. Gift of Heber R. Bishop, 1906

Rated six to seven on the Mohs' scale of hardness (talc is one, diamond is ten), jade is difficult to work and must be laboriously ground away by an abrasive such as quartz sand (hardness of seven). This process is about to be undertaken in one of these charming watercolors showing craftsmen sawing, preparing the abrasive, carving, and piercing the stone, reproduced from a large two-volume catalogue to his collection privately issued by Heber R. Bishop in 1906.

Copiously illustrated, the book marks the initial publication of the objects now in the Museum's collection. It also includes scientific, geological, and other analyses of jade working in China and other parts of the world as this medium was understood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Volume 1 includes the Chinese text of a

detailed examination of jade production during the late nineteenth century by Stephen Bushell, a physician at the British legation and one of the Western pioneers in the study of Chinese art, and thirteen watercolors by the little-known artist Li Shichuan, showing the various steps in the manufacture of jade objects. Each was the responsibility of a specialist, and at least ten steps took place—from choosing the stone to drilling, carving, polishing, and aging by dyeing or other means.

Paintings of this type, documenting the processes in the manufacture of luxurious objects, flourished during the late nineteenth century as part of the greater interest in the decorative arts of China fostered by increased trade with the West. Each operation shown here is described in a Chinese text on the borders. Additional information, such as the identification of tools, is written on the image itself. For example, the first two steps in these illustrations, "sawing open the crude jade"

and "grinding and pounding the sand," include an explanation of the importance of three kinds of sand—red, yellow, and black—from different parts of China, shown and labeled at the bottom of the painting. The text states that each must first be prepared and that the abrasive is as crucial to the grinding of jade as the tools.

The illustrations for "openwork carving" and "piercing" show holes first being cut with a diamond-borer and then sawed with a steel wire stretched on a bow. The smaller objects are placed in a bamboo container filled with water, which supports the jade, leaving one of the artisan's hands free for more delicate tasks. All of these operations are depicted taking place out of doors or in domestic settings in which the craftsmen work, enjoying the beauty of bamboo in the wind or the charm of ceramic cups and teapots and other luxuries.

DPL

Lotus-Leaf Brush Washer

Southern Song to Yuan dynasty, 12th–14th century

Nephrite

L. 6 3/4 in. (17.1 cm)

Promised Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving

Oval Cup with Dragons

Southern Song to Yuan dynasty, 12th–14th century

Nephrite

L. 4 5/8 in. (11.7 cm)

Promised Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving



This brush washer and cup exemplify the types of jades that are now thought to date from either the Southern Song or Yuan dynasties. Both vessels were made from opaque pieces of white nephrite with mineral inclusions of brown and yellow, colors that may account for the “dirty” or “smoky” quality of jades discussed in sources such as the *Song Huiyao* (Essential Records of the Song Government). The brush washer is in the shape of an open lotus leaf with a long, elegant stem at its base, and the veins of the leaf have been

incised, giving the piece a more naturalistic appearance. The shape of the cup is also somewhat organic, suggesting growth rather than stasis. The body is decorated with an incised curvilinear pattern that resembles the auspicious *lingzhi* fungus.

Both pieces have images of sinuous dragons coiling along their sides: three creatures, one holding a lotus bud, are carved on the brush washer; and two ornament the cup. Dragons of this type are known as *chi* dragons, or *chi-hu-long*. They sometimes decorate the exteriors

of Southern Song ceramics from kilns producing Qingbai wares in Jiangxi Province or those making Longquan wares in Zhejiang Province. Their presence on these vessels suggests that a provisional date from the twelfth through the fourteenth century may be appropriate, at least until more information about Northern and Southern Song and Yuan jades is available.

DPL



Belt Slide

Jin to Yuan dynasty, 12th–14th century

Nephrite

H. 2 5/8 in. (6.7 cm)

Purchase, Florence and Herbert Irving Gift, 1991

1991.483

Belts composed of metal pieces attached to leather or fabric were first introduced to China from Central Asia in the Western Jin period (265–317). During the Tang dynasty jade belts of this type were produced in large numbers. From the Tang to the Ming dynasty such jade belts were a sign of status worn by members of the imperial family and high-ranking individuals. This slide with a loop was used to suspend personal accessories from a belt.

This piece was made from translucent white nephrite, which has the unctuous texture that prompted the stone's frequent comparison to "mutton fat" in Chinese writings on the properties of jade. The borders are a series of pearl-like shapes, a design that can be traced back to Tang-dynasty metalwork and ultimately to

the art of western Central Asia and Persia. A flying goose with a lotus in its beak pursued by a small falcon is shown in the openwork center. This motif has been identified as a symbol for the goose, or swan, hunt conducted as a spring rite by the Jurchen, a forest people from Manchuria who controlled parts of northern China as the Jin dynasty.

The spring goose hunt and a related autumnal event, the deer hunt, were integral to the yearly cycle of the Jurchen. The emperor presided at both, and officials were required to wear clothing, jewelry, and regalia that depicted scenes from these events. Jade representations were worn by senior officials, while the same themes in bronze were displayed by those of lower rank.

The small falcon, known as the *haidongging*, was a hallmark of the spring hunt, which is called *chunshan* (spring mountain) in Chinese sources. The Jurchen were known for these trained birds, which were coveted throughout Asia. This specific iconography indicates that the slide may have been made for the Jurchen spring hunt. Images of geese or of swans with lotus continued to decorate small jade accessories during the subsequent Ming dynasty. However, the falcon is missing in the later works, in which the symbolic imagery has been lost: ritual hunts were no longer held after the country was again in the hands of the native Han Chinese.

DPL



Cylindrical Cup (*zhi*)

Ming dynasty, late 16th–early 17th century

Nephrite

H. 3 3/4 in. (9.5 cm)

Lent by Florence and Herbert Irving

The shape and decoration of this elegant cup illustrate the syncretic use of the past that is often found in nephrite wares of the late Ming dynasty. The cylindrical form and ring-shaped handle derive from pieces produced in lacquer and bronze during the Western Han dynasty (206 B. C.–A. D. 9). The three carved feet in the form of animal masks also reflect the art of the early Han. Two interlaced and abstracted C-shaped forms with birds' heads are carved in low relief along the sides of the cup and set against a background of raised drops. The treatment of the birdlike creatures recalls the decoration on Chinese bronze vessels produced during the late Eastern Zhou period (770–221 B.C.). However, the drops in the background are similar to the designs of small rings found on Tang metalwork and ultimately come from Central or Western Asian sources. Comparisons with other cups of this shape suggest that this vessel originally had a lid.

The *mélange* of early forms and designs as well as the shape of the drinking cup are associated with the work of Lu Zigang, one of the most celebrated jade artisans in Chinese history. Two such cups with his signature are known: one is in a private collection in England, and the other was excavated in the early 1960s from the tomb of the daughter of the Qing statesman Songattu.

Very little is known about the life of Lu Zigang. One of the few widely accepted works bearing his signature is a box dated 1562. He is also mentioned in the writings of late-Ming authors such as the poet Xu Wei (d. 1593) and the writer Wang Shizhen (d. 1590), which further indicates that he was active in the late sixteenth century. The 1642 edition of the *Taicang Fuzhi* (Gazetteer of Taicang Prefecture) lists the city of Suzhou as his birthplace and mentions the growth of his reputation during the mid-seventeenth century.

The rise of jade carving in Suzhou during the late Ming period had two main causes. One was the greater availability of jade in China after about 1550 because of political changes in Central Asia that once again made the



material from Khotan available. Another was the relative stability of the area in southern China around Suzhou and Hangzhou during the late Ming, which helped to promote intellectual and artistic pursuits in this region and led to a growing appreciation of the work of traditional craftsmen such as Lu, who had not previously been acknowledged in Chinese critical writings on the arts. In addition, the widespread interest in elegant surroundings and in the development of exquisite taste fostered the production of guides to the art of living and illustrated books of antiquities and other collectibles. These publications provided craftsmen like Lu with a range of motifs and shapes to use and to reconfigure. The pastiche of styles in the decoration of

this cup is typical of objects of the early seventeenth century, when artists, relying on illustrations of collectibles, often misunderstood earlier works and thus amalgamated forms, themes, and styles of different eras.

DPL

Dish

Qing dynasty, 18th century

Nephrite

H. 3 3/4 in. (9.5 cm)

Gift of Heber R. Bishop, 1902

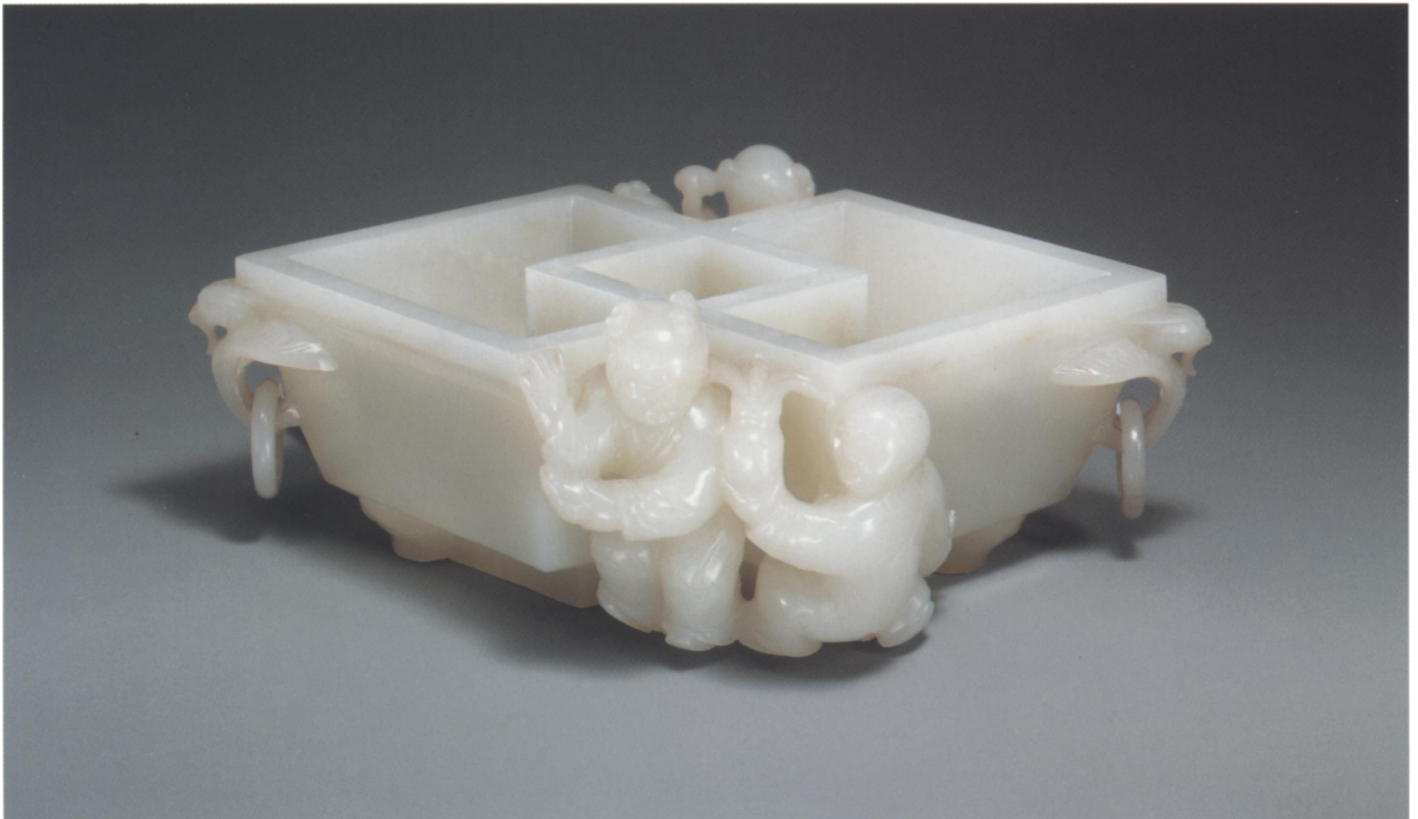
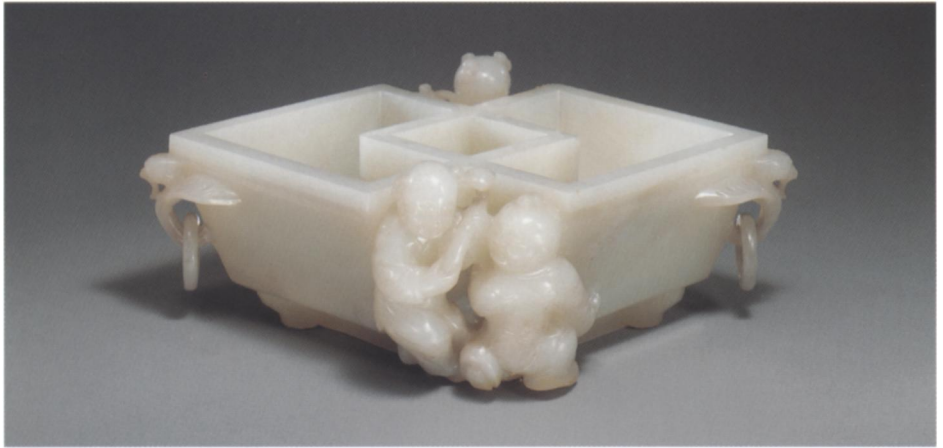
02.18.397

Four endearing boys are depicted two to a side on this unusually shaped dish, which probably contained water on a scholar's desk. A child on one side holds a *ruyi*, the scepter with a mushroom-shaped top. His companion, who kneels to lift the vessel, wears a vest decorated with a coinlike disk reading "taiping" (great peace). One boy on the other side of the dish carries a vase filled with coral and has hanging from a string around his neck a medallion composed of twin fish, which signify abundance and conjugal harmony; the second boy carries a peach, an emblem of longevity. The lads and their symbols reiterate the auspiciousness of the dish's shape, which derives from marriage cups known as *sixibei* (cups of four-fold joy), because they are composed of paired rhombi, signifying the union of two individuals. Paired rhombi, which are also among the eight lucky symbols, became common in many aspects of Chinese culture and in some texts

are said to represent good government, and in others, victory.

This object illustrates the ability of eighteenth-century craftsmen to manipulate the hard nephrite. The square edges contrast well with the softer features and physiques of

the four children on its sides. Two birds holding rings in their mouths are found at either end. The skill of the carver in creating such freestanding rings from one piece of jade demonstrates the high level of technology found in Qing-dynasty jades. DPL





Mythical Creature

Qing dynasty, 18th century

Nephrite

H. 3 1/2 in. (8.9 cm)

Gift of Heber R. Bishop, 1902

02.18.398

This charming creature was carved from a piece of yellow nephrite of noticeable translucency. Works of yellow jade are rarer in Chinese hard-stone tradition than those in shades of green and white. The color appears to have first become available during the Yuan and early Ming periods. In late-Ming guides to elegant living it is often listed among the most desirable of hues and described as resembling “steamed chestnuts.” Yellow jade was also favored during the eighteenth century, probably as a result of the fascination for the art of the Ming dynasty that marked that era.

Animals, both real and imaginary, play an important role in Chinese hard-stone carvings. Mythical creatures were particularly favored during the earliest phases of Chinese culture and again during the late Ming dynasty, when works such as this one were used both as paperweights and as decorations for the desk. The iconography of these creatures, which is

frequently loosely based on images found in woodblock-printed manuals on good taste, showing antiquities and other collectibles, is often hard to characterize. However, this beast seems to be closest in type to the mythical lion-dogs that have guarded entryways to temples, homes, and public spaces for centuries. It has the same broad face with large teeth and wavy mane and tail of the more common stone and ceramic representations but lacks the ball or puppy often associated with lion-dogs, particularly when they are paired.

These animals are thought to be a combination of the regal lion of early Indian culture and the celestial dogs of early Chinese mythology, and their protective function incorporates the powers of both. They are often known as *fó* dogs in the West. *Fó* is Chinese for “Buddha,” and the term derives from the pairs of lion-dogs commonly placed in Buddhist temples throughout Asia.

DPL

Boy with Water Buffalo

Qing dynasty, 18th century

Nephrite

H. 5 1/4 in. (13.3 cm)

Gift of Heber R. Bishop, 1902

02.18.438

Translucent white nephrite was used to create this appealing image of a small boy attending a large water buffalo. The carver carefully detailed the docile bulk of the animal and the liveliness of the child, who gently prods him with a shaft of rice, often used in Chinese art as a symbol for peace.

Representations of young boys and water buffalo were frequently carved in jade and other stones. On the one hand, these sculptures illustrate familiar subjects in the prosperous agricultural life of China. On the other, their frequency suggests that they may have had some symbolic meaning. The theme of a youth herding a water buffalo is found in Chinese and Japanese paintings, particularly those associated with Chan (Zen) Buddhism. These works usually feature a barefoot youth and often exploit the contrast between the potential power of the animal and the vulnerability of its keeper.

Such images derive from a cycle of parables known as the *Ten Oxherding Songs*, which became popular in the eleventh and twelfth

centuries. The ox (*niu* is Chinese for both “ox” and “water buffalo”) and herdsman as a parable is an ancient Buddhist tradition and can be traced back to an early Indian text describing the eleven different ways of tending oxen and comparing them with the responsibilities of a monk. A similar tradition is known in Tibet, where the same word is used for both “cow” and “elephant,” and the parable refers to a mahout and his mount.

At least a dozen Chinese versions of the oxherding cycle are preserved today, but those by the mid-twelfth-century Chan masters Puming and Guo’an are the best known. Puming’s version was widespread in China, while Guo’an’s was preferred in Japan. Both were available in series and in books of woodblock prints illustrating the ten songs, each of which represents a step on the path to enlightenment, beginning with looking for the ox, sighting it, herding it, and ending with the ox alone, then the boy, and then a great emptiness symbolizing enlightenment.

DPL





Incense Set

Qing dynasty, late 18th–early 19th century

Nephrite

H. vase 4 in. (10.2 cm)

Gift of Heber R. Bishop, 1902

02.18.537

This incense set was made for domestic use in a family altar rather than for a religious setting. The vase would have held the spatula and tongs for handling the powdered incense, which would have been stored in the covered box and lit in the burner.

The thin walls of the three vessels and the delicate fluting of their sides are typical of Chinese jades carved to resemble works produced at the Mughal courts. The Mughals, who ruled a large part of India from the sixteenth through the early nineteenth century, were descendants of the Timurid and Safavid rulers of Persia. They imported Persian and Turkish

techniques of jade manufacture and a taste for the stone into India. The earliest Mughal jades date from the late sixteenth century, and the craft flourished during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A jade carved in the Mughal style was given as tribute to the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–95) in 1758 by a Mongol people known as the Ili Dzungars. Additional works of this type made in India and Central Asia, often presented by officials of Xinjiang Province, reached the court during the late eighteenth century. These pieces were collected and studied by the Qianlong emperor, whose fascination for the

foreign jades was largely responsible for the growth of the Mughal style in this medium in China. He was particularly impressed by the thinness of the Indian pieces, and, as a result, some late-eighteenth-century works, especially those made in the imperial workshops in Beijing, have thinner walls than were common in the Chinese tradition in an attempt to imitate Mughal jades. The Indian jades in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, were once part of the Qianlong emperor's collection and form the largest group of this material surviving anywhere in the world. DPL



Jade Book

Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–95)

Nephrite

5 1/2 x 3 3/4 in. (14 x 9.5 cm)

Gift of Heber R. Bishop, 1902

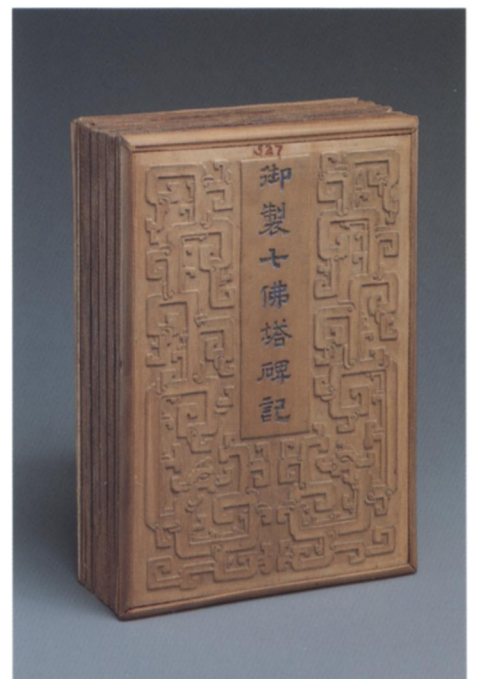
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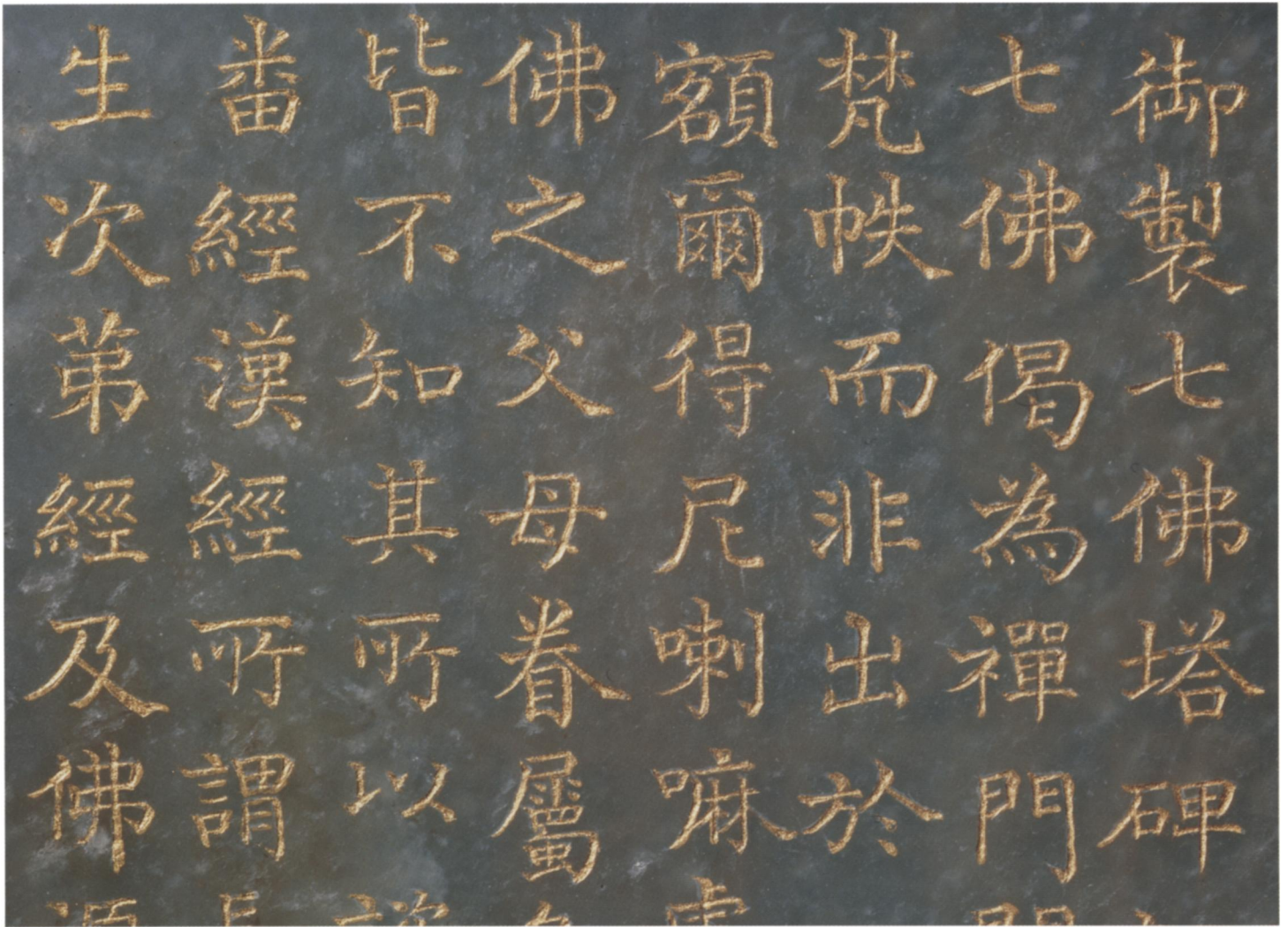
Books composed of jade tablets were numerous during the reign of the Qianlong emperor, whose fondness for the stone and partiality to all sorts of extravagances are well recorded. The earliest extant jade books date from the middle of the seventeenth century, although historical documents suggest that they were made as far back as the Tang dynasty. They often have page shapes derived from the wood and bamboo slips that were inscribed with some of the oldest extant Chinese texts.

Jade books known from the Tang period were in two formats: individual tablets held

together with cloth straps, or, as here, tablets enclosed in paper mounts and bound together accordion-style. The inscription on the top of the wood cover indicates that this book contains text composed by the Qianlong emperor for a stone stele that he placed in front of a pagoda. He built the structure to house a scroll, giving the genealogy of the Seven Buddhas of the Past, that he had received from the Panchen Lama of Tibet.

According to certain Buddhist scriptures, Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism (worshiped as the Buddha Shakyamuni), had many predecessors who achieved enlightenment in previous ages. Seven of them were particularly revered, and their role in the cosmic history of Buddhism is often described in texts. Worship of the seven flourished in China during the sixth and seventh centuries, when for the first time they were represented in the





visual arts as primary icons. Moreover, references to seven generations of ancestors are frequently found in inscriptions on images of this period, as it was believed that by attaining enlightenment, one could retroactively convey this state to seven generations of one's ancestors. This notion was crucial to the spread of Buddhism in China, where, from the beginning, it was attacked as antifamily because it stressed the rejection of the worldly in pursuit of a monastic, celibate existence.

The text for this book was written in gold ink on pieces of black paper (which in this rare volume constitute the left-hand pages) and then carved into the jade and filled with gold leaf or powdered gold. The calligrapher was Liang Guozhi (1723–1787), whose signature on the written version was copied by the anonymous carver. A court official and author, Guozhi was one of three calligraphers with the same

family name and known as the “three Liangs.” They were members of the Copybook school, which based its works on the styles of particular Tang-period artists. Patronized by the court, this school flourished during the eighteenth century. Liang Guozhi's signature is on other jade books produced during the reign of the Qianlong emperor, and he appears to have been an imperial favorite. At least one other jade book recording the text of the Seven Buddhas stele is known. Written by the calligrapher Dong Gao, it is preserved in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin. DPL

Basin

Qing dynasty, dated 1774

Nephrite

L. 20 in. (50.8 cm)

Gift of Heber R. Bishop, 1902

02.18.689

Five powerful dragons chase two flaming pearls on the surface of this impressive cushion-shaped basin. The dragons, which fly in a turbulent cloud-filled sky, are five-clawed, showing it was made for imperial use. The basin is believed to have been in the Summer Palace, Beijing, until 1860 and then sold to a British gentleman, who sold it to Heber R. Bishop. It was bequeathed to the Museum in 1902 as part of the Bishop Collection.

The vessel's shape and a poem by the Qianlong emperor carved on the interior indicate that it was inspired by the *Du Mountain Wine Sea*, a large wine container of Dushan jade currently displayed in a museum at Beihai Park, Beijing, and one of the most famous jades in Chinese history. The *Du Mountain Wine Sea* measures over twenty-three and

one-half inches in height and over fifty inches in length. Its exterior is carved with dragons and other monsters, some aquatic and some aerial, on a background of swirling waters. This basin is believed to have been commissioned in 1265 by Khubilai Khan, who had it placed in the Guanghan Palace on the Hill of Myriad Years, located on an island in Beihai Lake, Beijing. It is generally believed that the *Du Mountain Wine Sea* was removed from the palace during the massive destruction that marked the transition from the Yuan to the Ming dynasty.

About 1745 the *Du Mountain Wine Sea* was rediscovered by the Qianlong emperor, who found priests using it to serve vegetables in the Chen Wu Miao, a Daoist temple dedicated to Xuan Wu, the guardian of the Northern Quarter. The emperor had a pavilion erected to display his treasure in the Round Fort near Beihai Park. He was so entranced by this work that he wrote three poems about the *Du Mountain Wine Sea* and had them inscribed on it. These poems, particularly the earliest, dated 1746, provide much of the information about the thirteenth-century basin. One of

them was also carved in a jade book, produced in 1745, preserved in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.

A poem inscribed on the Metropolitan's basin is dated to the early spring of 1774. It is a recondite work and difficult to understand or translate precisely. In general it explains that a large piece of jade was brought from Khotan as tribute and goes on to define the decoration, including references to clouds suspended in a blue sky and dragons rising from the mist. The poem extols the beauty of the carving and compares the creation of either this basin or of *Du Mountain Wine Sea*, or both, to several highlights in Chinese art and history, such as the reign of the mythical Emperor Yao; the paintings of the artist Zhang Sengyou (ca. 470–550), who was noted for his Buddhist figures and dragons; and the vibrant prose of Han Yu (768–824).

The two seals carved into the Metropolitan's basin read: "Qianlong yu bi" (by the brush of Qianlong) and "suo bao wei xian" (what I prize are virtuous men), a reference to the classic *Book of Annals*. DPL





Pillow in the Form of a Small Boy

Qing dynasty, 19th century

Jadeite

L. 8 3/4 in. (22.2 cm)

Gift of Heber R. Bishop, 1902

02.18.426

Several factors contributed to the flourishing of the jade industry in China during the late seventeenth through the nineteenth century. One was greater access to the material; another was availability of large quarried pieces of the stone, which could be carved into works such as the basin (pp. 30, 31) and this charming pillow; and a third was the importation of jadeite from Burma (Myanmar). Jadeite is a different mineral from the nephrite commonly used in China, although both are generally termed “jade.” It is valued for its bright green color and translucency and is often made into jewelry, particularly in the West, where “jade” is more apt to refer to jadeite than to nephrite. Although the stone was frequently used in China during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is unclear when jadeite was first imported from Burma. One possible early reference to it is found in the

Zhangwu Zhi (Treatise on Superfluous Things) by Wen Zhenheng (1585–1645). In this work he refers to a fashionable green stone that is not jade, suggesting that jadeite may have been known in China during the seventeenth century.

The prototypes for this work are likely to be ceramic pillows made in northern China during the Northern and Southern Song periods at kilns such as those producing Ding and Cizhou wares. The Ding kilns made pillows in the shapes of small, fully clothed boys lying on their stomachs, either on mats or on the ground. The Cizhou kilns favored an image of a small boy, often wearing the same scanty clothing as this one, as painted decoration for some ceramic pillows. Children, particularly young boys, are a common motif in Chinese painting and decorative arts and often express a wish for progeny to perpetuate a family’s line.

DPL





Twelve Animals of the Chinese Zodiac

Qing dynasty, 19th century

Nephrite

H. each approx. 2 in. (5.1 cm)

Gift of Heber R. Bishop, 1902

02.18.730 (a-l)

The twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac (rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, serpent, horse, sheep, monkey, cock, dog, and pig) are best known today as prognosticators capable of predicting people's futures or determining their characters. These symbols have a long history in China, and there has been much speculation regarding their relationship, if any, to a similar cycle common to the Turkic people of Central Asia. By the fourth century B.C. the animals were well established in Chinese thought and had been paired with the twelve "earthly branches" in a system that combined twelve "earthly branches" and ten "heavenly stems" to form a cycle of sixty. It remains in use today as a way of counting the years and marking other measurements.

Although references to the duodenary appear early in Chinese history, images of the twelve animals are first found in ceiling paintings from a tomb dated 533. Pottery

representations of them were customarily placed in tombs during the Tang dynasty, and their frequency is attributed to the fascination of the Tang court with divination and astrology.

Early representations fall into three basic types: images of the animals themselves, those held by humans, and hybrids such as these examples. The hybrids were the most common of the Tang-period figures. Despite the continued importance of the twelve in Chinese culture, few sets are known in the fine arts after the Tang dynasty. This later jade group may reflect the revival of mythology, astrology, divination, and the occult in Chinese thought during the nineteenth century. A renewed interest in the magical properties of jade is also characteristic of this period and may help explain the reappearance of this motif in Chinese lapidary art of the time. DPL



Lohan in a Grotto

Qing dynasty, 18th–19th century

Lapis lazuli

H. 7 1/8 in. (18.1 cm)

Gift of Heber R. Bishop, 1902

02.18.917

Lohan in a Grotto

Qing dynasty, 18th–19th century

Malachite

H. 9 in. (22.9 cm)

Bequest of Edmund Converse, 1921

21.175.136

Hard stones such as lapis lazuli and malachite were valued for their blue and green colors that not only evoked the hues of jades but also the “brilliant sparkling gems” referred to in traditional descriptions of the realms of the Chinese immortals. Malachite is indigenous to China and was used as early as the Shang and Zhou periods as inlay on ritual vessels and on other luxury goods. Lapis lazuli was imported by the Tang from Afghanistan through the Central Asian kingdom of Khotan. Both minerals were ground into pigments for painting and carved (again as early as the Tang dynasty) into small sculptures, including miniature mountains such as these sheltering Buddhist sages.

Luohan is Chinese for the Sanskrit *arhat*, which in Buddhism is an epithet for a person in

an advanced stage of enlightenment. Although arhats are cited in Indian Buddhist texts, devotion to these sages is more prevalent in Central Asia, China, and Japan. The development of the Chinese lohan cult has often been traced to the seventh-century translation of *Da Aluohan Nandimido Luo Suo Shuo Fazhuji* (A Record of the Abiding of the Dharma Spoken by the Great Arhat Nandimitra) by the renowned monk-pilgrim Xuanzang (ca. 596–664). This text describes sixteen lohans, each of whom has his own mountain abode. It further explains that lohans are enlightened beings who will remain in the mortal sphere to guard and protect Buddhism and its practitioners during the period between the life of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni and the coming of the Buddha of the Future, Maitreya. In China the cult of the

sixteen lohans was expanded to a group of eighteen, and by the tenth century it had grown to five hundred.

The development of an iconic type of lohan, an unprepossessing individual in an indeterminate setting, is often linked to the work of the monk Guanxiu (832–912), whose paintings of these figures have long served as archetypes in East Asian art. By the eleventh century the repertory had expanded to include lohans in landscapes and courtly settings with elaborate compositions that included five hundred figures. The sages became a major theme in Chinese literati painting during the late-Ming- to early-Qing-period revival of Buddhism. Many paintings of lohans, as well as contemporaneous images in the decorative arts such as these two sculptures, stress their eremitic nature by placing them in caves and other remote locations.

Both of these works depict a lohan seated in a grotto, situated in an inaccessible, rocky

mountain covered with a few scraggly pines. The men hold rosaries and each is accompanied by a youthful attendant. The malachite sage is the more elaborate of the two. He is shown seated on a woven mat, and his sandals have been placed beneath the ledge under it. Both men have extremely long eyebrows, a characteristic frequently associated with Pindola Bharadvaja, one of the original sixteen lohans, who became the focus of private devotion in China and is often worshiped as the patron of Buddhist refectories.

A poem written by the Qianlong emperor and inscribed in gold on the malachite sculpture by his eleventh son, Yong Xing (1752–1823), begins with an identification of the lohan as Yeguang and then follows:

Several thousand years passed while facing
the wall
Mount Sumeru is like a Kshana
True void comes to the ocean of life

And the kalpa of the sages settles along the
Ganges
The free moon is my light and glory
A simple flower made by rich silks
I have none that I desire
Content I sit on the high snowy peak.

Unfortunately, Yeguang does not appear in standard Buddhist dictionaries or in indices to the Taisho-period *Tripitaka* (the Chinese version of the Buddhist canon reprinted in Japan during the early twentieth century) that is the primary source for Chinese and Japanese texts. (This volume and a comparable Tibetan version are the two main sources for Buddhist texts that have been preserved.) While it seems likely that Yeguang is a variant name for one of the five hundred lohans, it is not impossible that both the malachite and the lapis-lazuli sculptures refer to a nameless individual noted in the late Qing period as an exemplar of Buddhist practice and virtues. DPL





The Nine Elders of Mount Xiang

Qing dynasty, 18th century

Soapstone

H. 7 1/2 in. (19.1 cm)

Bequest of Jacob Ruppert, 1939

39.65.33

As is true of jade, the use of soapstone (or steatite) has a long history in China and can be traced back to the Neolithic period. This sculpture is decorated on all four sides with images in low relief to illustrate an inaccessible mountain on which a few pines struggle for survival. On the front three aged men with long beards and walking sticks and a pack-carrying attendant are crossing a bridge in the foothills. Above them two figures are depicted on a ledge leading into a cave. One elder is playing a game of *weiqi* (a type of Chinese chess) while his companion looks on. Three other gentlemen are shown walking in the woods on the back of the mountain, where a small deer snuggles into the quiet landscape.

The scene of the man playing *weiqi* provides a clue to the imagery. *Weiqi* is not a solitary game, so it seems likely that a second player once appeared on the other side of the board and was lost because of damage and subsequent recarving. Known as “The Nine

Elders of Mount Xiang,” a common theme in Chinese painting and decorative arts, such representations refer to the retirement of the celebrated poet Bo Juyi (772–846). During this period Bo lived in the Mount Xiang temple on the outskirts of Luoyang, Henan Province, where he was often visited by his contemporaries.

The now-damaged depiction of the *weiqi* game may also allude to stories such as that of the woodcutter who stopped to watch two youths playing chess in the mountains and discovered upon his return to his village that all of his contemporaries had passed away in his absence. Anecdotes of this type, which often include meeting immortals and being caught up in an entirely different time system, are found in works such as *Shu-i-chi* (Tales of the Extraordinary), by Ren Fang, and other writings of the Six Dynasties.

DPL



IVORY

Ivory, like jade, was carved by some of China's earliest cultures and has continued to be turned into luxurious objects and ornaments to the present day. Elephants were indigenous to China during the Neolithic period and throughout the Shang and were the first source for ivory. Indian elephants, subspecies of which were found in India and Southeast Asia and in southwestern China until the seventh or eighth century, were another source. Beginning in the Song dynasty, trade brought tusks of the African elephant.

Ivory and bone were used to make decorative plaques in the Hemudu culture that flourished in Zhejiang Province about 5000 B.C. Handles, ornaments, and vessels—some in shapes common to the better-known bronzes—were made from ivory throughout the Shang and Zhou dynasties. Very little Chinese ivory is extant from the second century B.C. to the seventh century A.D., although it would have been readily available because of the close ties between China and Southeast Asia. Musical instruments, examples of which are preserved in the Shōsōin (the imperial repository in Nara, Japan, founded by Empress Kōmyō in the eighth century), were among the more elaborate objects fashioned from ivory during the Tang period. From the ninth through the twelfth century ivory was used primarily for decorative fittings on furnishings and often on imperial carriages or other state vehicles.

Ivory carving flourished during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties because of an increased supply and widespread patronage of the decorative arts. The production of ivory figures—both Christian themes for the European market and native religious images for domestic consumption—was centered at the city of Zhangzhou, Fujian Province, and a major component of this revival. Another center was in Guangzhou (Canton), where craftsmen trained at the Qing court were relocated for better access to the material. Figures and other decorative objects, as well as more functional ones such as brush holders and wrist rests, were made throughout the Qing dynasty. In addition, objects, including folding fans and the concentric balls known as “devils’-work balls,” were turned out in Guangzhou for domestic consumption and for export to the West as part of the vogue for chinoiserie that gripped Europe and America in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Box with Pommel Design

Yuan dynasty, 13th–14th century

Ivory

Diam. 3 5/8 in. (9.2 cm)

Promised Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving

Stylistic features help date this box to the Yuan period. The surface has been carved into a curvilinear design usually called the “pommel-scroll” pattern. Used on lacquers as well as ivories, it is derived from the shape of the ring pommel of early Chinese swords. It also became a popular motif in Japanese lacquers and is better known today by the Japanese term *guri*. The pommel-scroll design was developed during the late Song period and was particularly widespread from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. The treatment of the pattern on this box is typical of fourteenth-century renderings: the deeply carved and fully sculpted pommels are shown in high relief and are divided by deep, narrow grooves.

A flowering plum tree and a crescent moon, made of ivory, gold leaf, lacquer, and glass beads, have been inlaid in the box interior. This motif is common in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century decorative arts and was a significant

theme in the ornamentation of the ceramic Jizhou wares made in Jiangxi Province. The image has been associated with a line from a verse by Chen Yuyi (1090–1139), a member of the Jiangxi school of poets, who evokes the shadows of the plum blossoms by moon-

light in a night filled with their scent. The red staining on the interior indicates that the box once held seal ink. However, it was most likely intended for storing toiletries or medicines.

DPL





*Buddha Shakyamuni with
Attendant Bodhisattvas*

Southern Song to Yuan dynasty, 12th–14th century

Ivory

H. each approx. 10 in. (25.4 cm)

Fletcher Fund, 1934

34.26.1–3

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* (Flower Garland Sutra) provides the scriptural basis for images of the Buddha Shakyamuni attended by Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, riding a lion, and Samantabhadra, the Bodhisattva of Universal Virtue, riding an elephant. This text, which was probably completed in India by the third century A.D., was first translated into Chinese in the early fifth century and reworked twice in the seventh and in the eighth. It was influential in the development of East Asian Buddhist thought, forming the basis for the Huayan order that flourished in China in

the seventh and eighth centuries and spread from there to Korea and Japan at that time.

In triads, such as this one, the central Buddha can be identified both as Shakyamuni and as Vairochana, the “resplendent one,” who is worshiped as a Buddha in his own right and as a manifestation of the historical Buddha. Painted and sculpted triads were common themes in art associated with the Huayan order and were first produced in China during the Tang period. This rare ivory triad is distinctive for its representation of the mythical *qilin* as a mount for the Buddha, who normally sits on a elaborate throne.

These three sculptures have been assigned dates ranging from the twelfth through the eighteenth century. Certain stylistic features, however, suggest a date between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries. The Buddha and

his attendant bodhisattvas have thin physiques, with no articulation of the waist or musculature of the chest, rounded limbs, youthful features, and carefully detailed clothing, characteristics that find parallels in wood, stone, and bronze sculptures carved in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Their broad faces and features and introspective expressions are in keeping with sculptures produced during the Southern Song period, as is the lack of movement in the figures and their mounts. The beaded jewelry worn by all three, however, is typical of fourteenth and early-fifteenth-century images from southern China, suggesting a somewhat later date. They were originally polychromed and gilded and exemplify the best workmanship of early Chinese ivory figures.

DPL

*Patron Deity of Literature,
Wen Chang*

Ming dynasty, late 16th–mid-17th century

Ivory

H. 5 7/8 in. (14.9 cm)

Bequest of Rosina H. Hoppin, 1965,

Alfred W. Hoyt Collection

65.86.125

The Chinese began to produce ivory figures of various types during the late sixteenth century in the city of Zhangzhou, Fujian Province, on the eastern seaboard, and continued to manufacture them throughout southeastern China until the early twentieth century. During the late Ming dynasty Zhangzhou was relatively free from the government constraints on enterprise and foreign exchange that affected other centers and had close ties to the Philippines, which had been conquered by the Spanish. The Spaniards, and other Europeans with bases in Asia, brought with them a need for ivory religious figures in a somewhat Gothic style to decorate their churches and for their personal devotions. It has been suggested that the opportunity presented to Chinese craftsmen in the late sixteenth century—to create Christian icons such as the Virgin and Child for European patrons—provided the impetus for the development of a native tradition of ivory figure carving during this period.



Chinese ivory figures depict primarily divinities—those associated with Buddhism and Daoism as well as auspicious beings affiliated with official and popular cults. This dome-headed, bearded man, who wears the robes of a Ming scholar, represents Wen Chang, or “Literary Glory.” Revered for his ability to assure success in the civil-service examinations that led to powerful bureaucratic careers and material rewards, Wen Chang was often a part of official Qing sacrifices. He is one of a group of Chinese gods who evolved

from a long-standing interest in astronomy and astrology and is believed to be the embodiment of Ursa Major (Great Bear). This constellation was thought to parallel in the heavens the role of scholar-officials on earth, and its position was tracked for clues to guide the activities and fortunes of that class. Wen Chang is often paired with Guandi, the deified Han-dynasty general who is revered as the patron of military enterprises and merchants.

DPL

Circular Plaque

Yuan to Ming dynasty, 13th–15th century

Ivory

Diam. 4 9/16 in. (11.4 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1919

19.1909a,b

This widely published plaque illustrates the difficulties inherent in the study and dating of Chinese ivories. Known by Western scholars since the seminal Chinese exhibition at Burlington House, London, in 1935–36, it has been given dates ranging from the twelfth through the nineteenth century and assigned various functions. Some have suggested that it was used for inlay, such as on a mirror box or a piece of furniture, while others argue that it was intended for display as an independent, freestanding work of art.

Much of the confusion regarding the dating centers around the plaque's primary decoration—a set of four long, snakelike dragons, two large and two small. These dragons, or *chi-hu-long*, can be traced back to the Han dynasty. They were prominent images in Chinese ceramics and lacquers during the Southern Song and Yuan periods. *Chi-hu* dragons are also found in late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ceramics and other works that illustrate the revival of shapes and designs of the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. Features such as long, narrow necks and raised lines down their backs and along their branching tails, however, are more frequently associated with fourteenth-century representations of these creatures and provide a rationale for a relatively early dating for this intriguing work.

DPL



Medallion

Ming dynasty, late 16th–early 17th century

Ivory

Diam. 3 3/8 in. (8.6 cm)

Purchase, Friends of Asian Art Gifts, 1993

1993.176

This ivory medallion, of unknown function, is carved on one side in high relief with a scene of the return by moonlight of a party from a “spring outing.” Every detail of the scene corresponds to its standard treatment in genre paintings of the Ming period, such as those by Dai Jin (1388–1462) and Qiu Ying (1495–1552), in the National Palace Museum, Taipei. On the reverse is a low-relief pattern composed around the character *wan*, surrounded by four cloud collars and in turn surrounded by four “secularized” emblems of Buddhist and Daoist origin. Interspersed among the emblems are lotus, peony, aster, and hibiscus blossoms. There are traces of gilding on a red-lacquer base. The center of the back is penetrated by an iron pin that has been cut to the level of the surface of the ivory. There is a drilled hole on the edge, which is carved with a diaper pattern.

Relatively few ivory carvings can be dated with any certainty to the Ming dynasty. The landscape scene on this piece, which is a standard subject in Ming professional paintings, provides an excellent clue as to the period of the carving. The generalized emblems are also indicative of a late-Ming date.

JCYW



Pair of Table Screens

Ming to Qing dynasty, 17th century

Ivory

H. each 10 1/2 in. (26.7 cm)

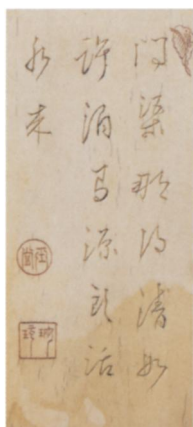
John Stuart Kennedy Fund, 1913

13.220.62

Single panels supported by wooden stands are one of the earliest formats for screens. They are illustrated in Han-dynasty tomb murals and in Japanese paintings dating from the Heian (794–1185) and Kamakura (1185–1333) periods. Few room-size examples from China or Japan are extant. However, Ming- and Qing-dynasty paintings record their use as backdrops for seated figures in portraits or for groups in landscapes. In addition, table screens in the format of this ivory pair were produced in many materials from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

Ducks floating on quiet waters under drooping plants are incised into one of the Museum's screens, while small birds (possibly turtle-doves) are shown perched on plum branches on the other. The one-corner composition of both scenes and the careful detailing of the birds and plants places these representations in the tradition of Chinese court and professional painting, which is rooted in the art of the Southern Song. It is likely, however, that the images on these screens were taken from illustrated books rather than actual paintings, because such volumes, which were widely distributed after the sixteenth century, were often consulted by craftsmen such as ivory carvers.

Poems are engraved into the backs of both screens. On the back of the screen with the ducks is part of a work by Zhu Xi (1130–1200), who is noted for his philosophical writings and seminal contributions to the development of



Neo-Confucianism. It describes the tranquil sound of the water in which the ducks swim. The unidentified poem on the other screen refers to the opening of the petals of a tea plum, helping to identify the plants on the front.

Three seals accompany each poem. A leaf-shaped seal at the beginning of both reads “shan shu” (dwelling in the mountains). A circular seal reading “yu tang” (jade hall) and a square example reading “zhen wan” (auspicious plaything) are at the ends. These two refer to Yan Song (1480–1566), one of the more infamous ministers in Chinese history, who

was noted for his greed and, ironically, later came to signify good taste because of the quality of the objects he had amassed in his collection.

DPL



Brush Holder

Qing dynasty, 17th century

Ivory

H. 5 5/8 in. (14.2 cm)

Promised Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving

On the lower part of this beautifully carved brush holder a man, hiding his face with a fan, rides in a goat cart. He is accompanied by three young boys, and four more attendants, carrying fans or other objects, follow the main group as the procession moves along the sides. The gentleman's entourage attracts a great deal of attention from the cluster of people on the rooftops and balconies placed at different heights along the top of the brush holder. Six animated figures directly above the central figure peer intently at him, and several have their hands raised as if to


throw something; one, at the front, leans over the rooftop and seems to be waving a cloth; others, in groups (not shown), also stand and gesticulate as they watch him ride by.

The unusual subject depicted here suggests that the figures illustrate a scene from Chinese history or literature. Two are possible, both from tales featuring beautiful and talented men: the story of Wei Jie, who rode in a white goat cart, and that of Pan Yue, whom women pelted with fruit as he passed. Both were noted scholars during the Jin dynasty (ca. 265–419). Wei Jie was famed for his speaking skills, and

Pan Yue's writings were highly regarded. Either would have been an appropriate image on a scholarly utensil, such as this brush holder, as some knowledge of history and literature is needed to recognize the theme.

The combination of a recessed ground with high-relief carving is a technique known as *xian di shen ke* (sunken-ground deep carving), first used on seventeenth-century bamboo pieces and borrowed by ivory workers during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.

DPL



BAMBOO, RHINOCEROS HORN, WOOD, AND AMBER

During the Ming and Qing dynasties carvers of small items often worked in more than one medium. A result of this practice was that carvings made from different materials—such as bamboo, rhinoceros horn, ivory, wood, jade, and so on—were fashioned in similar modes reflecting common aesthetic concerns. The craftsmen’s sensitivity to the textures of the various media is evidenced in the fine surface polish they customarily applied to the objects. Such finish enhances the fibrous texture of bamboo, the grain of hardwoods, and the translucency of horn, and in general enriches colors. From the seventeenth century onward there was an increasing interest in dense, miniaturized carvings. Narrative scenes with figures in landscapes, drawn from both popular and literati traditions and based on templates supplied by local painters, depicted details with meticulous attention. Designs inspired by interest in antiquities, such as the rhinoceros-horn “champion” vase, were also popular.

Bamboo carving is an example of how artistry transforms a humble material into highly valued works of art. Bamboo fascinated scholar-officials because of the attributes and symbolism attached to it. Its hollow stalk symbolizes an unprejudiced mind and humility. The resilience of its branches in withstanding strong winds is a metaphor for scholar-officials, who must maintain their principles when challenged by adversaries. Thus, bamboo was popular for objects used in scholars’ studios, such as brush holders, wrist rests, perfume holders, and fan ribs. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries bamboo carving flourished in Jiading, Jiangsu Province, where three generations from the Zhu family produced distinguished works with an emphasis on dynamic compositions and high relief. The Zhu family was succeeded by many followers. Also working in Jiangsu Province, Zhang Xihuang practiced a different technique, which was characterized by extremely shallow relief, incorporating part of the bamboo skin, and landscapes featuring both grand vistas and minute details. The city of Nanjing was famous for talented carvers of bamboo fan ribs. In addition to relief carving, artisans also manufactured small three-dimensional objects from bamboo roots. The designs of these small carvings are often very similar to those in other materials. For example, the design of a small amber carving illustrated on page 52 could easily have been adapted for bamboo root.

Works crafted in hardwoods were also highly prized. After a ban on maritime trade was lifted in 1567, tropical hardwood was available in great quantities to Chinese carpenters, who until this time had been working mainly with native deciduous woods. Among the various kinds of

imported lumber *huanghuali* (*Dalbergia odorifera*) and *zitan* (purple sandalwood) were the most highly valued. The density of these materials allowed the carpenter to construct sturdy furniture and utensils with sophisticated mortise-and-tenon systems. Instead of applying many coats of lacquer over the final product for protection and decoration, as in the case of objects crafted from softwood, carpenters invested their labor in polishing the hardwoods to show off their natural grain and dark colors. The hardness of the material encouraged the execution of lavish and intricate designs, such as openwork, relief, and semiprecious stone inlay. The carving of hardwood flourished until the eighteenth century, when the supply began to diminish because of scarcity.

Rhinoceros horn was also imported from the south. The rhinoceros was once found in China, but by the Han dynasty it had become an exotic species whose skin was sought after for making armor and whose horns were carved into drinking cups. By the Tang dynasty rhinoceros horns were imported into China along with foreign goods such as pearls, sandalwood, and camphor. Horn varies in color from dark brown to yellow, sometimes with spots of contrasting tones. Its natural texture, pattern, and translucency sparked the imagination of connoisseurs, who gave the patterns names like “clouds,” “raindrops,” and “millet spots.”

A number of desirable properties were attributed to rhinoceros horn, including medicinal uses, which led to many objects in this medium being ground into powder. As a result, few works in horn have survived. Extant examples consist mainly of wine cups datable to the Ming and Qing dynasties, although back-scratchers and girdle plaques were known to have been made from it. Tradition has it that a rhinoceros-horn cup will react with poison and thus protect its user. Li Yu, a connoisseur from the late seventeenth century, also recommended rhinoceros-horn cups because they enhanced the fragrance of wine and because this material, though precious, was not ostentatious. Many rhinoceros-horn cups are superb works of sculpture.

WAS

Incense Holder

Zhu Sansong (act. ca. 1573–1619)

Ming dynasty, late 16th–early 17th century

Bamboo

H. (including new wooden ends) 7 in. (17.8 cm)

Purchase, Friends of Asian Art Gifts, 1995

1995.271

Made for holding stick incense, this bamboo vessel has openwork carving to facilitate the release of the fragrant smoke. The openwork relief depicts “Laughter at Tiger Creek,” the legendary story of the meeting of the famous Buddhist monk Huiyuan (334–416) with the poet Tao Yuanming (365–427) and the Daoist priest Lu Xiujing (407–477) on Mount Lu, Jiangxi Province, where Huiyuan’s monastery, the Donglin Si, was situated. Huiyuan is shown talking to Tao Yuanming under a tree; Lu Xiujing stands on a bridge on the other side of the vessel. Several layers of perforated fantastic rocks and a pine with a scaly trunk and twisting branches constitute the shallow, compact backdrop. The carver’s signature appears in intaglio on a foreground rock.

Zhu Sansong descended from a family of bamboo carvers in Jiading, Jiangsu Province. His works and those of his father, Zhu Ying (1520–1587), are characterized by crowded compositions of figures in nature, spatial compression, and a keen interest in the characters’ interactions through expression and posture. Compared with his father’s output, Sansong’s style is more developed in its use of high relief. The Zhu family founded the Jiading school of bamboo carving, and their followers flourished until the eighteenth century. WAS



Brush Holder

Late Ming to early Qing dynasty, 17th century

Bamboo

H. 6 3/8 in. (16 cm)

Purchase, Florence and Herbert Irving Gift, 1994

1994.381

This bamboo brush holder is decorated with a continuous scene of an architectural structure enclosed in a garden setting carved in high relief. One side shows a building with a dramatically curved roof set in the middle of gigantic garden rocks. The other side depicts a different section of the building, with a window overlooking a pond. The image is dense with many layers of overlapping space.

Many novels and scholars' writings of the seventeenth century had as their subject women who were distinguished not only for their beauty but also for their literary abilities. The fascination of this theme is evident in the figural scene on this brush holder. The focus is on a young lady devoting herself to a composition or writing a letter by a window. Her writing instruments—an inkstone and a sheet of paper on the table and a brush in her hand—are delicately rendered in shallow relief. She is accompanied by an old woman and attended by a maid, who approaches from the left side of the building. Compositions almost identical to this one are found on other bamboo brush holders. The close resemblance of the motif on the various examples may have been a result of the circulation of templates among carvers.

The brush holder is inscribed with the signature of the artist Cheng Sui (1605–1691) and a date equivalent to 1615. The inscription must have been added later, because not only does the relief landscape bear no relation to the landscape paintings of Cheng Sui, he would have been only ten years old when this carving was made.

WAS





Brush Holder

Zhang Xihuang (act. early 17th century)

Ming dynasty, early 17th century

Bamboo

H. 5 1/4 in. (13.3 cm)

Purchase, Mr. and Mrs. John A. Wiley Gift,
Seymour Fund, Bequest of Dorothy Graham Bennett,
and Erich O. Grunebaum Bequest, 1994

1994.208

The continuing development in bamboo carving during the seventeenth century was marked by the high achievement of *liuqing* (reserve-green) technique, a type of shallow relief that exploits the contrasting colors and textures of the smooth greenish bamboo skin and the darker, more fibrous inner layer of the stalk. The design is cut from the lighter skin and stands in relief against the ground. By varying the amount of skin retained, the artist could achieve an articulated picture with subtle color gradations. Early instances of the *liuqing*

technique are hard to find. Most surviving examples date from the seventeenth century onward. Zhang Xihuang, a bamboo carver from Jiangyin in southern Jiangsu Province, was credited with producing many works in this technique and bringing it to a high artistic and technical level.

The relief carving on this brush holder depicts the scholars' outing recorded in the famous *Ode to the Pavilion of the Inebriated Old Man* by Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072). The event took place in 1045 in the mountains of Chuzhou, in today's eastern Anhui Province, where Ouyang served as a prefectural governor. Recently demoted from an influential position in the imperial court, Ouyang found the scenic mountains of Chuzhou a pleasant distraction. The pavilion of the story was named by Ouyang Xiu after himself, referring to the facts that he became intoxicated easily and was the oldest among his associates.

Pictorial motifs with direct correspondence to descriptions in the ode can be found on this brush holder. The gathering takes place in a panoramic landscape viewed from an elevated perspective. In the center of the composition, in a vast clearing flanked by boulders and heaps of earth, Ouyang Xiu's banquet takes place beside the pavilion. On the right his friends are playing chess and *touhu*, an ancient game described in the poem. Dwarfed in the panoramic landscape, the human figures are represented as diminutive shapes with only generalized forms.

The other side depicts more visitors mentioned in Ouyang's poem. The space above is filled with the entire text of the ode in running script, also carved in the reserve-green style. The inscription is followed by Zhang Xihuang's signature and seal.

WAS

Brush Holder

Gu Jue (act. late 17th century)

Qing dynasty, Kangxi period (1662–1722)

Bamboo, with hardwood rim and base

H. 7 in. (17.8 cm)

Purchase, Ellen W. Bamberger Bequest, in honor of her husband, Max Bamberger, 1994

1994.382

Like Zhang Xihuang's brush holder, this example also illustrates Ouyang Xiu's *Ode to the Pavilion of the Inebriated Old Man*. The composition and landscape setting, however, are constructed very differently here. The viewers are brought close to the scene, and the pavilion and the guests are confined in a narrow space enveloped by massive outcroppings and overhangs of rock, which create strong diagonal lines in the composition—pictorial devices characteristic of the Jiading school (see p. 47).

The central figure inside the pavilion is Ouyang, who is identified by the garb of an official. He is leaning against a table and succumbing to the influence of wine at his banquet. On the left a monk converses with a scholar. In the foreground a man fishes by the Niang Spring, which is described in the poem as teeming with big fish. Behind a rock to the left of the pavilion three scholars play chess. On the other side of the brush holder the figures by the bamboo grove and the servants tending horses and a carriage are unrelated to Ouyang's ode. They were drawn from the conventional repertoire of figure and literati-gathering paintings of the time.

A native of Jiading, Gu further developed the Jiading school of bamboo carving. His works are known for their highly complex compositions and meticulously executed details. He added subtlety to the compositions by combining high relief with shallow carving, as seen in the flock of birds flying away in the distance and the mist lingering on the roof of the pavilion.

WAS



Cup

Qing dynasty, 18th century

Rhinoceros horn

L. 4 1/2 in. (11.2 cm)

Promised Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving

The oval vessel is carved in the shape of waves, which part in the center to reveal two dragons' heads. It must have been an extraordinary sight to see the dragons partially submerged when wine was poured into the cup. The bodies of the dragons appear on the exterior as if they are maneuvering through the waves, which break in crests on one side to form a handle. The undulating contour conveys a sense of motion suggestive of the ever changing nature of water.

The dating of rhinoceros-horn cups is still imprecise, and very few examples have firm dates. Judging from the vivid illusionism of the design, however, this example is datable to the eighteenth century. WAS



"Champion" Vase

Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–95)

Rhinoceros horn

H. 3 3/8 in. (8.6 cm)

Promised Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving

This vessel has two narrow vertical compartments connected by a carving of a mythical bird. The term "champion" vase, which appears only in Western writings, may be derived from two possible sources. It has been suggested that winners of archery competitions were rewarded with rhinoceros-horn cups during the Ming period. The term also may have been a loose translation of *yingxiong bei* (hero's cup), referring to the bird (*ying*) and the bear (*xiong*) it is standing on.

The origin of the champion vase is not exactly clear. Double cups with carvings of birds had been made from lacquered wood as early as the late Warring States period (481–221 B.C.), but their relationship to champion vases is not obvious. A bronze version with partially fluted walls from the Qing palace collection was illustrated in *Xiqing Gujian* (Catalogue of Xiqing Antiquities, *juan*

[scroll] 18, leaf 15a, published 1750) and dated to the Tang dynasty; however, this dating needs further investigation.

During the middle and late eighteenth century, the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–95) exhibited a fondness for multibodied vessels, as evidenced by porcelain produced for the court. Champion vases were popular during the middle and late eighteenth century and were manufactured in different media, including

jade, cloisonné enamel, and rhinoceros horn.

The designs on rhinoceros-horn champion vases usually reflect a strong archaistic inclination, characterized by the integration of animal motifs with fancy angularized scrollwork. On this vase a wide horizontal band, raised by carving the background away, displays a dragon-headed scroll pattern, which was adapted from woodblock illustrations of antiquities. WAS





Cup

Chenxiang wood

Ming dynasty, 16th–17th century

H. 2 5/8 in. (6.7 cm)

Gift of Alan and Simone Hartman, 1981

1981.81.2

Although this cup is carved in *chenxiang*, a tropical hardwood, its shape—and its irregular rim in particular—suggests strongly that the maker had a rhinoceros-horn cup in mind. A continuous landscape, surprisingly complex for a vessel of this size, is carved on its exterior. On one side two scholars stop on a natural terrace to gaze into the distance. Selected sections of the scene were depicted in close-up detail, such as the bamboo grove on the scholars' right and a willow tree that appears quite unexpectedly from behind an outcrop of rock. The carver has thoughtfully created “breathing space” in the composition by simplifying the faces of the figures and the many rock surfaces. This alternation of dense details with simple shapes and plain surfaces adds subtlety to the design and leaves room for one’s imagination to play. WAS

Hanshan and Shide

Qing dynasty, 17th–18th century

Amber

H. 3 1/2 in. (8.9 cm)

Bequest of Mary Stilman Harkness, 1950

50.145.152

Amber has been known in China since at least the third century. The true nature of this material, which is sometimes ascribed magical properties in Chinese writings, was well understood by the Tang dynasty, when pharmacopoeia and literary works described its formation over centuries and noted the presence of embedded insects. Amber seems to have been widely available in Tang China and is frequently mentioned in poetry of the period. It was used for jewelry and for other decorative items and as inlay. Examples of Tang-period amber are preserved today in the Shōsōin at Nara, Japan. With the exception of the ambers at the Shōsōin, few are known that can be dated between the ninth and eighteenth centuries.

China’s far-reaching contacts during the Tang dynasty probably contributed to the abundant supply of amber at the time. Chinese documents indicate that it was brought from Iran and may have included the legendary amber from the Baltic Sea area, carried with other goods along the overland trade roads known as the Silk Roads. Other routes led

through Burma (Myanmar), and the plentiful amber mines in Hukuang Valley were also a source. This sculpture and other later Chinese works were made of the red-toned amber (burmite) imported from Burma along with the much-coveted jadeite during the late seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.

Images of a pair of somewhat disheveled monks laughing uproariously are a prominent theme in Chinese and Japanese paintings from as early as the twelfth century up to the present day. The figures represent Hanshan and Shide, two of the most popular eccentrics of Chan Buddhist iconography, who became common subjects in East Asian culture. There is still much controversy regarding their biographies: the only record is a preface to a well-known book of 300 verses, *The Collected Poems of Hanshan*. According to this volume, Hanshan (Cold Mountain) was a hermit, who lived near the Guoqing Si monastery on Mount Tiantai in Zhejiang Province sometime between the sixth and ninth centuries. Tiantai, a major Buddhist center, was also home to several hermits and other seekers of knowledge. Hanshan became friends with Fenggan, a monk from the monastery, and his protégé Shide (Foundling), who worked in the kitchen. Shide frequently provided scraps and other necessities for Hanshan, which may explain why he is shown in this sculpture holding a bowl. DPL



Picnic Box

Qing dynasty, 19th century

Zitan wood with metal corner mounts, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and semiprecious stones

H. 9 1/8 in. (23.2 cm)

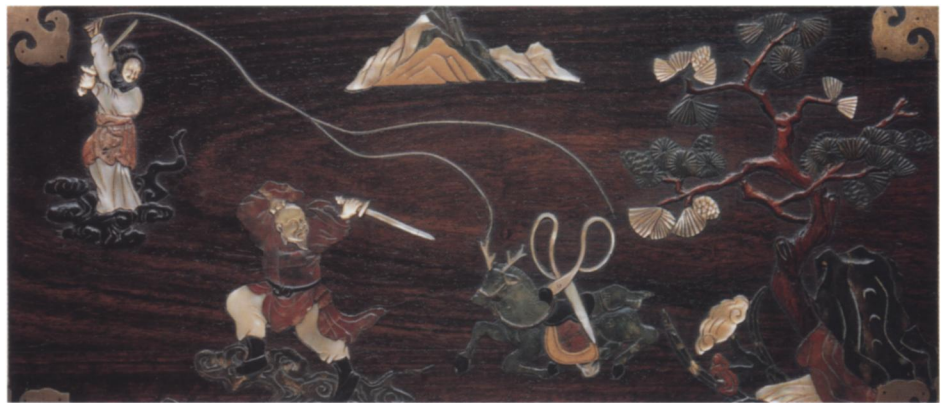
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William Corbus, 1977

1977.262a-g

Picnic boxes have long been used to carry refreshments along on pleasure outings, as demonstrated in a woodblock illustration for a popular romance novel published in the late sixteenth century (fig. 2). This picnic box is constructed of *zitan* and reinforced with metal hardware. It is outfitted with three stacked trays, one hidden flat tray, and a flat cover, which is fastened to the sides of a humped handle with a long wooden pin. The hardness of *zitan* makes it an excellent material for receiving inlaid decoration, which covers the entire box and comprises mother-of-pearl, various semiprecious stones, and contrasting wood.



Fig. 2. Carrying a bamboo picnic box, from *Xihuji* (Romance of the West Lake), Ming dynasty, Wanli period (1573–1620), Guangqingtang edition. Woodblock print, ink on paper, after Zhou Wu, *Jinling Gukbanhua* (Ancient Woodblock Prints from Jinling [Nanjing]), Nanjing: Jiangsu meishu chubanshe, 1993. Department of Asian Art Library



The designs on this picnic box appealed to popular taste for the fantastic and auspicious. The upper side of the cover displays a scene of combat between two figures, both bearing swords, and probably illustrates an episode from a popular story of chivalries. Riding on a cloud in the upper left corner, a female figure exercises her supernatural power to attack her mounted opponent with a pair of scissors. This scene captures the split second in which the swordsman makes a narrow escape, while his steed is about to fall victim to the gigantic shears. The action on the left is balanced in the lower right corner by a pine, symbolic of longevity and constancy, bearing many cones, symbolic of abundant progeny. Under the

pine grow two *lingzhi*, the magical fungi of immortality.

The sides of the trays are adorned with sprigs of flowers, leaves, and fruits, all with auspicious allusions, arranged horizontally in a seminatural fashion. On the top tray, a branch of *tianzhu* (heavenly bamboo, *Nandina domestica*) on the left and the fungus in the center combine to make a verbal pun, “tianran ruyi” (naturally, as you wish). The pomegranates on the middle tray symbolize progeny. The four gardenia blossoms on the bottom tray suggest “siji ping’an” (peace throughout the four seasons). The base and handle are decorated with florets of mother-of-pearl.

WAS



INK

In China ink is made by combining animal glue with either carbon collected from burning resinous pine wood or lampblack obtained from burning vegetable oil. Musk and other fragrances are sometimes added to mask the odor of the glue. Combined according to workshop formulae, these ingredients are blended thoroughly by pounding, shaped into cakes, and then allowed to harden slowly. Ink can be made from the cake by grinding it with water on a stone. The shape of ink cakes evolved through the ages. Excavated samples surviving from the Han dynasty take the form of small spheres, but examples from the Ming and Qing dynasties, which account for a majority of extant ancient Chinese ink, take the form of round sticks, small tablets, or disks.

Most extant ink sticks and cakes are adorned with molded ornamentation. Using a mold with a design carved on its interior, the ink maker transfers the pattern onto the surface of the cake as it is shaped. Cakes with molded decorations thus are collaborative works by ink makers and woodcarvers. By the sixteenth century the expanding market for luxury goods prompted many ink shops to produce lines of exquisite products with fine ornamentation. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ink making flourished in Anhui Province, also a center of woodblock printing. Tapping the skills of local carvers, the ink shops in Anhui were able to produce molded cakes with strong artistic appeal that were stylistically indebted to the tradition of woodblock illustrations, as represented by the output of the shops of Cheng Junfang (1541–ca. 1620) and Fang Yulu (act. ca. 1570–1619) in Huizhou.

In 1588, in what was a highly original endeavor, Fang published *Fangshi Mopu* (Ink Manual of the Fang Family), a catalogue of his cakes with 380 illustrations. Many of these pictures were contributed by distinguished local painters, and members of the famous Huang family of woodblock carvers were responsible for cutting the printing blocks. Cheng followed suit and engaged a similar group of artists and craftsmen to produce his own catalogue, *Chengshi Moyuan* (Cheng Family's Ink Garden), in 1606. Trying to outdo his rival, Cheng included some 500 illustrations in his volume, and a limited number of copies were printed in color. The height of Cheng's career was marked by the presentation of his ink cakes to the court of the Wanli emperor (r. 1573–1620).

Fangshi Mopu and *Chengshi Moyuan* further our knowledge of the repertoire of these masters even though only a small number of their works survive. However, the availability of their designs in the catalogues gives rise to the problem of copies. Cheng and Fang were such prominent names that it is customary for forgers to add the masters' marks to their own manufacture.



Ink Making

Anonymous

Qing dynasty, early 19th century

Gouache on paper

14 5/8 x 11 7/8 in. (37.1 x 30.2 cm)

Purchase, Florence and Herbert Irving Gift, 1994

1994.409

This drawing illustrates several stages in the traditional method of ink making in China. Lampblack and a binding glue are mixed thoroughly by pounding in a metal mortar with a pestle—such as the set on the ground on the left of the picture—to form a dense paste. Sitting on a wooden bench, an ink maker strikes a new ink stick from a set of wooden molds. The inside of the mold was usually carved with decorative designs and the names of the ink and the shop or the master, all of which are pressed onto the surface of the stick. Here the viewer can see the outer mold holding the inner mold together while the latter is struck. On the right a bamboo tray piled with ink cakes and sticks rests on a bamboo stool. On a table in the back the finished products are boxed.

This sheet was originally one in a set of gouache drawings depicting different professions in China. The theme is indicated in the title, “Yinmo” (Molding Ink), written in regular script on the lower right corner, together with the number forty-seven, probably the picture’s place in the series. This type of image was produced for the European market during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Western techniques, such as shading,

modeling, and a single, consistent light source, were employed. These pictures are an important source of social and technical information about crafts production.

WAS

Ink Cake with Xuanzhu Motif

Manufactured by the shop of Fang Yulu

(act. ca. 1570–1619)

Ming dynasty, dated 1573

L. 4 3/8 in. (11.1 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1929

30.76.198

The subjects depicted on Chinese ink cakes often carry multiple layers of popular and literary allusions. The squarish cake here is adorned with a *xuanzhu*, a spotted black stag with an extraordinary set of antlers. For the practical-minded, the stags’ bushy tails make excellent dusters. It has been suggested that their hair, when placed next to red silk, will preserve the color of the dye and that dusting felt with it will protect the material from insects. The *zhu*-hair duster, when serving as a scholar’s accessory, is a symbol of lively intellectual and philosophical conversations.

Finally, a black stag is an allusion to the color of ink. The word *xuan*, here meaning “black,” is a common word in the names for ink cakes.

Some of these properties of and allusions to *xuanzhu* are highlighted in a poem molded in regular script on the back of the cake:

Xuanzhu

A *zhu* with an elegant black tail

It draws a following of deer, none dares to pass it.

Shiny like jade, dark like pine

Naturally talented in interesting conversation, you are a master of discussion.

The poem is signed Jianyuan Fu, a sobriquet of Fang Yulu, and followed by a square seal reading “Jianyuan.” A reign date of Wanli *yuannian* (inaugural year of the Wanli era), corresponding to 1573, and Fang Yulu’s signature, written in seal script, are molded on the vertical sides.

The design of the stag was created by Ding Yunpeng (1547–ca. 1621), whose sobriquet, Nanyu, appears in the entry for this motif recorded in the *Fangshi Mopu*. On the ink cake the graceful deportment of the stag is rendered in subtle relief. The mold carver’s technique in producing clean outlines and strikingly sharp details is commendable.

WAS



Ink Cake with Tang-Mirror Design

Qing dynasty, mid-18th century or later, with mark of

Fang Yulu (act. ca. 1570–1619)

W. 4 3/8 in. (11.1 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1929

30.76.194

Fang Yulu's ink cakes were so prized among ink collectors that spurious marks of his were often added to cakes made in later periods, such as this example.

On its upper side, molded in relief, is the design of a mirror with an eight-lobed foliated rim and eight florets encircling a central one around the mirror's knob. On the reverse is an inscription arranged in a radial pattern around the rim: *Tang baoxianghua jian si jing qichun linghuashi beizuo huaduo* (Tang precious image flower mirror 4; diameter 7 *chun*; foliated type, florets on back). The vertical edges of the ink cake carry Fang's signature and a date: *Wanli wuxunian* (the *wuxu* year of Wanli, corresponding to 1598), and *Taixuan shih jianzao* (manufactured under supervision of Taixuan).

A bronze mirror with an identical design is recorded and illustrated in *Xiqing Gujian* (Catalogue of Xiqing Antiquities, *juan* 40, leaf 69 a,b; fig. 3), a compilation of the antiquities in the Qing palace undertaken in 1750. This mirror was the inspiration for the design on the ink cake. Also, the inscription on the back of the cake is adapted from the text accompanying the mirror in the catalogue. The cake was probably manufactured in an imperial workshop.

The choice of a bronze mirror as the source of the design for an ink cake was most likely prompted by the formal resemblance of the media—both are flat and relatively small and created with section molds. The octagonal outline of this cake is a clever adaptation that echoes the foliation of the contained mirror motif and at the same time maintains simple edges for the cake. Ink makers of the eighteenth century were capable of producing cakes with complicated outlines. The decision to keep a plain outline was probably an effort to reproduce the less flamboyant seventeenth-century style. WAS

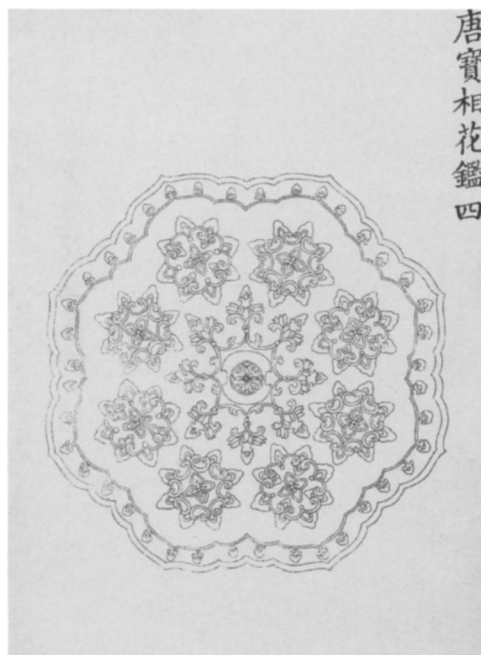


Fig. 3. Tang-dynasty bronze mirror, from *Xiqing Gujian* (Catalogue of Xiqing Antiquities), compiled 1750 (*juan* 40, leaf 69 a,b). Reproduced from a facsimile reprint of the 1751 edition. Department of Asian Art Library





*Ink Cake with Thousand-Year
Fungus Motif*

*Manufactured by the shop of Cheng Junfang
(1541–ca. 1620)
Ming dynasty, dated 1620
Diam. 4 1/2 in. (11.4 cm)
Rogers Fund, 1929
30.76.196*

This round cake is adorned with an auspicious subject, *qiansui ling*, the thousand-year-old fungus. Shown growing on a hill among herbaceous plants between rocks with angular outlines, the fungi stand in the shade of a twisted old pine. The tree's needles are depicted in two different ways. Whereas most of them are shown from the side, a branch in the center of the canopy is rendered in frontal

perspective, with each needle cluster forming a radial motif. Such a pictorial device for creating a more three-dimensional image, however, achieves quite a different effect in this medium than it would in painting. The precision of details and the linear approach to mold carving produced a crisp image characterized by repetition of linear patterns. The title of the relief design, written in running script, is molded in intaglio in a cartouche on the other side of the ink cake.

On the vertical edge is molded an inscription of eleven minuscule characters: *Wanli gengshen nian chen Cheng Junfang jianzhi* (manufactured under supervision of humble servant Cheng Junfang in the *gengshen* year of

the Wanli era). The date corresponds to 1620. Cheng held a minor position in the Court of State Ceremony in the imperial capital, Beijing, for a short time in his early fifties. His ink cakes, valued for their fine quality and elegant designs, might have been further promoted by the friendships he formed with court officials during those years.

This particular motif was included in Fang's *Fangshi Mopu*, thus raising questions about the exclusiveness of design templates between the rival shops and suggesting that there was some appropriation of designs between their repertoires.

WAS



INKSTONE

Inkstones are essential companions to ink sticks and cakes. A good ink slab should be made from material with low water permeability and absorbency that is moderately hard and fine grained in general yet has some harder grains. Solid ink ground with water on this mildly abrasive surface will quickly produce ink with a rich tone. Traditionally, Chinese inkstones are made from fine-grained stone. The most celebrated stones for carving ink slabs are Duan (quarried in Guangdong Province), She (from She County, Anhui Province), and Tao River stones (quarried from Gauzu Province). Sometimes ink slabs are molded from clay that has been repeatedly filtered and washed to remove the impurities and coarser grains and then hardened in a kiln.

For centuries Chinese carvers integrated the practical requirements and artistic potential of inkstones by combining ingenious relief designs with lavish polishing. In addition to reproducing ornamentation in prevailing archaistic types they also created new designs in tune with the taste of their times. Balancing nature and artistry, these craftsmen brought out hidden natural markings by careful planning or accidental discovery and enhanced surface veins and markings by buffing. In a poem on a Duan inkstone the scholar-poet Li He (790–816) applauded the “divine” workmanship of the carvers, whose knives brought out the beauty of nature.

Calligraphy is often a part of an inkstone design. An inscription may inform the viewer of the theme of the slab’s decorative design or the identity of the carver. As accessories for scholars’ studios, inkstones often became vehicles for self-expression. Because the stones were relatively easy to carve, with some practice scholars could develop enough technical expertise to add their own ornamentation or inscriptions. Poems, verses, commemorative inscriptions, and even drawings carved by the owner or by his circle of friends turned an inkstone into a form of literati art and a testimony of friendship. While their level of skill rarely rivaled that of professional carvers, adding poetry, calligraphy, and pictures to inkstones expanded the scholars’ aesthetic experience of the stones.

Inkstones and sticks as an inseparable pair were credited with inspiring creativity and poetic imagination. This power was proclaimed in an inscription carved on the wooden box of a green inkstone in the shape of a bamboo stem (see p. 60). Alluding to the mixing of water and ink on a slab, the inscription remarks that the fusion embodies heaven and earth and inspires brilliant essays. Grinding ink on a stone was elevated from a mundane task to an aesthetic experience and stimulated the mind through the appreciation of the slab and the ink tones that were produced.

Inkstone

Qing dynasty, 18th century

Duan stone

L. 9 1/2 in. (24.1 cm)

Lent by Florence and Herbert Irving

Duan stone is a general name given to shale, slate, or mudstone from sites situated east of the Sanrong Gorge of the Xijiang, a river in Zhaoqing, Guangdong Province, quarried as early as the early Tang dynasty. Because of its dense structure, which allows for low water permeability and absorbency, and fine grain, Duan stone is an excellent material for making ink slabs. The color of Duan stone ranges from dark gray to purple and brown, often with natural markings.

This rectangular inkstone is carved from a purple-gray stone with greenish veins on the underside. A large grinding surface on the top is enclosed by relief carving depicting at one end a dragon generating mists and scrolling clouds, and with plain low borders on the other three sides. A cloud scroll carved in recess makes an ink or water well. The underside of the slab is decorated with an illustration of the story of Su Wu (d. 60 B.C.), a Han official who was detained by the Xiongnu ruler and sentenced to herd goats on the steppes near Lake Baikal for nineteen years, but never relented in his unbending loyalty to the Han dynasty. The story of Su Wu had serious



implications for the scholars of the Qing period, a time when China had fallen under Manchu rule. An inscription by a certain Congwuzi for his friend Yungu at a Buddhist society in Canton extols the beauty of the stone. The inscription is dated to the summer solstice of the cyclical *bingchen* year, a date that corresponds to 1736 or 1796.

Unlike the dragon-and-cloud design, which is carved in relief and finished to smoothness, the scene of Su Wu has no sculptural quality, but rather is a calligraphic work. The blanket

wrapping around the hero, which dominates the composition, is defined by a series of shallow beveled lines suggestive of the bold brushwork associated with a distinctive type of figure painting produced in the middle and late eighteenth century. The inscription, written in running script, is carved in a freehand manner. It is quite likely that the picture and inscription on the underside were both made by an amateur, while the dragon-and-cloud design on the top was crafted by a professional.

WAS



Inkstone and Box

Qing dynasty, early 18th century, inscribed with dates corresponding to 1370 and 1702

Green schist and wood

L. 8 1/4 in. (21 cm)

Gift of Marion Chait Howe and Allan S. Chait, in memory of Ralph M. Chait and Libby E. Chait, 1981

1981.120.1a-c

The green inkstone is carved in the shape of bamboo stem segments and is adorned in low relief with leafy branches rising from behind rocks. The slanted surface of the sunken grinding area displays multiple layers of natural markings within the stone in purple and

various shades of green. The wooden box is also carved in the shape of a length of bamboo.

The ink slab and its case carry three inscriptions altogether, which offer clues and raise questions about its date. An inscription on the underside of the stone and one on the lid of the box, though signed Qinggong Daoren and Nancun, respectively, both have the same seal, *Zuo*. While these names are unknown from other sources, they probably denote the same person. The stone's inscription is dated to 1370, which is curiously early, considering the good condition of the box. The third inscription, on the upper side of the slab, comprising eight delicate characters executed in regular script, is dated to the summer solstice of the *renwu*

year (1702), signed Wang Shizhen (1634–1711), a preminent poet of the early Qing period, and is followed by Wang's seal, *Yuan*. If this inscription is not a genuine ownership mark by Wang Shizhen, it is likely to have been added either during Wang's time or not long after his death. From 1722 onward, because the character *zhen* in Wang's name also occurred in the personal name of the newly enthroned Yongzheng emperor, the characters of Wang's name were replaced by others that had a similar sound. Since here Wang's name was written in its original form, the inscription was probably carved before 1722.

WAS

Inkstone

Gu Erniang (act. early 18th century)

Qing dynasty, 18th century

Limestone

L. 5 1/8 in. (13 cm)

Gift of Lily and Baird Hasting, 1989

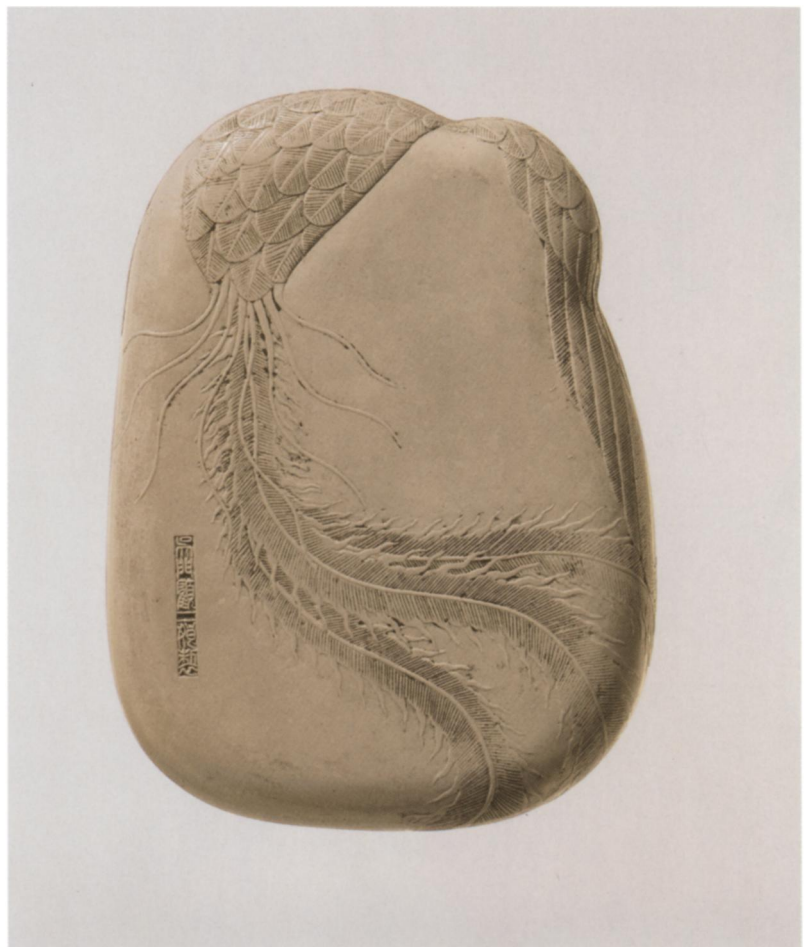
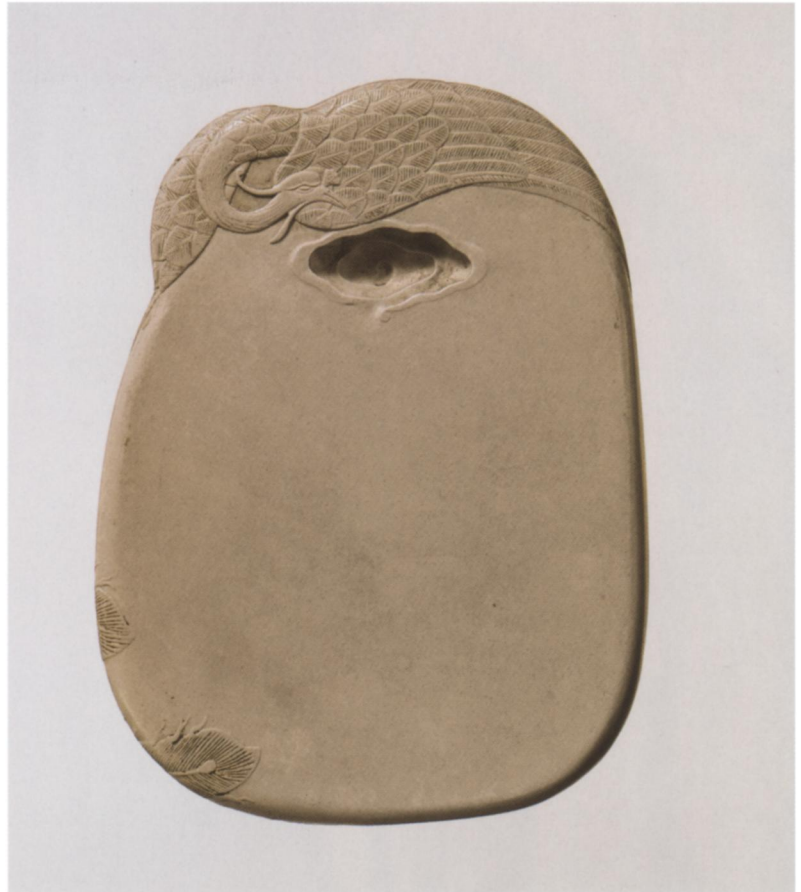
1989.99.1a,b

Gu Erniang, also called Qinniangu or Qingniangu, née Zou, married into a family known for inkstone carving since the early part of the Qing dynasty. The family lived in Zhuanzhu Alley in Wumen (present-day Suzhou), which was also the center of jade carving and the home of Zhu Gui, a famous woodblock maker. Succeeding her father-in-law in the family business, Gu established her own style and passed her skills on to her nephew. Her works were celebrated in poems. It is recorded in an eighteenth-century source that her style was ornate and that she believed an inkstone should be round edged, organic, and voluptuous, rather than lean and hard.

This plump, fleshy, yellow-green stone illustrates Gu's ideas on the formal qualities of a good inkstone. It is irregularly shaped and is decorated with a phoenix in low relief. An ink/water well in the shape of a swirling cloud is carved at the top of the grinding surface. In the lower left corner of the underside in relief inside a recessed cartouche is the artist's signature, reading "Wumen Gu Erniang zhi" (made by Gu Erniang of Wumen).

The mannered pose of the phoenix, the treatment of individual feathers, and the nervous wiggles of the tail plumage agree with the "ornate" quality attributed to Gu's works. The density of details and the spatial compression of the shallow relief are strikingly similar to the surface of a printing block. The reliance on linear rather than sculptural articulation is also standard vocabulary in woodblock illustrations, and it is possible that Gu's carving style was influenced by her familiarity with woodblock techniques.

WAS





LACQUER

Chinese lacquer comes from the sap of the lacquer tree (*Rhus verniciflua*), which is native to central and southern China. Liquid lacquer requires relatively high humidity, warm temperatures, and contact with oxygen in order to set properly, making it imperative to apply the material in thin coats. Once it is set, lacquer is resistant to water and acid and can withstand a certain amount of heat, so it is excellent for serving utensils. Because of its unique properties, since early times lacquer has frequently been used as a protective and decorative coating on objects crafted from various materials and as an adhesive. Lacquer can be mixed with a limited number of pigments, of which red and black are by far the most stable and most widely used. Painting with lacquer on wooden or fabric objects was a highly developed art form beginning in the sixth century B.C.

Significant innovations in lacquer making took place during the Song and Yuan dynasties. Lacquer was no longer just a coating material; it was also exploited as a substance to be shaped and worked. By applying multiple layers of the liquid, one on top of the other, to a base and allowing each coat to set before the next was added, artisans were able to build up thick piles, which could then be incised, carved, and burnished. Thin mother-of-pearl cutouts were incorporated within the layers to create iridescent patterns. Carved lacquer was a unique Chinese contribution and remained a highly revered category of lacquer production. During the Southern Song dynasty carved, *qiangjin* (incised and gold-filled), and mother-of-pearl-inlaid lacquers were manufactured in the south. Due to the tedious and hazardous method of preparation and refinement—liquid lacquer is a very toxic material—and the time-consuming process of layering, working, and burnishing, lacquerware was a luxury item found only in the court and in the homes of the nobility and the wealthy.

Lacquer making thrived under Mongol rule in China. During the Yuan dynasty lacquer craftsmen learned to layer the material to an unprecedented thickness, and the carved decorations exhibited tremendous

sculptural vigor. Complex narrative compositions with architectural and landscape backdrops were constructed with minute pieces of mother-of-pearl inlay, like mosaics. After the Yuan period the continuing development of this medium can be seen in the refinement of and variation on the Song and Yuan achievements and in the incorporation of inspiration from other art forms, including woodcuts, hardwoods inlaid with precious materials, and small carvings in stones, woods, and other natural substances.

The palace had a significant presence in lacquer production in the Ming and Qing dynasties. From the fifteenth to the middle of the sixteenth century, through a *corvée* system, the palace workshop in the Ming court controlled the output of resident artisan families as well as a large portion of that by craftsmen from outlying regions. Commercial lacquer production gained impetus in the late sixteenth century after the decline of the palace workshop. Artisans newly released from *corvée* duties were free to engage fully in commercial production, which flourished with the support of the strong economy in the coastal provinces. Commercial lacquer makers served four groups of patrons: the merchant class, scholar-officials, the imperial court (through special brokers), and the Japanese market. The style of their work and the decorative motifs they employed were as varied as their patrons.

In the eighteenth century, when social and economic conditions recovered from the Manchu conquest, a lacquer workshop was again set up inside the palace and was placed under the stringent supervision of the emperors and the imperial household. Like their Ming counterparts, palace lacquers produced during this time were often inscribed with reign titles and cyclical dates. Imperial symbols, which became popular toward the latter half of the Ming, remained an important category of design throughout the Qing period. Decorations of eighteenth-century lacquers also increasingly drew on popular auspicious iconography and evidenced a delight in complex pictorial scenes. With superb technical skills and tireless attention to details, the lacquer makers created extravagant works distinguished by an unprecedented dramatic quality.



Dish with Scalloped Rim

Song dynasty, 11th–13th century

Black lacquer with traces of gold

Diam. 12 5/8 in. (32.1 cm)

Promised Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving

This thin-cored lacquer dish has an equivalent in the ceramics manufactured in northern China during the Song period. Exact formal resemblance can be found in some Ding wares, down to the scalloped rim and raised edge. Another shared feature is the presence of gilding. Some Ding wares are ornamented with gold leaf applied on top of painted

designs. Much of the gilt decoration on the lacquered dish has worn off with age and use, but a floral spray and a geometric scroll can still be seen in the center and on the rim, respectively. Its present monochromatic tone may look plain, but the original appearance of this dish was much more ornate.

WAS

Incense Box

Yuan dynasty, 14th century

Carved lacquer (*tixi*)

Diam. 5 in. (12.7 cm)

H. O. Havemeyer Collection,

Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929

1929.100.713

Round Box with Scroll Design

Late Yuan to early Ming dynasty, late 14th century

Carved lacquer (*tixi*)

Diam. 13 1/8 in. (33.3 cm)

Lent by Florence and Herbert Irving

A type of carved lacquer known as *tixi* was well established by the Southern Song dynasty and remained popular during the Yuan and the Ming dynasties. The predominant decorative motif of *tixi* lacquer is a scroll pattern—sometimes called pommel scroll (see p. 38)—carved in either black or red lacquer. Thin layers of black interspersed within the red, as seen in the examples illustrated here, subtly enhance the rhythm of the scrolls. A similar effect is created by thin red layers within black.

The incense box, demonstrating Yuan workmanship and creativity, is adorned with four dynamic pommel scrolls encircling a quatrefoil on its lid. The scrollwork arranged on the narrow band on the sides, though simple in shape, is charged with vitality. The large round box, at least half a century later in date, lacks the sculptural energy so abundantly displayed on the smaller example. The relief scrolls, which enclose a six-cornered motif in the center of the lid, fill concentric bands repeated across the large box. However, the high quality of the red lacquer and the workmanship are noteworthy and are the grounds for giving it a relatively early date. WAS





*Seven-Lobed Platter with Scene of
Children at Play*

Yuan dynasty, 14th century

Carved red lacquer

Diam. 21 7/8 in. (55.5 cm)

Promised Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving

The narrative scene with many figures on this large platter represents a type of carved lacquer prevalent, like the *tixi* examples, since the Southern Song dynasty. This depiction of children at play in a garden setting is obviously derived from a Song design, as evidenced by the costumes of several of the figures. The two women's costumes are in the style of the Song period, and the square hat worn by the boy in the lower right is of a

type made popular by Su Shi (1037–1101), an eminent poet-official of his time. The lotus-pond-and-waterfowl motif, however, became fashionable during the Yuan period.

The pictorial design on this platter exemplifies the maturity of the Yuan development of narrative subjects in lacquer carving. The artist's ability to deal with a complex scene is demonstrated in the clarity maintained among the many layers of details and overlapping elements. The refined brocade patterns on the background and the sumptuous floral border enclosing this image further enrich the overall design. The painstaking polishing of the translucent red lacquer removes all sharp edges and gives the relief a relaxed appearance and a

soft texture. The sophisticated techniques of Yuan carvers formed a solid foundation for the continuing production of high-quality narrative pictures in lacquer during the early and middle periods of the Ming dynasty.

WAS

Tray with Figures in a Landscape

Yuan dynasty, 14th century

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay

Diam. 19 3/8 in. (49.2 cm)

Lent by Florence and Herbert Irving

The incorporation of mother-of-pearl in lacquer is an ingenious Chinese exploitation of lacquer layers that have been built up to a considerable thickness. The earliest excavated example, a black sutra box featuring an experimental floral scroll in mother-of-pearl, dates to the tenth century. By the late twelfth to the thirteenth century, lacquered furniture, sumptuously adorned with small pieces of mother-of-pearl painstakingly cut into shape and put together in floral-scroll designs, was used in the palace and the homes of the wealthy. The introduction of pictorial compositions in mother-of-pearl inlay further extended the decorative potential of the medium. Such depictions probably were an innovation of the thirteenth century and remained a strong tradition until the seventeenth century.

This tray, which is decorated with a design of figures in a landscape, is datable to the fourteenth century because of its unusual shape and eloquent pictorial techniques. It is uncommon in the odd number of its sides. The positioning of the narrative scene's bottom on a point, which happens to be slightly off center,



introduces another element of irregularity that breaks the static effect of the polygonal frame. The scene employs a set of artistic conventions well established by this time in Chinese

illustrative paintings. The image is divided into two sections by an obscuring mist. In the background four elderly men are gathered under a pine tree for a moonlit drinking party. In the foreground officials on horseback and their halberd-bearing attendants and young servants pause at a bridge on the way to the party. Originality and freshness in design come through in the details, as seen in the trailing clouds and rising mist, the two kinds of wave patterns indicating the stream's rapids, and the way the ground is defined. Later mother-of-pearl inlays with similar details tend to be more pattern oriented and repetitive. On the other hand, the complex designs on the characters' clothes are evidence that the depiction of figures was already sophisticated, setting the standard until the seventeenth century.

WAS





*Round Dish with Two Paradise
Flycatchers and Hollyhock*

Yuan to early Míng dynasty, 14th century

Carved red lacquer

Diam. 12 7/8 in. (32.5 cm)

Promised Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving

The flower-and-bird motif is an established subject in carved lacquer that reached its height of artistic and technical refinement during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The composition typically consists of two birds in flight on a background covered with a floral pattern, forming a two-level design, as seen on this dish. The foreshortened images in high relief create an illusion of roomy pictorial space in spite of the relatively thin lacquer layer they are carved on. The number of areas of exposed ground between the hollyhock branches suggest that this dish was made in the early or middle fourteenth century, since later works dealing with the same theme tend to have very dense floral backgrounds. While the fine polish perfects the decorative motifs and enhances the



luster of the translucent material, it also calls attention to the uneven tones within the lacquer layers, which probably resulted from the settling of the red pigment. The absence of hairline cracks, which can be credited to the minimized mechanical stress on the lacquer layer due to its thinness, has helped to preserve the fine incisions on the flower petals and the feathers of the paradise flycatchers. Except for a large crack at the lower left along the tail of one bird, the lacquer on this dish has been well preserved.

The dish carries an incised signature of Zhang Cheng, a renowned master who is thought to have worked in the early to mid-fourteenth century. Considering the confidence with which this dish is carved and the exquisite outcome, it is certainly worthy of the master's name. The approximate date suggested by its stylistic characteristics also falls within the period of Zhang's activity.

WAS



Rice Measure

Ming dynasty, Jiajing period (1522–66)
 Carved red, green, and yellow-brown lacquer
 H. 6 1/2 in. (16.5 cm)
 John Stuart Kennedy Fund, 1913
 13.100.140

Multicolored carved lacquer was developed during the sixteenth century to feed an increasing demand for polychromatic designs on luxury goods as well as on everyday items. To prepare polychrome carved lacquer, layers of different colors are built up successively and are then cut back to reveal the motifs in the desired colors. Since the design is divided into areas of color revealed at various levels, the resulting image is often flat and spatially compressed, without sculptural coherence.

This rice measure is adorned on each of its four slanted sides with a Daoist deity in the foreground and a distant landscape background. The side of the vessel on the left in the illustration depicts Laozi (or Laotzu, act. early 6th century B.C.) riding on a black ox amid colorful scrolling clouds on a journey

to the West. He is reputed as the author of *Daode Jing* (or *Tao-te Ching*, Classic of the Way and Its Virtue), the canon of Daoist philosophy, and was the most important figure in the pantheon of popular Daoist belief. On the right a Daoist deity wearing ceremonial garb and holding a scepter with both hands is accompanied by a dragon and colorful clouds. The two other sides of the vessel are adorned with deities of similar demeanor.

The compositions borrow freely from woodblock illustrations dealing with both religious and secular subjects. The looming cloud, which announced the arrival of a deity, was commonly used in Buddhist and Daoist icons. The angular hill slopes were derived from topographical illustrations, and the bands of meandering mist were frequently used in illustrations for popular novels. These conceits,

together with the color contrast, create a surreal backdrop that emphasizes the deities' magical power.

In spite of the creative energy of the design and the skillful execution of the relief, the lacquer is not of high quality. The inferior material, which is dull and muddy in tone, indicates the deterioration of workmanship in the palace atelier during the early sixteenth century. An incised and gold-filled six-character inscription in the vessel base dates it to the reign of the Jiajing emperor (1522–66), a devotee of Daoism.

WAS



*Rectangular Box with
Flower-and-Bird Decoration*

Ming dynasty, late 16th–early 17th century
Black lacquer painted with lacquer and oil colors, with
basketry panels

L. 18 3/8 in. (46.7 cm)

Lent by Florence and Herbert Irving

Lacquer boxes with basketry panels were used for presentation of gifts and documents and for storage of various items during the late Ming. Multicolored designs enjoyed great popularity throughout the sixteenth century. Here, using the wide range of colors available in lacquer and oil, the artist created on the cover a cheerful flower-and-bird scene of two paradise flycatchers standing on blossoming camellia and plum branches behind a fancy garden rock. (Quarried from lake beds, perforated rocks like the one depicted here formed an important element of Chinese garden architecture.) In the seventeenth century this type of round-shouldered box was gradually replaced by straight-sided ones.

WAS

*Oval Dish with Design of
Antiquities*

Qing dynasty, Kangxi period (1662–1722)
Lacquer inlaid with mother-of-pearl and gold foils

L. 4 3/4 in. (12.1 cm)

Lent by Florence and Herbert Irving

The technique of mother-of-pearl inlay underwent a transformation during the late seventeenth century, marking the last stage of its development. Haliotis shells were boiled to separate their layers to obtain very thin iridescent mother-of-pearl sheets. Cut into



small pieces, this fragile material was often used with gold foil to construct designs valued for their fineness and precision. Small narrative and landscape compositions, still lifes, and compact geometric patterns were some of the popular subjects.

Here a group of antiques, made of mother-of-pearl cutouts, rests on a fine hexagonal pattern constructed with gold foil. As a theme, the display of antiquities appealed not only to the literati's taste for ancient objects but also to a popular interest in auspicious associations through the use of a rebus. The antiques depicted on this dish include a ritual water vessel (*jiaodou*), a grain vessel (*fu*), and a mold for a coin (*qian*). The names of the last two items are the root for the expression "fuzai yanqian," meaning "happiness is right here." Still lifes with auspicious meanings were popular on lacquer and in other decorative arts, such as cloisonné enamel and textile, and were widely depicted in paintings, which were often given as presents. By giving the gift, one offered the good wish as well.

WAS

Cabinet with Scene of Figures in a Landscape

Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–95)
Carved red lacquer with gilt-bronze fittings
L. 14 1/8 in. (36 cm)
Promised Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving

This two-door cabinet has the appearance of separate boxes held together by a gilt-bronze handle mounted between the drawers on top. The overall design is based on straight edges and squared corners, creating an angularity most evident in the metal handle. The six side panels each have similar decoration: a scene of figures at a river bank or on a garden terrace by the water, with receding hills in the far distance. The tops of the two drawers are each adorned with a scene of a deer in a landscape. The sharp and precise cutting of the lacquer is characteristic of the palace workshop at this time, as are the deeply carved brocade patterns on the ground.

WAS



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