The Elegance of the Qing Court

In the late sixteenth century, Nurgaci, a tribal chieftain who claimed descent from the Jurchen who ruled during the Jin dynasty (1115-1260), united the nomadic tribes of northern China. His son solidified this unification by forming the disparate tribes into so-called Banner Groups, thus giving them new identities and proclaiming that they were of one tribe, the Manchu, with their own distinct written language and capital, Shenyang. When Manchu banner troops defeated the Han armies south of the Great Wall, the Qing dynasty, the last and arguably the most successful dynasty to rule China, was established in 1644. Shunzhi, the grandson of Nurgaci, became the first Qing emperor and relocated the capital from Shenyang to the conquered Ming capital of Beijing.

The minority Manchu made efficient use of their army and the management of the inherited Ming bureaucracy to consolidate their power and conquer central and southern China. Emperor Kangxi, at age eight, succeeded Shunzi in 1662 and became the longest reigning emperor of the dynasty. His legacy includes acceptance of a strong neo-Confucian philosophy, which brought widespread approval by his subjects; commissioning great works of reference that included a history of the Ming and a comprehensive dictionary of the Chinese language; establishment of workshops in the Forbidden City; and a re-establishment of the importance of the imperial kilns. Kangxi was succeeded in 1723 by his fourth son, Emperor Yongzheng. Reigning from 1723 to 1735, Yongzheng reformed the imperial bureaucracy and perpetuated his father's intense interest in the arts. His fourth son ruled at the Qianlong emperor from 1736 to 1795. The Qianlong military campaigns expanded the empire to its farthest limits. Qianlong died three years after abdicating in favor of his son, Emperor Jiaqing (1797-1820), and so ended the grandeur and greatest years of the dynasty and began a century of disaster and decay.

Emperor Daoguang, ruling China from 1820 until 1850, saw further decline in the empire. His efforts to gain control over the influences of Western powers in Chinese commerce and abolish the British opium trade and other imports led to the Opium Wars. Militarily inferior and with an incompetent government, China was forced to surrender to Western dictates and also to cede control of Hong Kong to the British. Daoguang was the first Qing emperor to lose a portion of the empire's sovereign territory.

Internal and external turmoil plagued the reigns of succeeding emperors. In 1900, the Alliance of Western Powers and Japan occupied Beijing.

During the reign of the child emperor Puyi (1909-1912), his father, Prince Chun, and Dowager Empress Longyu acted as regents. On February 12, 1912, following the Xinhai revolution, Longyu signed the Act of Abdication of the Great Qing, ending the Qing dynasty. Two generations later, declared reformed and a common man by Mao Zedong, the Last Emperor of the Qing dynasty died in Beijing in 1967.

Dragons *(Lung)*

Dragons are an Imperial symbol - they symbolize heaven and the emperor. Only the Emperor was allowed to use the image of the five-clawed dragon. It is said that the emperor sits on the dragon throne and has the face of a dragon. Numerous legends tell of dragons appearing to emperors to announce auspicious events. The Mon Dragon has four claws and was a symbol for princes and high ranking officials. The three-clawed dragon was used by the general public. Improper use of claw number was considered treason, punishable by execution of the offender's entire clan. Yellow is the color of the emperor and is often associated with the Imperial Dragon.

Lacquer

The earliest known lacquer items were made by the Chinese as early as 7000 BC. Lacquer is made from the sap, *urushiol*, of the lacquer tree *(rhus verniciflua)*. When exposed to oxygen, this sap changes from a liquid to a solid state - a natural plastic. When used to coat a base material, such as wood, it imparts resistance to water, acid and, to a minor extent, heat. The earliest use of lacquer was to provide a protective coating.

For the lacquer sap, which is poisonous in its liquid state, to dry, it must be exposed both to oxygen and to high humidity. The Chinese facilitated the process by making applications in a damp room or in pits in the earth called *yinshi*, meaning "shaded room." If a coating is applied before the previous layer has dried completely, the undercoating will forever remain liquid. Therefore, to produce lacquer of substantial thickness, each layer requires up to forty-eight hours drying time before the application of the next layer. It is not uncommon for Ming and Qing lacquer works to have coatings in excess of two hundred layers.

While the early use of lacquer ware was primarily utilitarian, it was not uncommon for such objects to be decorated. By the Qing dynasty, lacquer work had become primarily an art form, prized particularly by the rich. Lacquer wares were inlaid with shell, metals, and semiprecious stones, with the sap often mixed with various substances to give it color. While the most common additive, cinnabar, or red mercury sulfide, imparted a desirable red hue, it was also highly toxic. Although it is noted that the Qianlong emperor recognized the inherent dangers of cinnabar lacquer production and considered banning its use, he prized it greatly and is known to have commissioned many objects. During the Qing dynasty Qianlong period, cinnabar lacquer work reached its zenith.

Joslyn's standing floor screen, dating from the Kangxi period, is a fine example of imperial lacquer work. In the depth of the carving that creates the court scenes, one may see the many hundreds of layers of lacquer which make up the screen and would have required years to produce.

Orchids and Grasses

The fragrant orchid is a symbol of the neglected scholar. The rich symbolism of the orchid is built upon its natural qualities. It grows in secluded woodland sites, its natural habitat being akin to Confucian and Daoist ideas, ideas that also relate to the life of the scholar. Orchids also symbolize moral virtue and fertility, this flower encourages many offspring. A symbol of perfection, abundance and higher growth, this flower allows us to be open to beauty and prosperity in our lives.



Longevity, steadfastness, self-discipline are symbolized by the pine tree, one of the Three Friends of Winter. A child in military dress is before his father is a symbol of great honor.

Two women and four men are shown in a lotus garden. The bridge symbolizes a path to a higher wisdom.

Four people are visiting the father and are shown in the corridor of the house.

Upper: Women and men are holding a discussion. Lower: Women and men and a peacock in the garden. The peacock symbolizes dignity and beauty.

A mother teaches a child reading and writing. This scene is a celebration of the Mother and the important role of mothers in the education of their children.

The crane is a symbol of longevity and wisdom. Two cranes represent a wish for a long marriage. Cranes flying in the sky represent a wish for a rise in status.

The people in the foreground are all wearing military uniforms. There are guests greeting the family.

All of the figures in this panel are women. An old woman sits on an elegant chair and is receiving guests at this celebration. Women are celebrated in this Qing Dynasty Screen.



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8



Everlasting Happiness and Eternal Good Health

May You be Accorded Meritorious Recognition and Hundredfold Remunerations

May there be both full Happiness and Longevity

May Celebratory Occasions Come with Great Frequency

Meanings of both lines remain to be translated

Let Longevity Complement Extended Eyebrows

Let Wealth Flourish and Longevity Soar

To Extend the Years and Send Birthday Greetings

Eight-Panel Screen

Early 18th century

Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), Kangxi period (1662-1722)

carved red lacquer, gold inlaid brown lacquer, and wood

The front of this cinnabar lacquer screen depicts various court scenes above panels of dragons among waves. The subject of the scenes is perhaps based upon Qiu Ying's painting *Spring Morning in the Han Palace.* The reverse side has columns of 168 *shou* (longevity) characters written in various styles above paintings of orchids in gold on a deep brown lacquer background. It bears the signature of Zheng Xie (1693-1765), a famous painter, poet, and calligrapher and one of the Eight Eccentric painters of Yanzhou. (His seal can be seen on the back of the screen.)

Lacquer technique was developed in China as early as the Shang period (1600-ca. 1100 BC), when the sap from a specific tree was found to harden under certain conditions, leaving a protective coating on the object to which it was applied. Through the centuries various techniques were developed, including the addition of cinnabar, which imparted a red color to the lacquer. After multiple applications, each requiring several days to dry, decorative designs were carved into the lacquer surfaces. In order to produce a screen such as this, hundreds of layers of lacquer would be required.

Collection of Joslyn Art Museum. Partial Gift of Mr. Anunt Hengtrakul and Museum Purchase with funds from the Peter Kiewit Foundation, 2005.

1 **Bird and Flower -** Bamboo, 3 Chrysanthemums, 1 small Magpie
When bamboo is shown together with the chrysanthemum they express birthday wishes to a person. The magpie is a messenger of happiness and good luck.
2 Dragons with 5 Claws - The Small Dragon is in the sea. The Large Dragon is flying in the sky. There is fire in the sky. Fire is one of the 5 elements associated with the color red (meaning happiness and celebration). Fire is one of the 12 symbols of the Emperor.

2 **Bird and Flower -** Lotus Flower, Lotus Seeds, 2 Mandarin Ducks
The Lotus represents summer, purity, and many children. Mandarin Ducks represent husband and wife and marital bliss.
2 Dragons with 3 Claws - 1 Large Dragon, 1 Small Dragon, Many Clouds.
Clouds are symbolic of the celestial realm and are seen as a connection to the gods and immortals. Clouds combined with Dragons are a positive emblem representing happiness and good fortune.

3 **Bird and Flower -** Chrysanthemum, Magpie
When the chrysanthemum is depicted with a magpie, a wish for happiness and joy for the whole family is conveyed. In Chinese legend, chrysanthemum has the rebus of luck and longevity.
1 Dragon with 5 Claws - The Dragon spurts long plumes of water as he rises from the sea into the clouds. The Spiritual Dragon creates rain and wind for mankind.

4 **Bird and Flower -** Peony flower buds ready to bloom, 1 Chinese Bulbul
The Peony bud and the Chinese Bulbul together present a special Chinese rebus. The flower represents nobility. Peony, known as *fu gui hua ("the flower of wealth and rank")* conveys a wish for high rank in the Emperor's civil service.
2 Dragons with 4 Claws - The four-clawed Dragon is a symbol for princes and high ranking officials.

5 **Bird and Flower -** 1 Chrysanthemum, 1 Magpie
This panel has the same bird and flower combination as panel 3. In this panel the magpie is depicted on the top of a branch. It means "happiness before your face," or *xi shany mei shao*.
2 Dragons with 4 Claws - The Dragon is in the sea and turns back to look at the sky. The Dragon is the most potent symbol of good fortune. Horned Dragons are the most powerful. The head is in the South and the tail points North. South is an important direction in China - it is lucky, prosperous and brings warmth.

6 **Bird and Flower -** 1 Peony, 1 Black-Crowned Night Heron gazing at the sky.
The Heron is a symbol for purity and longevity. The word for Heron *lu* is a homonym for the word road. With the peony and Heron together it means "one road to prosperity," or "prosperity from start to finish."
2 Dragons with 5 Claws - Many different animals contribute to the Dragon's body: the body of a snake, belly of a frog, scales of a carp, head of a camel, horns of a giant stag, eyes of a hare, ears like a bull, neck of the iguana, paws of the tiger, and claws of the eagle. Horned Dragons are a symbol of the East and the sun.

7 **Bird and Flower -** 1 Peony Flower, 1 Chinese Bulbul Bird
The Chinese Bulbul bird turns white as it grows old and therefore symbolizes a happy, harmonious and lasting marriage. This is a rebus for: "May you live together until your hair turns white." When the peony is depicted with the Chinese Bulbul it means "Have a wealthy life till you are old."
1 Dragon with 5 Claws - Fire symbols are also present and carries the same meaning as panel 1.

8 **Bird and Flower -** 1 Peony Flower, 1 Chinese Bulbul Bird
Same Bird and Flower combination as panel 7. When a peony flower is shown with a Chinese Bulbul they symbolize old age and wealth.
1 Dragon with 5 Claws - There are many clouds around the dragon. The Clouds are close to the sea. The Celestial Dragon protects the mansions of the Gods. The Horned Dragon is the most powerful. The Yellow Dragon emerged from the water and taught the Emperor Fu Shi writing.

Additional details regarding the black reverse side.

Traditionally, Chinese people do not pay a lot of attention to birthdays until they are 60 years old. The 60th birthday is regarded as a very important point of life and therefore there is often a big celebration. Like a giant 60th birthday card, the characters on the back of the screen are gold Confucian calligraphic symbols for birthday and other auspicious wishes - especially **Shou - longevity.** The characters are written in a variety of archaic (ancient) scripts. Each panel has four character lines in different stylistic brush strokes engraved in low and deep relief. All eight panels allude to purity, righteousness, dignity, integrity and longevity, those characteristics scholars strive to emulate.

The segments at the bottom allude to the ideal of purity and personal integrity. Each segment portrays, in gold and low relief, a simple sprig or orchid, as an emblem of the ideal. The eight pictures carry the signature and seal impressions of the famous painter Zheng Banqiao (Zheng Xie, 1693-1765). Trained as a scholar, the noted artist and calligrapher later turned to professional painting, active in one of the most prosperous cities in the 18th century, Yangzhou.

Special thanks for translations and content to: Dr. John Fong, Adjunct Curator of Asian Art; Maggie Lee, Hong Kong Polytechnical University; Marion Lee, PhD, The University of Ohio; Ruby Hagerbaumer, Coordinator of Curatorial Projects, Joslyn Art Museum.
This project is supported by a generous lead gift from Richard Holland and the Holland foundation as well as a generous grant from Carmen and John Gottschalk. Additional support is provided by an anonymous donor.

© Joslyn Art Museum 2009