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Auspicious Imagery in Chinese Rugs and Textiles, February 23, 2001-June 10, 2001

Bats, peonies, dragons, pearls – many of the most common motifs found in the knotted pile rugs and woven luxury textiles of China conveyed wishes for good luck, good health, longevity, and prosperity. This exhibition explores the imagery in the museum's collection of Chinese rugs and velvets, many of which have never before been shown.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Chinese

Pillar rug, 1800s

Cotton warp and weft, wool pile; asymmetrical knot, pulled left
Museum Works of Art Fund 48.136A



In Buddhist temples, structural columns or pillars were often ornamented by wrapping them with decorative woven hangings, such as this rug. A five-clawed imperial dragon is disposed in three horizontal sections so that the dragon appears to spiral around the wrapped pillar. The eight Buddhist symbols of good fortune (canopy, conch shell, sacred vase, umbrella, lotus flower, wheel of law, endless knot, pair of fish) surround the dragon.

The combination of imperial and Buddhist imagery is common in Ningxia rug weaving. The region was heavily influenced by the imperial court to the east, Buddhism from Tibet to the west, and the pile-rug weaving traditions of the Mongols to the north.

Chinese

Hanging, late 1800s - early 1900s

Silk; satin weave, embroidered

Bequest of Martha B. Lisle 67.300



Three pairs of children, placed at intervals on this banner, carry the main meaning on this banner. At the top, the "Heavenly Twins" are seen, one carrying a lotus and the other a box. These symbols of marital harmony are surrounded by bats and various flowers, standing for wealth and happiness.

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The next pair includes a child riding a unicorn, holding a lotus and a reed organ, attended by a servant. This is a rebus, translatable as a wish for many sons who will rise in rank. At the bottom, a pair of children look at each other, smiling; another rebus for "meet each other in joy." The lotus and reed organ held by this pair also express the wish for many sons who will achieve preferment, or high rank. This banner appears to have been designed for use at a wedding.

Chinese
Hanging, late 1800s - early 1900s
Silk; satin weave, embroidered
Bequest of Martha B. Lisle 67.299

The most important images in this design are concentrated at the top of this banner. Peacocks (on the valance) stand for dignity and beauty, and are accompanied by butterflies for longevity, peonies for wealth, and magnolias for beauty. Just below the valance are five men and five bats, under branches of pomegranates. Together these three motifs represent the wish for many sons and much happiness.

The rest of the banner is embroidered in the same exquisite style with a variety of birds and flowers important in Chinese culture: plum, iris, wisteria, cherry, lotus, and crane, pheasant, swallow, oriole, and hummingbird. These appear to be more decorative than symbolic in this particular context.



Chinese
Chair cover
Silk; gilt paper
Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.194

Long rectangular textiles with four distinct sections were used as chair covers on ceremonial occasions, usually in pairs and with a coordinating table frontal. The top section hangs down over the back of the chair, the next two sections form the back and seat, and the final section covers the chair legs.



Here the top two sections depict four-clawed dragons, facing in opposite directions so as to be correctly placed when draped over the chair. In a non-Imperial context, the dragon may stand for the Daoist principle of yang -- the male force. The seat section shows a large lotus flower in a quatrefoil medallion. The lotus is primarily a symbol

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of purity, and as such is one of the eight treasures associated with Buddhism. However, it is also a symbol of one of the eight Daoist Immortals. In the bottom section, two lions, emblems of courage and vitality, flank another of the eight treasures: the wheel of law. Perhaps the overwhelmingly male nature of the imagery on this cover meant that it was used in celebrations for the sons of the house.

Chinese
Table cover, 1790-1800
Silk; metallic yarn
Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.189C

Although the dragon is usually considered an Imperial emblem, it also has significance as a Buddhist symbol of male energy and vitality. In this table frontal, however, the entire imagery of the Imperial "dragon robe" is used. The sea and mountains are below the dragon, which faces straight on in a cloud-filled sky. Two small sky dragons and two small sea dragons fill out the composition. Only two of the "eight treasure" motifs can be found in this piece: coral in the waves and the flaming jewel within the coil of the large dragon. As the imagery is incomplete, this hanging, which was machine woven, may have been manufactured as a souvenir for the tourist trade.



Chinese
Altar cloth, 1800s
Silk; satin weave, embroidered (satin stitch, Peking knots)
Gift of Henry D. Sharpe 16.260

Table frontals such as this were often part of an ensemble that also included chair covers. A table and two chairs were set in a position of honor within the home for celebrations such as weddings.



The pair of phoenixes may be interpreted as emblematic of the Daoist principle of balance between the male and female forces, yin and yang, and by extension to marital harmony. The peonies, which usually symbolize wealth, may here also stand for "the beloved." At center top is a bat holding a stylized character -- perhaps that for "happiness" -- and a ruyi sceptre, which is a homophone for "as you wish." The whole design strongly indicates a marriage blessing.

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Chinese

Table frontal, late 1800s - early 1900s

Silk, metallic-wrapped yarn; satin weave, embroidered

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.191A

The imagery in this table frontal is very complex. The two main medallions contain two cranes holding counting sticks in their beaks, flying toward a pavilion by the sea, the whole surrounded by peach branches. Individually, cranes and peaches symbolize longevity and immortality. The counting sticks refer to a tale of Daoist sages who counted their age in terms of epochs, and not years. The pavilion represents the Daoist paradise. The design therefore invokes four-fold wishes for a long life.



In addition, images in the smaller roundels at the top of the frontal depict the "three happinesses" (peach for long life, pomegranate for many sons, and Buddha's hand citron for happiness) alternately with a bat carrying a ruyi sceptre above a double swastika motif. The bat roundel symbolizes "may you have every joy and happiness as you wish." Other auspicious images fill the spaces around the roundels.

Chinese

Panel, early 1900s

Silk; cut and uncut velvet

Museum Collection S84.191



The primary patterning on this jacquard-woven velvet consists of a stylized shou character (longevity), amplified by two swastika symbols (ten thousand) thus invoking the wish for a life of twice ten-thousand years. Interspersed among the shou characters and the stylized cloud scrolls of the field are six of the eight Buddhist emblems: canopy, conch shell, sacred vase, umbrella, lotus, and endless knot.

Fabrics such as this velvet were manufactured in quantity for garments and furnishings by the early 20th century. These machine woven fabrics tend to have small repeating patterns which are more decorative than symbolic.

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Chinese

Rug, 1800s

Cotton warp and weft, wool pile; asymmetrical knot, pulled left

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.283

This small rug features attributes of the scholar or gentleman in the outer border. A book appears in the lower left and at right center, a chessboard at upper left, and a scroll or painting at left center and lower right. The indistinct motif at upper right may represent a lute, as music joins chess, calligraphy, and painting to complete the four arts of the scholar.



Chinese

Rug, 1800s

Cotton warp and weft, wool pile; asymmetrical knot, pulled left

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.286

Several references to longevity are presented in this rug. The central roundel contains a crane and a deer, both symbols of long life. However, the Chinese character for "deer" is pronounced the same as the character for "official emolument," so the image in the roundel includes wishes for both riches and long life. A variety of motifs frame the roundel: butterfly for longevity, pomegranate for fertility, lotus for purity, plum blossom for perseverance, and chrysanthemum for gentility.



The attributes of the eight Daoist Immortals (fan, sword, basket, bamboo tube and rod, flute, lotus pod, castanets, and double gourd with crutch), yet another reference to longevity, can be seen in the outer border.

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Chinese
Rug, 1800s

Cotton warp and weft, wool pile; asymmetrical knot, pulled left
Gift of Marshall H. Gould 44.040

The twice-repeated roundel in the field of this rug contains five bats surrounding a stylized *shou* character. The word for "bat" is pronounced the same as the character for "blessing," while **shou** means "longevity." The motif is a popular one, pointing to the five blessings (old age, wealth, health, love of virtue, peaceful death) supporting long life. Longevity is also one of the meanings attributed to the endless knot motif.



Chinese
Rug, 1800s

Cotton warp and weft, wool pile
Gift of Marshall H. Gould 44.044

The crane is a popular symbol of longevity. Roundels with two or four cranes facing inward are common field motifs in rugs and other textiles. Here, the cranes appear to be holding peach branches: another reference to long life. The peonies around the central motif symbolize wealth. The design as a whole invokes lavish wishes for long life and riches.



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Chinese
Rug, late 19th century-early 20th century
wool; cotton
Gift of Marshall H. Gould D46.284

The peonies (wealth) and butterflies (longevity) depicted in the field of this rug are common and popular motifs. It is somewhat unusual to find a field pattern such as this one together with the mountain and wave design seen at each end of the rug. A mountain, wave, and cloud design is at the base of all imperial robes of state, symbolizing the earthly realm of the emperor. In this rug the mountain may simply be decorative.

