

From: "Dr. Robert Poor" <poorx001@maroon.tc.umn.edu>
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To: <eastclif@umn.edu>
Cc: Karen M Duncan <dunca002@maroon.tc.umn.edu>
Subject:

A Pair of Chinese Vases (at East Cliff).

This pair of large vases has a red reign-mark written in seal script on the underside of the foot of each piece indicating that they were made in the Ch'ien Lung Era of the Ch'ing Dynasty, i.e. between CE 1736-95. Although they are unsigned the quality of the workmanship would suggest that they might be the product of the famous imperial kilns at Ch'ing Te-Chen.

The shape of these vases is quite typical of the period. The decoration, consisting of birds posed among flowers before a fantastically shaped rock, implies a garden setting for this is exactly the kind of oddly shaped sandstone quarried from the bottom of Lake Taihu that was prized by collectors as a centerpiece in the scholarly garden. Rocks of this sort were collected as early as the twelfth century and were always quite expensive (as they are now. Thus, we know that this is not an ordinary garden but that of a wealthy person.

The strange shapes of Tai Hu rocks were thought to reflect the mysterious energy forces (ch'i) which run through the earth giving shape to such things as mountains. Thus this garden stone is more than just an ornament; it is the focal point in a miniature landscape which was meant to suggest the vitality of nature itself. Similarly, the beautiful birds, shown as though they were roaming free, suggests the freedom of nature or at least freedom in this garden. Pairs of birds are also symbols of domestic bliss, nature's example of perfect couples; their coupling sounds a domestic while providing a natural precedent in nature for that most hallowed of all Chinese social institutions, the family. In the same vein, trees, plants and flowers all have auspicious attributes. In total then, the decoration of this vase offers a visual essay on Chinese ideas about the vitality and beauty of nature and also on the role of nature as a model for human institutions.

The symbolism of these motifs are part of an aesthetic tradition known only to the Chinese elite. Yet, these vases were made during a time when China was ruled by the Manchu, a people who were not ethnic Chinese. The apparent contradiction is easily explained. The Ch'ien Lung emperor was an avid connoisseur of Chinese art and hoped by accumulating ancient art and sponsoring the most beautifully made art in his own time to somehow rival the splendors of the past and establish himself as a worthy monarch in the Chinese tradition. These vases document his ambition.