



## THE LOTUS

By ELEANOR CONSTEN

*Flowers have gladdened the heart of man since time immemorial, and it is not surprising that people in all times and places should have chosen flowers to symbolize their feelings and ideas. The East has perfected such symbolism to an extent unknown in the West. Eleanor Consten, who has already interpreted various aspects of the East to our readers in her articles "Landscape Painting East and West" and "Brush and Hand," now describes the role of the lotus in China. She has been assisted by the Peking photographer Serge Vargassoff. Our author has translated the Chinese poems herself and in doing so has tried to reproduce the original flavor without clinging to a literal translation.*

*The text illustrations are lotus motifs taken from ancient Chinese designs.—K.M.*

**O**F all the flowers of the four seasons which mean more to the people of the East than just a joy to the eye, the lotus is probably used more than any other flower in Chinese art and decoration, outranking even the plum and the bamboo. This is chiefly due to its significance in Buddhist religion. The lotus itself was known in China long before the Indian faith migrated north and east. It is already mentioned in a poem of the *Shih Ching* (詩經), China's oldest collection of songs, as the flower gracing the lowlands. But not until Buddhist teaching and art spread in the first millennium of our era did the Chinese look upon the lotus as something more than an admirable manifestation of nature. Its leaves and flowers rise above the impure waters of stagnant pools; they do not even float, as do those of the water lily, but leave the element of their origin behind. They are thought to grow out of their own substance, without nourishment from the earth, and it is said that, at the beginning of the world, Adi Buddha was manifest in the form of a flame emanating from a lotus flower.

The lotus became the symbol of self-creation. Buddhist deities are seated on lotus thrones to indicate their divine birth, independent of matter. In the hand of the Bodhisattva Padmapani, the "Lotus Bearer," this flower

indicates creative power. Even if the lotus springs from muddy water it stays pure—a befitting symbol of purity. When the child Buddha first walked, lotus flowers grew under his feet, marking his early steps.

### REBORN IN A LOTUS

No Asiatic paradise is conceivable without its lotus pond. The first thought a human being directs toward achievement of bliss in the Sukhavati Paradise will cause a lotus flower to blossom there; as the pious advances in sanctity, so it unfolds its petals until it emanates rays of light. After his death the originator of this flower is reborn in it and is thus able to partake of the glories of paradise. To this day, the corpse of a Chinese is dressed in shoes embroidered or cheaply painted with lotus designs, and the head rests on a pillow similarly adorned.

Buddhist doctrine knows many variations of the lotus flower as symbols or attributes; black, pink, red, white, and blue lotus, all with their special meaning; the open lotus, for instance, may symbolize the day and the closed the night. The shape—often with scalloped and flamboyant petals—and the use to which the blossom is adapted stray far from nature's original intentions. This





LOTUS -  
THE QUEEN OF  
SUMMER

Five pavilions on the  
north shore of the Pei  
Hai in Peking, during  
lotus blossom time





Two rows of lotus petals support an octagonal pagoda of white marble at the Jade Fountain not far from Peking. Guardian deities are carved in relief on the walls and also on the huge petals



Detail of painted cloth panel, probably Tibetan. Out of a pond grow lotus leaves, buds, and a flower carrying the dagoba



Mural in the Fa Hai Ssu Temple near Peking, dating from the Ming Dynasty. An Arhat, disciple of Buddha, with a lotus flower in his left hand and a lotus seed in his right

is especially true of the heavy, compact thrones or bases for Buddhist statues or even pagodas: huge open flowers, sometimes inverted, with many stylized petals, on which, if they are big enough, ornaments or even Buddhist pictures may be traced. This omnipresent lotus throne becomes a handy convention for painters, sculptors, craftsmen, and architects—the outstanding visible evidence of Buddhist faith. Often it is the only reminder of splendor on the site of a once prosperous temple. So many neglected places of worship haunt the soil of China and the imagination of the Chinese poet in their melancholy decay.



#### Looking at the

##### "Temple of Buddha's Footsteps"

On the lotus throne—the god's austere form  
On the pine precipice—traces of his wondrous presence.

Time dims the traces of gold,  
Time has widened the cracks in the stone.  
Stone petals drop and fall on stone steps.  
The god's shadow leans forward and falls over the steps.

We sigh—  
How long would it take to change hill into valley?  
Yet how soon might we face the void of Nirvana?

(Wang Po 王勃, T'ang dynasty, 618-907 A. D.)

#### ONE SOUND AND MANY MEANINGS

The Chinese have always been very fond of puns; and the names of the lotus, which have undergone several changes, oblige them in many ways. *Ho* (荷) was the original name of the flower, and it still often appears in poetry. Nowadays *lien* (蓮), formerly applied to the edible seeds only, is used for the whole plant. Under this pun aspect we again find the lotus in Buddhist temples, now more realistically represented. Among a set of pictures of the Four Seasons, the one which stands for Summer shows the lotus in a vase flanked by peonies and morning glories. The names of these flowers, properly arranged, form the sentence: "Why must there be honors and money?"—a question befitting the Buddhist monk, who has relinquished both. Instead of the present name for lotus *lien*, an older appellation has been used: *ho*, which sounds like the word for "why" and thus starts the question.

This picture of the three summer flowers, with the lotus in a prominent position in the vase, must not be confused with a somewhat similar composition often found on small articles, such as embroidered fan or

spectacle-cases, or a vase with a lotus flower and three halberds. Such little tokens of friendship and encouragement were given to candidates before examinations, the pun indicating the desire of the donor that the receiver pass the three big examinations, leading to the highest official career, one after the other. The three halberds stand for the examinations, and the lotus lends its sound to the meaning of "one by one" (*lien* 連). The same pun makes the lotus a welcome decoration on wedding gifts, especially pictures and cushions. Here the implication is that many children may appear "one after the other."

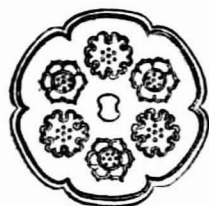
The name *ho* has led the lotus into the realm of Taoism. Ho Hsien Ku, the only woman among the Eight Immortals, is given the lotus for an attribute just because of the similarity of sounds. There is nothing else in her history or in the characters of her name to support such a choice.

In the case of Han-shan and Shih-to we once more have a real pun. They were two exemplary friends who lived in the T'ang dynasty. Earlier pictures present them as jolly men, often with a broom. But the numerous later representations—pictures, porcelains, carvings, or small toys—show a pair of happy, laughing boys carrying a lotus flower and a big lotus leaf over their shoulder. They are called *ho ho erh hsien*, (two living together in perfect harmony). The sound *ho* has again admitted the lotus to an important, non-Buddhist symbolical task. With these boys the lotus once more appears on wedding presents, advising peaceful partnership in married life.

Thus we see that many of the lotus flowers emancipated themselves from Buddhist terminology. From a Buddhist



point of view, the name of "golden lotus" for the bound feet of China's women would be quite shocking. An anecdote tells us the reason for this choice of name. An emperor of the late T'ang dynasty, in the tenth century A.D., had a favorite concubine with exceptionally small and pretty feet. She danced for him on a carpet strewn with lotus blossoms. The fame of her little feet gave rise to the cruel practice of foot-binding, and the lady's dance was commemorated by embroidered lotus flowers on women's tiny shoes and the name given to their crippled contents.



#### USEFUL AS WELL AS BEAUTIFUL

Besides its many engagements in the field of fancy, the lotus plant makes several contributions to the practical necessities of everyday life. The roots of the white and the seeds of the red variety are good to eat, and in the voluminous leaves the vendors wrap anything from a slice of pork to a live cricket. From the seeds a medicine is made which is supposed to be good for fever and shortness of breath: it "cools the heart." The lotus is thought to be always cool, rising as it does from the water; hence it appears as an appropriate decoration on mats and curtains for summer use.

The lotus flower, aloof and short-lived on its slender stem, has fired the imagination of the East more than any other child of nature. Its color, a strong-willed pink, is difficult to match, but to this day it is one of China's favorite hues. Innumerable articles are fashioned in lotus shape: baskets large and small, bowls and cups, delicate playthings of jade and other precious materials, remind us throughout the year of the queen of summer flowers.

#### LOTUS VS. PEONY

When the lotus first entered the field of decorative art, it was on account of its Buddhist significance. This is the case in the caves of Yün Kang, Lung Men, and T'ien Lung Shan, which date

from the late fifth and sixth centuries A.D. They are purely Buddhist, and the lotus is widely used in their decorative scheme. Stylization has already got hold of the flower, and a queer thing has happened to the leaves: the characteristic

and unmistakable round leaf, which alone is botanically correct, has disappeared, and in its place we find a kind of Greek acanthus leaf, which traveled many miles and many centuries until it finally joined the flower of the East. The fact that blue-and-white Ming porcelain is often decorated with a mixture of lotus and peony motives is explained by this stylized lotus flower with its foreign leaf, slit and cusped, with winding tendrils. It is really closer to the peony than to the lotus; yet it is called "joined lotus pattern" on account of the thin stems in regular scrolls. A misinterpretation of this motive was godfather to the "onion pattern" of Dresden china fame.

The T'ang dynasty artisans, who fashioned silver cups in lotus shape or incised lotus leaves or blossoms on pottery plates, must have been aware of using a sacred symbol. In the Sung dynasty the lotus was already detached and loved for its own sake. But being simply a beautiful flower and no more, it now had to face competition, notably of the peony, which had become popular during the T'ang dynasty. A Sung dynasty writer, Chou Tun-i (周敦頤, 1017-1073), has left us a little essay:

#### Loving the Lotus

There are many flowers on shrub or tree, on water and on land, which we love. Tao Yüan-ming of the Chin dynasty loved only the chrysanthemum. From the T'ang dynasty up to now everybody loves the peony. I love only the lotus; it comes out of the mire, but it is not tainted; it bathes in the clear ripples, and yet it is no heartless beauty. Inside it is hollow (full of understanding), outside it is straight (outspoken). It does not creep, wind, or ramify. From far away the fragrance is clear. It stands alone, clean and straight. One can see it from afar but cannot reach it to break it wantonly. I say the chrysanthemum is like a hermit (retired official), the peony is like a man with office and riches, the lotus is a prince. Alas, I hear of very few people loving the chrysanthemum after Tao Yüan-ming. And who loves the lotus as I do? Everybody seems to love the peony.



Ho Hsien Ku, one of the Taoist Eight Immortals. The first character of her name is often mistaken for the lotus—hence her attribute.



Statue of Kwan yin, of unglazed clay, colored and gilded. The lotus petals of the base are tinted white and pink—a touch of realism which is rarely thought necessary.

## Lotus in Religion



"Why must there be honors and money?" A pun on the flowers of summer from a series of the Four Seasons to be found in a Buddhist temple.



Paper lantern for the Lantern Festival, composed of many lotus blossoms made of delicately folded and tinted paper.



Chien Lung copy of early Ming blue-and-white porcelain. A bunch of lotus with leaves and seed pod

### Lotus as a Decorative Motif



Small flower basket, carved from a single piece of white jade. The opening spreads out like the petals of the lotus



Lotus on porcelain. Covered teacup with simple blue lotus petals. Tea jar with a naturalistic group of lotus in water. Water pot for the ink stone; slightly raised petals are outlined in gold; other flowers in colored enamel are strewn over them (by courtesy of P. C. Huang)

Today the author would find no cause for complaint if he were to mingle with the people who turn out every summer to admire the blossoms on Peking's lakes, or if he were to watch the loving skill that goes into the making of lotus lanterns, elaborate compositions of delicately tinted paper. They are sold for the fifteenth day of the seventh moon of the lunar calendar, when "sacrifices are made to the ancestors and the ancestral graves are swept." In the evening, children proudly carry their lighted lanterns along the streets. Sometimes it is just an ordinary lotus leaf with a candle stuck in the middle—probably the origin of the custom. They sing:

Lotus-leaf candles! Lotus-leaf candles!  
Today you are lighted! Tomorrow thrown away!

#### THE LOTUS'S BIRTHDAY

In Kiangsu the people go out on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth moon to view the flowers on moats and lakes; they call it the birthday of the lotus.

The West Lake is also famous for its blossoms; on its shores lies Hangchow, the capital of the Southern Sung dynasty, a city called by Marco Polo the most beautiful in the world—high praise indeed from a native of Venice. Su Shih (蘇軾), brilliant essayist, poet, and painter of the Northern Sung dynasty, picks the lotus season as the most glorious time:

No season on the West Lake like July.  
An endless sea of green leaves joins the sky.  
The lotus flowers in a strange red tone  
Reflect the brilliant light of the sun.

The lotus is so closely connected with pleasure on the water that a certain kind of song, sung by beggars and entertainers on the boats of the Imperial Canal and other waterways, is called *lien hua lao* "amusing lotus songs" (蓮花落). Their themes are not confined to the flower in their name, nor their performance to the boats. They can still be heard in the streets of Peking to the accompaniment of bamboo clappers. Though originally a beggar's stunt, they have recently made the radio—a long way from the lotus-covered waters.

We may enjoy the ever-recurring lotus motif in arts and crafts, the paintings in ink and color, the delicacy of jade petals, the endless variety of snuff bottles in glass, porcelain, or stone, the brocades and velvets in ever new shades—we might even get complacently used to the products of so many creative minds and skillful hands; but the mysterious appearance in midsummer of the first lotus leaves on impassive ponds, the thrill of discovering the first blossoms among the billows of green, remote, proud and untouchable—these will stir us anew every year, and the last poem to their glory has not been written yet.

Eight, nine leaves cluster,  
Tender leaves, just emerged from the water  
Make scattered spots of young green.  
The round shadow of others  
Already conceals the fishes,  
Their stems make clear pools in the duckweed.  
A few shiftless weeds wind around the stems.  
Under the waves the spring growth is hidden.  
Above—still closed—is the fragrant heart of the flower.

(Li Ch'ün-yü 李商隱, T'ang dynasty)

