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Figure 1. Bronze: Tsin period (220 B. C.) or earlier

Chinese and Japanese Mirrors

THE first mirrors in any country were undoubtedly still pools, such as Narcissus found to his cost. In the course of time these were ingeniously adapted to the needs of man by forming them artificially in vessels dark in color. Such an adaptation was an important step in the production of mirrors, for it made them portable in a limited sense: it made possible the placing of a mirror in any horizontal position convenient to the user. With the invention of stone mirrors another important step in mirror production was taken, for that step secured not only greater portability, but also durability of surface. Thenceforward the development of mirrors has been mainly in the way of increasing the clearness and the accuracy of the reflection.

In Chinese literature* the earliest reference to a mirror — or rather to a reflected image — indicates that a sheet of water was the medium of reflection. The latest date to be assigned to that reference seems to be the twelfth century B. C., and the years between that century and the beginning of the Christian era saw stone, jade, iron, and bronze mirrors in use in China. In the sixth century A. D., glass mirrors, too, were known to the Chinese, who bought them at great prices from merchants of Western Asia. Of all these kinds of mirrors, however, no specimens survive except of bronze. Rust and hard knocks seem to have demolished those of iron and of the other materials. As the only surviving specimens are of bronze, and as they are

* The interested reader is referred to F. Hirth's *Chinese Metallic Mirrors*. New York, 1906, for an admirable bibliography of the Chinese sources of the subject.

so much more important in the history of Chinese and Japanese art, the term "mirror" in relation to either country means a mirror of bronze. Such mirrors are of genuinely great antiquity, though not probably so great as some Chinese writers would have us believe. According to them, the mysterious Yellow Emperor, whose death is said to have occurred forty-five hundred years ago, brought mirrors into use along with many other inventions of great benefit to his empire. Certainly they were well-known in the early years of the Chou dynasty (that is, in the twelfth century B. C.) Probably their production was greatly facilitated by the discovery and the use of quicksilver, and it is conjectured that they reached perfection as reflectors in the sixth or the fifth century B. C.

From the Chou dynasty — though the compilation may not date from so far back — comes the Code of Chou, in which is set forth among many other things the proper proportion of the metals composing the bronze of mirrors. These metals, as generally in Chinese and Japanese mirrors, are copper and tin, combined, according to the Code, in equal proportions. In later ages other metals were added and these proportions were changed. In the Hang dynasty silver was sometimes added in making the alloy, and in Tang mirrors we occasionally find a percentage of gold. Yuan and Ming mirrors have a larger proportion of copper and some zinc, and later Japanese mirrors show an increase in the proportion of tin. But, whatever the alloy, the reflecting surface of the mirrors which have come down to us was arrived at in much the same way. The surface of the bronze was polished and then treated with mercury, with the result that it gave a clear reflection. For cleaning that precious and delicate surface nothing served so well as the juice of a plum or of a pomegranate.

In the history of art Chinese mirrors are of great importance, not merely, however, for the light they throw on ideas of beauty in very early ages. Unlike the bronze sacrificial vessels of China, in the making of which the creative impulse ceased in the early dynasties, mirrors reflect the artistic impulses of all the periods down to modern times, when glass superseded metal in their manufacture. The decorative pattern on the backs is often of great beauty, and always of interest, and the form, as it varies from the square or the round, indicates a high degree of appreciation for beauty of line. Often the backs bear inscriptions which indicate the date of the mirror, specifically or by allusion to known history; but even undated inscriptions, through the nature of the inscribed characters, furnish a definite clue to dates. Thus we may trace a succession of decorative impulses, which, through vast "cycles of Cathay," has been continuous.

One of the earliest mentions in Chinese of a metallic mirror is to the effect that it was a gift accompanying a "queen's large girdle." Apparently, then, mirrors were used for personal decoration in very early times, and there is evidence to show that kings delighted to wear them set in their crowns. In other ways, too, they were affected by royalty. One emperor of the Tang dynasty covered the walls of his room with mirrors and so wasted his time there that his ministers were obliged to interfere. A more valuable architectural use of mirrors is found in the Howodo Temple in Japan. There small mirrors were let into the ceiling at the angles of the beams to make spots of light in the scheme of decoration.

Obviously the primary use of a mirror is for toilet purposes; but to see yourself in a mirror is to know something about what you have to face the world with. Accordingly, the Chinese and Japanese make this use of a mirror significant as a part of their fulfillment of the Confucian idea of decorum. They develop the idea further: to know what you face the world with is, in a measure, to know your soul; and to know that is but a step toward the toilet of the soul — toward schooling your inner self. By a slight transition — since a mirror aids so faithfully toward self-knowledge — the mirror comes to stand for fidelity. There is a story of a wife, who, separated from her husband and lapsing from virtue, lost the half of the mirror which had been entrusted to her at parting; it had flown, in the form of a magpie, to her husband to tell him of her broken faith. As the sword is the soul of man, so is the mirror the soul of woman. It is a mystic symbol of purity.

Such symbolic meaning has further development. The imperial regalia of Japan are a mirror, a jewel, and a sword. Of these, the mirror is considered very sacred because it once reflected the image of the Sun-goddess, mother of the imperial line. To leave no doubt as to their intended religious symbolism, the Mountain Samurai, a sect of Buddhism which includes Shintoism, chiselled Buddhist images on the surface of the mirror, or else with mirrors made by the "magic-mirror process" reflected Buddhist images from apparently plain surfaces. Later, images were set in high relief on the faces of mirrors, thus producing the effect known as the hanging Buddha. Mirrors so treated were, of course, venerable; and it is easy to see that the surfaces, thought fit for such symbolism or for such sacred use, might themselves have beneficial properties ascribed to them. In fact, such properties were ascribed even to ordinary mirrors. Thus the Taoist monks wore them on their backs to ward off evil spirits, and frequently mirrors were placed on the breast of the dead for the same purpose. The belief was that evil destroys itself on recognizing itself. Hence mirrors could ward off sickness, since evil spirits cause it, and, by an easy deduction, could cure if ground up and taken as a medicine. How efficacious "powdered mirror" was the records do not say, but for long it was listed in the Chinese *materia medica*. One wonders still more at the belief that mirrors were a protection against robbery. Seven of them imbedded in the ground in a certain form, on a certain day, under auspicious conjunction of the stars, were held to form an impassable barrier to thieves.

Figure 2. Bronze: Hang period (200 B. C.–220 A. D.)

Figure 3. Bronze: period of the Six Dynasties (268–618 A. D.)

Figure 4. Bronze: Tang period (618–907 A. D.)

Figure 5. Bronze: Tang period (618–907 A. D.)

On the other hand, mirrors happily cast and suitably inscribed were held as talismans of good luck. Wealth, fame, appreciation followed the possessor of such. Even to-day a Chinese lady in the perils of child-birth holds a mirror to ensure greatness for the son hoped for.

The importance of the mirror to the Chinese and the Japanese mind may be perceived from the fabulous lore that grew around mirrors and their properties. Of some it is told that they could enable the user to see through opaque bodies, much as to-day the ultra-violet rays reveal things ordinarily hidden. Of others it is said that they could reflect at great distances, and that they were used to show the movements of the enemy while he was unaware of observation. Sometimes a mirror was made to detect the true nature of men. Such were invaluable to kings. And always mirrors were believed to penetrate disguises. No thing of evil could hope so to disguise itself as to pass in a mirror for anything but what it really was. Nor is this growth of fable to be wondered at. Consider a single property of the concave mirror — that it served to focus the rays of the sun into fire when even the Chinese were comparatively a young people. Such fire was sacred, enkindled with due rites, and distributed to the people for their use and comfort. Their imaginations must have been slow indeed not to have enkindled at the Promethean marvel and its instrument, the mirror.

In the making of so wonderful a contrivance, even when for ordinary use, great care was expended. Emperors called experts to consider alloys, and artists to furnish designs. Astrologers appointed an auspicious time, and all precautions were taken to secure the result desired. Genii were believed to guard important mirrors, not only in the making, but afterwards. One great mirror, it is said, was cast by a dragon, who entered the foundry in disguise. As proof of its supernatural founder, it had the quality of causing rain-fall when carried to the bank of a river.

It is no wonder that the admired products of such care should have been sought for by collectors since long ago. Indeed, to early imperial collections we owe much of the information concerning early mirrors. Nor is it a matter of wonder that they were important articles in the system of exchange which was called tribute. According to that system, the Japanese — as did other nations — carried to the emperor of China rare products of their own country, and brought away "gifts" in return. To this imperial monopoly of foreign trade we owe the survival of many valuable mirrors, for the Japanese prized highly mirrors from the Chinese imperial foundry. Many examples of the Hang dynasty (during which the system of tribute flourished) have been found in Japanese tombs.

In size, in style of decoration, and in form mirrors vary greatly, the size depending on the use for which they were intended. Variations in style of decoration and in form are, of course, more important; they speak definitely of the period in which the mirrors were made. Thus in the Tsin and the Hang periods (220 B. C.–220 A. D.) they were mostly round with a round knob in the middle of the back. The design is generally arranged around the knob in concentric circles, and the style of the decoration is that of the pure classic art of China.

Figure 1 shows a mirror from the Tsin dynasty, or perhaps of earlier date. On the round knob are centred three concentric spaces, separated by two simple mouldings raised and rounded like the outer edge. The design in the innermost space is a "strap" pattern of two twisted strands; in the intermediate space it is a foliated pattern of simple repeated units; in the outer space it is formed by twelve dragons interwoven and highly conventionalized. The whole design is treated after the style of the jade carvings of the period.

Figure 2 is a wonderful piece of casting, probably from the *shang-fang* — the imperial foundry in the Hang dynasty. In the middle is a large knob on which are centered three distinct spaces, the outermost being gently sloped toward and much raised above the inner ones. The flat moulding between the inner and the intermediate spaces, and the bevel bounding the inner edge of the outer space, are emphasized by transverse ray-like lines, which on the outer space become broad points. The design of the inner space is formed of two leaf-like conventional ornaments repeated in alternation four times. In the intermediate space and alternating with the nipple ornament occur seven divine figures — the tiger, the dragon, the phoenix, the Da-dragon, a heavenly being, and the snake and tortoise entwined. These are modelled and cast with extraordinary skill. On the outer space are figures of birds, fish, and beasts, highly conventionalized.

The Six Dynasties (268-618 A. D.) form the transition between the Hang and the second great school of Chinese art in the Tang Dynasty. During this period the Hang style survives, but with a difference. The designs grow freer. From this period come the "grape" mirrors, of which a specimen is reproduced in Figure 3. Here the spaces are but two, separated by a rounded moulding and with an outer edge of great thickness. The knob is not round, but formed as part of the central design, like the six lion-like beasts that surround it. They sprawl among stems of grape vine, and clusters of grapes hang from the inner moulding and from that at the edge. In the outer space are birds and beasts in alternation. The whole design suggests a West Asian influence — the result of the intercourse and the trade which had been gradually building up since an early century in the Hang period.

Still greater freedom of design and elaboration of details appear in the mirrors from the Tang period (618-907 A. D.). In these gold, silver, mother-of-pearl are much used for inlaying, and on one Tang mirror — to be found in the Shosoin Collection at Nara — is the first instance of cloisonné.

Figure 6. Bronze: Sung period (960–1280 A. D.)

The outline, too, of these mirrors shows development. The shape of the water-chestnut flower, which had been known, but not generally used, from the third century A. D., occurs frequently, as do other modified octagons. In arrangement of the design the concentric spaces are generally discarded. Figure 4 is an illustration of a Tang mirror of the water-chestnut shape. There are but two spaces; the larger one occupying the centre, and the knob, lion-like, as in Figure 3, being treated as a part of the design immediately about it. Two peacocks and two emblems of love — birds with their necks entwined — are placed symmetrically about the knob. The design of the border, of which the edge is reinforced by a strong flat moulding, is formed in regular alternation of birds and flowers haunted by butterflies. Figure 5 shows a large mirror of the rounded octagonal shape. Here the knob is rounded. The large central design shows two phoenixes on clouds symmetrically placed, and two ornaments as settings for characters which read "one thousand autumns," and signify longevity. The edge is strengthened by a wide moulding, and the border shows conventional clouds, lotus sprays, and jewels.

In the Sung period (960-1280 A. D.) mirrors were made thinner than before, and new shapes — squares and modified squares — came into fashion. The relief was modelled very low, and is similar to that found on the thin porcelain of the period. Figure 6 shows a Sung mirror. The knob is very small, the outer edge very important, and the whole back is treated without subdivisions. Immediately about the knob, the relief, including the knob itself, is modelled to represent a flower lying face downward. Four sprays of the same flower — a peony — are arranged to form the remainder of a design of much grace.

The Yuan and the Ming periods (1280-1662 A. D.) were times of decadence in the production of mirrors. In design they became coarser and in casting rougher, though sometimes they are very vigorous. Though mirrors with handles came into fashion, — a tardy development, considering that dancers in the Hang dynasty are known to have used such, — there was no other marked change of form. For the most part, mirrors became less interesting, and, whatever the cause, their great days seem to have been numbered.

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