



Chinese Bronze Mirrors with Silver Decoration

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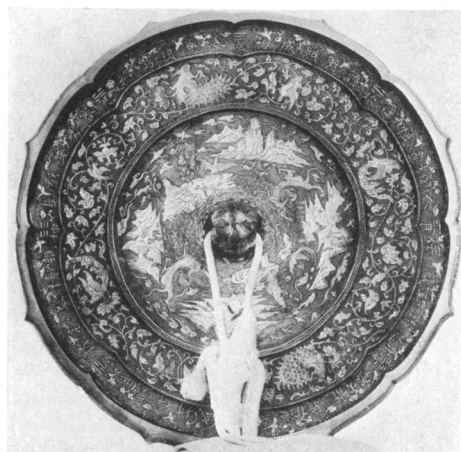
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CHINESE BRONZE MIRRORS
WITH SILVER DECORATION

UP to quite recent times mirrors in China and Japan were bronze disks. The faces were plain, silvered and polished; the backs, carefully cast, were decorated with very elaborate and beautiful ornament around pierced central knobs. A cord or leather strap was strung through this knob and the mirror could be handled

after centuries of burial took the most amazingly beautiful patina, varying in color and texture according to the conditions of the soil in which the mirror was found or the alloy of the metal which had been used.

The great beauty of the decorative motives, the superb casting, and the lovely patina make these Chinese mirrors the most charming objects that have come to us from early times. Many have survived



BRONZE MIRRORS WITH SILVER DECORATION IN THE STOREHOUSE AT NARA IN JAPAN
CHINESE, T'ANG PERIOD

without the risk of dimming the polished side.

The earliest known mirrors date from the Han period, when the decoration was simple and almost geometrical; gradually it became more ornate, with animal forms interwoven, till in the early part of the T'ang dynasty the profusion of animal life and floral scrollwork reminds us of the highly decorated Italian bronzes of the fifteenth century. After that, during the later T'ang period, the decorative motives became simpler and the mirrors flatter, two birds and two lions or two flowers filling the surface tastefully and symmetrically; still later, borders were added and gradually the design became more complicated and less effective.

The metal, carefully chosen, often contains a large alloy of silver, or the whole mirror is heavily coated with silver, which

because mirrors were attached to the ceilings of tombs or hung on the walls, evidently with the idea of lighting up the vaults, and it is owing to this fortunate mistake that Chinese and Korean mirrors are not more rare. The Museum owns a very representative collection, and has acquired lately some very rare specimens to which special attention should be drawn.

One is a very small mirror, the back of which is not silvered but covered with a sheet of silver, showing on a tooled ground a design of animals hammered out round the central knob, which consists of the usual badger. It is a small and unimportant looking pocket mirror of the T'ang period, curious and rare because it is similar to the much larger one kept in the Shosoin, the Nara storehouse, where since 775 the household articles of the Emperor Shōmu are kept. In the same treasure house is

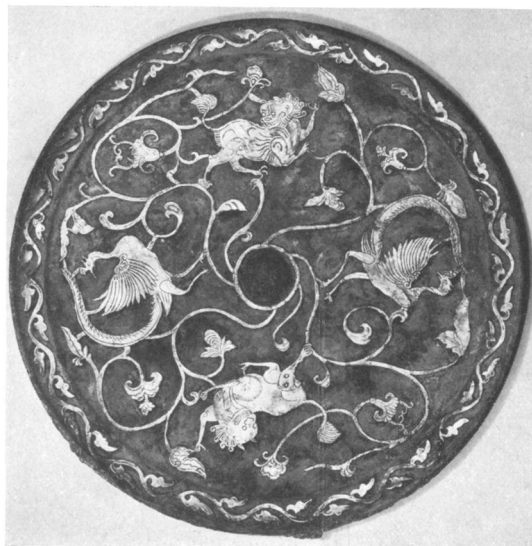
preserved another large mirror of which the back is covered with black lacquer inlaid with a design in silver. This form of decoration, much used during the T'ang period on lacquer boxes, musical instruments, etc., and called by the Japanese Heidatsu or "uncovered ornament," consisted of applying in the lacquer ornaments cut out from thin sheets of silver; when the lacquer was polished, the silver came to the surface and made handsome designs on the black or rich brown surface. The second mirror which the Museum has acquired is about the same size as the one preserved in the Shosoin and here reproduced. It has lost nearly all its lacquer during the fourteen hundred years of burial, but the silver inlay

remains in place practically intact. The design is the one mentioned before, which is often found on large mirrors of the T'ang period—two phoenixes and two lions between floral scrolls, and in the border,

which is hollowed out, a more unusual design, a running and continuous leaf scroll. The silver is of substantial thickness and is engraved on the surface; the design is very handsome and well drawn, but the special interest of the mirror is its great rarity—besides the one specimen in the Japanese Shosoin no other example is known. Both the large and the small mirror are shown in Room H 9 in the

case where the early Chinese jewelry is exhibited.

S. C. B. R.



LARGE MIRROR INLAID WITH A
DESIGN IN SILVER
IN THE MUSEUM



POCKET MIRROR, CHINESE, T'ANG PERIOD
IN THE MUSEUM