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A Loan Collection of Chinese Bronze Mirrors

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A LOAN COLLECTION OF CHINESE BRONZE MIRRORS



FIG. 1. BRONZE MIRROR, TS'IN TYPE

A LOAN collection of Chinese bronze mirrors, covering, roughly, a period of a thousand years, has been placed on exhibition in Gallery H13 until the first of January. Over forty examples give a very clear idea of the development of the mirror during long centuries of popularity, and it is interesting to observe how few fundamental changes were made in form and general conception, though the decorative elements underwent entire metamorphosis. Speculation as to the advent of the mirror into China is useless, but it probably appeared from the west at a period when the Chinese had been casting bronze for many centuries, and it must have been adopted, fully developed from an outside source. It would be difficult to place any of these mirrors before the third century B.C., and they are the earliest type known in China. Circular mirrors were in use in Greece in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. and their general size approximates the average dimensions of the Chinese mirror, although they seem to have nothing in common with it except the circular form and size. On the other hand the majority of Greek mirrors had handles, much like our small mirrors of today.

In one respect Chinese mirrors are all alike: the decoration is confined to the

back, in the center of which rises a pierced boss through which a tassel-like handle, probably of silk, but possibly leather, was passed. The face of the mirror is, as a rule, slightly convex, which permits the entire face of the user to be seen. The material is generally white bronze which is the color of silver and will take a high polish. Age and burial often produce beautiful patinations, among them a rich and lustrous black. Occasionally the mirror backs were gilt.

Sometimes a thin bronze mirror-plate was covered with a bed of lacquer in which cut-out designs or patterns of gold foil were embedded, but this type is infrequent and has not survived in good condition, owing to the materials. It is not represented in this collection. Then sometimes backs of repoussé gold or silver were attached to small mirrors. The most interesting of all, however, are the mirrors of solid bronze where the decorative features are an integral part of the casting.

The virtuosity of the founders who cast these Chinese bronze mirrors is astonishing. One rarely finds the trace of chisel or polishing instrument on the decorated surface. The mirrors seem to have emerged from their molds, shining and perfect, although the reflecting surface must have received a very careful truing and polishing. This



FIG. 2. BLACK BRONZE MIRROR, HAN TYPE

surface, in spite of long burial, when freed from its encumbering crust, often retains such a smooth surface that it seems to have been recently polished.

The early mirrors are thin and the late are thick, and the types of decoration are so clearly defined that it is hardly possible to confuse mirrors of different periods, always allowing, of course, for transitional types. Sometimes replicas of early mirrors were made at later dates, and one of these, a probable Ming copy of an undoubtedly T'ang original, is shown. The mold seems to have been made directly from an authentic specimen, and there is nothing in its appearance, such as spurious patination, to indicate that any deception was intended.

The pre-Han type of mirror is called Ts'in, not because it was necessarily made in the Ts'in Dynasty, a short period of about fifty years, but because it bears a distinct type of decoration which appeared in the late Chou Dynasty (1122-256 B.C.) and continued through the Ts'in into the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-219 A.D.) when it gradually disappeared. Most Ts'in mirrors bear scroll-like creatures of hydra or dragon form in low, flat relief upon a ground of extremely delicate and complicated diaper patterns, sometimes in more than one plane (Fig. 1). The general appearance is that of a dull or roughened ground on which shining figures are sil-



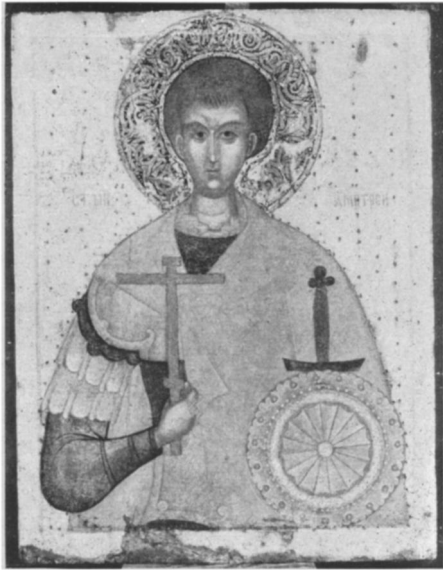
FIG. 3. "GRAPE" MIRROR, T'ANG DYNASTY



FIG. 4. BRONZE MIRROR, T'ANG DYNASTY OR EARLIER

houetted. There is much invention of line, and the general effect is linear.

The Han type of mirror (Fig. 2) cannot possibly coincide exactly with the limits of the Han Dynasty, and many examples of this type must have been made well on into the Six Dynasties (222-589 A.D.), but they are a distinct type coming between the early mirrors and the T'ang, and we shall hardly be justified in trying to delimit subdivisions of styles and epochs. They are characterized by concentric borders of geometrical motives, generally enframed by a meandering frieze. A circular inscription often follows the inside of the border, and in the central field are small bosses in low relief with closely intermingled small figures of birds and animals, simply and dashing represented in raised lines of great charm. The best examples of this type are beautifully crisp in execution. They are somewhat thicker than the fragile Ts'in mirrors, but by no means as heavy as the T'ang. The boss is larger, and usually a simple hemisphere. Occasionally figures in heavy relief appear on Han mirrors, but they are greatly stylized and have little fluency or ingenuity in using animal forms. They are, however, the precursors of the florid and brilliant T'ang style, and should be looked upon as transitional.



"ST. DEMETRIUS OF THESSALONICA," RUSSIAN
ICON, PSKOV SCHOOL, FIFTEENTH CENTURY

The T'ang mirrors, sumptuous, heavy, intricate, rococo, would have delighted the Italian craftsmen of the high Renaissance. The circular examples, as a rule, bear concentric bands of interlacing floral and animal forms, as does also the central field, while the boss frequently takes an animal form. The floral forms are frequently vines with bunches of luxuriant grapes, and are often called "grape-vine" mirrors (Fig. 3); they show a Hellenistic derivation. If, as some contend, the mirror came into China from Greece three or four centuries before the Christian era, it is very interesting to note that there is nothing even remotely indicative of Greek feeling in the early types and hundreds of years pass before the unmistakable "Hellenistic" patterns appear. This points first to independent development and then to new trade routes.

Many T'ang mirrors are made in six or eight petalled forms based on the beloved lotus. These often have flat grounds with pictorial decoration in low relief (Fig. 4).

The mirrors vary greatly in size. Some are small enough to have been used in "vanity cases" and others are so large that a sturdy man would soon tire of holding

them. These were doubtless placed on stands as was done in Japan.¹

Japanese archaeologists are now engaged on a scientific study of Chinese mirrors, and it is not too much to hope that within a few years our knowledge of them will be very definitely increased.

No collection of Chinese bronzes can claim to be representative unless it contains the principal types of mirrors, and it is to be regretted that the collections of the Art Institute have so far made little progress in this direction.

CHARLES FABENS KELLEY

¹A large mirror on a stand is shown in an early scroll in the British Museum attributed to Ku K'ai Chih of the fourth century A.D. A reproduction of this scroll is on view with the mirrors.

A CHRISTMAS PLAY

The second production of the Art Institute Members Series of the Goodman Theatre will be presented during the week beginning December 7. It will be played four successive nights and a matinée on Thursday. The play chosen for the Christmas production is from the pen of Paul Claudel, the French Ambassador to the United States, who is not merely a diplomat, but a dramatist, a poet, a mystic and a philosopher.

The play is "Tidings Brought To Mary," a miracle play, not so ancient as "Everyman" but in a fashion a much finer product of the poetic and religious spirit. It has the advantage of uniting the substance of drama with the pageantry of "The Miracle."

All members of the Art Institute have been mailed coupons exchangeable for tickets to the plays in the Art Institute Members Series without any charge. Reservations cannot be taken over the telephone. Coupons may be exchanged for tickets on presentation at the box office of the theatre, or at the information desk of the Art Institute. Tickets may be obtained by mail, in advance, if written requests include a stamped self-addressed envelope and the necessary coupons.

The Children's Theatre opened Saturday, November 14, at 2:30 with "Treasure Island" by Robert Louis Stevenson.