

## MARY KARLTON

*Asian Melange*, 2010  
Acrylic and Mixed Media on Paper, 22 x 30 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## TERESE TSE BARTHOLOMEW

### Happiness Has Arrived Visual symbols in Chinese art

In 1969 I was hired by the newly founded Asian Art Museum in San Francisco as its first curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art. (Later I would specialize in the arts of China and the Himalayas.) I ended up staying thirty-nine years! On one occasion back in those early years the museum's director asked me for advice regarding a gift for a departing commissioner. This commissioner was Chinese, and the director wanted to know if a clock was appropriate. I was horrified! In China, to "give a clock," *songzhong*, is a homonym, or pun, for giving "a last farewell." In other words, for attending a close relative, such as a parent, in the last extremity. I vetoed the choice.

Looking around the museum's galleries, I found many visual symbols among the Chinese art objects on display. But the object's labels were not enlightening: "Vase," "Plate with fruit," "Bowl with flowers." "But all of these have auspicious meanings!" I said to myself. I visited other museums, and saw exactly the same types of labels. In a painting of Zhong Kui, the demon queller, in a major museum on the East Coast, the label talked about the god and the history of the artist, but didn't say a word about the significance of the painting itself. Included in the painting is a fascinating vase of flowers and fruit denoting the fifth day of the fifth moon, the most poisonous day of the year, when the portrait of Zhong Kui was hung in homes to ward off evil. So began my thirty-year study of Chinese visual symbols.

No one in China would give a clock as a gift. In China, gift giving is always carefully thought out. The gift has to be appropriate for the occasion. Above all, the gift has to be auspicious. A vase, *ping*, is a suitable gift for all occasions because the word is a pun for "peace." For the opening of a Chinese store or restaurant in San Francisco, the standard gift is a pot of philodendrons. This plant is an American substitute for a Chinese plant named *wannianqing*, or "ten thousand years green." New restaurants in the Bay Area are always filled with such plants, embodying the good wishes from friends that the new business will flourish for ten thousand years.

Chinese decorative motifs are also propitious in nature. They represent auspicious sayings that come in four-character phrases. Those phrases might be written out in full on an object, or they might be represented pictorially by a group of seemingly unrelated objects, such as bats