MARY KARLTON

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

COURTESY THE ARTIST

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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

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and peaches, which stand for such auspicious concepts as happiness and longevity. Such a grouping is known as a *rebus*, or pictorial pun. It combines well-known symbols and objects that have the same sounds as those in the auspicious sayings. The Chinese language is conducive to punning because it contains many words that share the same sounds. As a result, there is a great deal of play on words in Chinese, in daily speech as well as in the decorative arts.

The most basic wishes of the Chinese are represented by the three Star Gods of Blessings, Rank, and Longevity. Fu Xing, the God of Blessings, often carries a young child. Traditionally in Chinese families it was the epitome of happiness to have a male child to carry on the family name. Lu Xing, the God of Rank and Emolument, appears as an official richly attired in court robes; while Shou Xing, or Shou Lao, the God of Longevity, is shown as an old man with a prominent forehead, holding a staff and the peach of immortality. Together, the three gods guard over the well-being of every household in China, and they are worshipped by the Chinese to make these wishes come true.

Motifs for Blessings or Happiness

While bats remind Americans of Halloween, in China they are the symbol for blessings, or happiness. In Chinese, the word for "bat," *fu*, shares the same sound as the word for "blessing," and for that reason it constitutes one of the most popular rebuses in Chinese art. In China, the bat is usually shown upside down. Upside down, or *dao*, is a pun on the word "arrived"—therefore, an upside-down bat means that "happiness has arrived." A bat descending from the clouds symbolizes "blessings descending from heaven," while red bats in the sky form the rebus *hongfu qitan*, or "happiness vast as the sky." When a bat (*fu*) hovers above a coin (*qian*), it is a rebus for "blessings in front of your eyes" (*fuzai yanqian*). (Chinese coins have square openings, allowing them to be strung together. The openings are commonly known as "eyes.")

A grouping of five bats stands for the Five Blessings—old age, wealth, health, love of virtue, and a peaceful death. In textiles and household furnishings, one often comes across the motif of five bats surrounding a circular "longevity" (*shou*) character, set against a background of swastikas. Because of a similarity in sound, "swastika" is used as a pun for the word *wan* or "ten thousand." A bat carrying a swastika on a ribbon is, therefore, a rebus for *wanfu* or "ten thousand blessings."

Motifs on Marriage and Children

The flower that symbolizes marriage is the lotus (known variously as the *hehua* or *lianhua*). *He* is a pun for "harmony," while *lian* is a pun for "continuous," as in the continuous birth of male offspring. The lotus is one of the few flowers whose seed pod is already present when the flower begins to bloom. To the Chinese, this excellent omen traditionally augured the early arrival of sons.

Other motifs for a happy marriage are the double fish, a symbol of fertility and conjugal bliss; fish and water (a rebus for *yushui hexie* or "may you agree like fish and water"); and a pair of mandarin ducks, symbols of fidelity and a happy marriage. The dragon and phoenix used to be royal symbols of marriage, but now they are commonly used by everyone as a wedding motif.

To ensure that the marriage is fruitful, the Chinese scatter the marriage bed with red dates (*Ziziphus jujuba* or *zaozi*, a rebus for "early"), peanuts (a symbol of numerous offspring), lotus seeds (*lianzi*, a rebus for "continuous" birth of "sons"), dried dragon eyes (*Euphoria longan* or *guiyuan*, a rebus for "nobility"), and lichees (*Litchi chinensis*, a rebus for "bright"), with the fervent hope that the couple will soon be blessed with a number of bright and noble sons who will bring glory to the family name by passing the civil service examinations and becoming high officials.

There are also toggles and charms that are worn by the married couple to bring about desired results. In the old days, men sometimes wore a toggle of carved agate in the shape of dates and peanuts, a rebus for "early sons." Women carried amulets in the form of infant boys, and wore clothes embroidered with the "hundred boys" motif. Prominent among symbols of fertility is the pomegranate, by virtue of its many seeds. Other symbols for many children are the vines bearing large and small gourds, and melons with butterflies. They are both rebuses for *guadie mianmian*, meaning "endless generations."

Symbols Associated with Wealth and Rank

In China, the flower that symbolizes wealth and rank is the *mudan* or tree peony (*Paeonia suffruticosa*), the "king of flowers." The early history of this flower is closely associated with royalty, for records show that it was grown in the gardens of the Sui and Tang emperors. Because of this association, it became known as the flower of prosperity. It is one of the most popular decorative motifs.

Rank is closely associated with wealth in China, for once a man becomes an official, he is more or less set for life. Therefore, it was the ardent wish of parents for their sons to become scholars, so they could pass the civil service examinations with flying colors and become officials. On a boy's cap, a golden carp leaping towards the "dragon gate" and transforming itself into a dragon symbolizes a scholar passing his exams and becoming an official.

Motifs of Longevity

As the emblem of longevity, the peach is of paramount importance in Chinese culture. One of the most popular of all motifs, it is the attribute of Shou Lao, the God of Longevity. It also brings to mind the legend of Xi Wangmu, the Queen Mother of the West, who has a peach orchard at her abode at Yaochi, high in the Kunlun Mountains. Every six thousand years when her peaches ripen, she holds a banquet and invites all the gods and immortals to partake of the fruit of immortality.

In the Asian Art Museum's collection is a plate decorated with five red bats and eight peaches. The bats symbolize the "Five Blessings" mentioned above, while the peaches stand for the Eight Immortals. The latter are people from various walks of life who, having absorbed the Elixir of Life, have become immortals and are worshipped as gods of longevity. Such a plate would have been used at the emperor's birthday banquet.

Because in the Chinese language many words share the same sounds, puns abound both in daily speech and in art. To fully appreciate Chinese art, it is necessary to understand the ways that its visual symbolism expresses wishes for such auspicious blessings as happiness, good marriages with an abundance of children, wealth, rank, and longevity. Then happiness will indeed have arrived.

Terese Tse Bartholomew was curator of Himalayan Art and Chinese Decorative Art at the Asian Art Museum before her retirement from the museum in 2008. (An earlier version of this essay appeared in the museum's membership magazine.) Her magnum opus is called *Hidden Meanings in Chinese Art.* It is a thorough reference guide to Chinese visual symbols, summarizing her decades of research on that topic. Among her other books are *Later Chinese Jades: Ming Dynasty to Early Twentieth Century; The Charming Cicada Studio: Masterworks by Chao Shao-an; Mongolia: The Legacy of Chinggis Khan;* and *The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan.*