

The Warring States Period (475–221 BC)

In technical and stylistic terms, these mirrors of the Warring States period were the trendsetters for the future. The high tin content in their alloy contributed to their highly reflective surfaces. In decoration, they shared motifs with contemporary ritual bronzes and other art forms. Thus, the feather and curl (cat. no. 1), the T's decoration (cat. no. 2), the quatrefoil (four petals; cat. nos. 1–3), and the animal form interlaces (cat. nos. 4–8) with birds (cat. no. 8), are characteristic. Even the double-tiered mirror (cat. no. 4) had its origin in chariot fittings or frontlets.

Early mirrors tended to be small, thinly cast, and lightweight. The knob, also small, assumed a sharp, angular profile and often featured three ridges. The rim was beveled to curve upward. The general layout of the mirrors combined a stamped ground with a layer of superimposed decoration. This modest scale soon gave way to mirrors of larger size and sophistication.

Of some significance is the appearance of the sunburst design (cat. no. 9) in the mirror's decorative repertory. It consisted of linked arcs around the contour of a circle and was of vital importance in mirrors after the Warring States era.

Western Han (206 BC–AD 8) I

During the early phase of the Han dynasty, known as Western Han, several new developments took place. In style, Han mirrorsmiths relinquished the early mode of relying on the duality of the stamped pattern and the superimposed decoration and experimented with positive images and diverse effects. They also added weight and substance to the mirrors (cat. nos. 13–16), thickened the rims, and varied the knob in several ways (cat. no. 13, for example) before settling on the hemispherical shape (cat. nos. 15–19). Among the various layouts, the square in a circle design (cat. nos. 10–11) was the most enduring. The sunburst image, too, had its impact (cat. nos. 14–17). With that design also came the earliest acknowledgement, through inscription, of the linkage of the mirror to the sun and the moon:

By the light of the sun, the world is made bright. (cat. no. 14)

Its inner purity is shown in perfect illumination. Its light is the image of the sun and moon . . . (cat. no. 15)

The sunburst image persisted, sometimes close to the core of the mirror and at other times retreating to a wider circumference, gaining more arcs as a consequence (cat. nos. 11–13). Also in other Han mirrors, one can observe the unfolding of a variety of decorations, not the least of which are the bird motifs (cat. nos. 18–19).

Western Han (206 BC–AD 8) II

Western Han mirrors can be simple in concept, although that simplicity can be deceptive. Through multiplication of images, these mirrors could evolve into elaborate designs. This is clearly visible in the series of mirrors known for their exploration of the concentric circle. The series begins with the simplest (cat. no. 20) and ends in the highly refined and sophisticated specimen (cat. no. 23), where the concentric circles increased in number, with a slightly enlarged interior band that accommodated a variety of zoomorphic (animal-like) images. Of interest here is their articulation, which used the egg-and-dart pattern, and the conscious play of alternating bands of motifs such as hatched lines, the sawtooth pattern, or the interlace. This resulted in a complex current of alternating revolutions, ceaseless movement, and duality of expanding or contracting forces.

Western Han (206 BC–AD 8) to Xin (AD 9–24)

Of the Han mirrors, the so-called TLV mirror was a dominant type and lasted for approximately 400 years. The term TLV has been used by Western scholars, who noticed the persistent appearance of shapes like T's, L's, and V's in the peripheral regions beyond the central square. More recently, Chinese scholars have discovered a link between this mirror design and the game board layout of the Liubo (fig. 1). This popular game during the Han period has been illustrated in contemporary relief sculpture *do we have these two figures?* (fig. 2).

From its modest inception, when the simple Liubo game board was transposed onto the circle of the mirror, the TLV mirror soon branched off into several subcategories. In one such subcategory, datable to the Western Han, the zoomorphic interlaces prevailed (cat. no. 24). In another the abstract pattern of curlicues assumed a more dominant role (cat. no. 25). Only when the Four Spirits began to command the cardinal directions did the mirror gain a cosmological flavor. The Four Spirits were prominent time and space symbols in Han culture and art. They are the Blue Dragon (east and spring), Red

Bird (south and summer), White Tiger (west and autumn), and Dark Warrior (tortoise and snake, north and winter). A further development saw the Four Spirits being given varying companions, thus resulting in the classic repertory of eight figures (cat. nos. 26–29). These developments took place before the end of the Western Han and the Xin periods. With imitation and replication, the TLV design survived through the Eastern Han period (AD 25–220) and even later.

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Figure 1: The Liubo Game Board (Square shape) and Superimposition over the Circle of a Mirror. [After Fu Juyou, *Kaogu Xuebao*, No. 1, 1986, p. 31, fig. 7.]

Figure 2: Winged Immortals Playing the Game Liubo, a rubbing from a stone relief, Sichuan Provincial Museum, Chengdu, China. Eastern Han, 2nd century AD. [After Richard Rudolph and Wen Yu, *Han Tomb Art of West China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1951), pl. 57.]

Eastern Han (AD 25–220) I

These Eastern Han mirrors are descendents of the TLV type, although they also underscore the phases of the latter's decline. First to go were the T's, L's, and V's (cat. nos. 30–31). In their place four nipples served as dividers. These nipples created four spacious quadrants beyond the central square to house selected members of the Four Spirits and other mythic animals, immortals, and deities. The sizes of these figures, too, were enlarged.

Then the central square also vanished (cat. nos. 32–33). With that step, the spatial enhancement of the mirror's inner well became optimal, allowing for a fuller repertory. Along with the icons of the King Father of the East and the Queen Mother of the West, historic personages also emerged on the back of the mirror. The struggles between the feudal lords, such as, Fucha, the King of Wu, and Goujian, the King of Yue, and loyal counselors such as Fan, were regarded as moral lessons

Eastern Han (AD 25–220) II

The emergence of the mirror type known for its “psychedelic” images (abstract and organic images with a radial pattern that throbs and pulsates—distorting and altering sensory perception) was a protracted process that began innocently enough. It started with those mirrors featuring the sunburst design and linked arcs. As these arcs retreated to the inner edge of the rim, an interior space unfolded that allowed for further exploration. As in catalogue numbers 34–35, the interior decoration could assume the playful pairing of double-headed dragons or a central quatrefoil (four petals). In the fully developed mirrors of this type (cat. no. 37), such rhythmic pulsation intensified and expanded to cover the entire mirror's back

Eastern Han (AD 25–220) III

During the Eastern Han dynasty and later, a new type of mirror emerged. This type combined a ring of squares with another of semicircles. With the rings pushed away from the knob to the outer edge of the inner well, a space was now made to house deities and their supporting animals (catalogue numbers 38 and 40).

The conception of this type of mirror favors precision and detail. The semicircles are further decorated with whorls. The squares are made to look like seals, with one to four characters in relief, thus forming either shorter or longer inscriptions. Catalogue number 38 has one of the longest inscriptions; its twelve squares contain forty-eight characters in total. The deities in the central circular band are the divine pair of the King Father of the East and the Queen Mother of the West, plus the legendary Yellow Emperor and the incomparable musician, BoYa. Animal-like *pixie*, protectors against evil influences, support each of the figures and his/her companions. Notable is the unprecedented degree of high relief in the figures.

Mirrors such as catalogue number 38 have attained the highest level of craftsmanship and are nearly flawless. The precision in casting is extraordinary and was achieved with ceramic molds.

A rare subtype within this phase is catalogue number 41, which has its interior circle divided into three parts. In this mirror, the ancient rite of *chanrang* is depicted, where rulership was determined less by familial inheritance than by merit. Thus Yao yielded the throne to Shun, taking note of his wisdom and keen intellect. Here the Confucian ideal reigned supreme, whereas in other mirrors, the Daoist faith and its deities were dominant.

Three Kingdoms (AD 220–280), Jin (AD 265–420), and the Northern and Southern Dynasties (AD 420–589)

As the Han dynasty came to a close, China again experienced divisiveness and foreign invasions that lasted until the end of the sixth century. The Han heritage in bronze mirrors remained strong, although post-Han mirrors also display some unique touches and interesting variations.

Several mirrors during this phase display a large hemispherical knob, a deep well within, and a thickened rim without. The rim itself ascends steadily to the very edge, and then descends sharply at an angle (cat. no. 43). In catalogue numbers 42–43, the truncated approach to the anatomy of the dragons and the tiger is unique and startling (cat. nos. 42–43). So is the curious predicament of the four animals—a monkey, a bear, a lion, and a hairy mammal—found among the *pixie* in catalogue number 44; they appear to be pinned underneath the nipples.

Toward the end of this particular subphase, the art of the mirror freed itself from these unconventional treatments. Catalogue number 45, in its stately tempo as well as its growing volumetric presentation, was a precursor to a new phase, the Sui and Tang dynasties.

Sui Dynasty (581–618)

In a remarkable way, Sui mirrors represent a summation of all that came before. Catalogue number 46 features the twelve zodiac animals, long known as a part of the mirror repertory. Catalogue numbers 47 and 49 even remind us of the layouts and designs of Eastern Han mirrors. The former is similar to catalogue number 23 in its exploration of the concentric circle, and to catalogue number 38 in its use of the *pixie* and figural groupings. The latter uses a simplified TLV design, with the Four Spirits as a commanding presence.

The Sui tradition differs from the previous era in the supple proportions of its figures and its simple yet noble layout. Although small, catalogue number 48 embodies most, if not all, of these traits.

Two additional features of the Sui mirror are noteworthy. The first is the adoption of the lost-wax technique, which, although long known in China, was rarely, if ever, used for mirrors. This step led to a broader technical frontier that enabled mirrorsmiths to experiment with effects previously unknown. The second pertains to the inscriptions on the mirrors' backs, in both form and content. In form, the extended use of the *kai* script (formal script) lent the design a regal poise as well as a more consistent pacing. In content, instead of merely stating the simple longings of Han mirror inscriptions, the Sui counterparts reveal the desire for love and peace in far richer imagery and subtler thoughts. These developments led to an expansion of possibilities in the Tang era.

Early Tang (618–about 700)

The evolution of the Tang tradition in bronze mirror design began gradually, based on the Sui period's accomplishment. Lost-wax casting, fuller zoomorphic (animal-like) images, and the use of the *kai* script in the poetic inscriptions continued, as in catalogue number 50. The same pattern is seen in catalogue number 51 to a further degree, with the formerly revolving images becoming three pairs of confronting zoomorphs, and the knob taking the form of a lotus blossom. From a historical point of view, both are a prelude to the series known as animal-and-grape mirrors (cat. nos. 52–56).

Indeed, for a taste of Tang exuberance, there are no better examples than this series, whether they are as small as catalogue numbers 53–54, or as elaborate as catalogue numbers 55–56. Proportionally, these mirrors are thicker and weightier, and their images are fuller and richer. The mythical beasts, for example, are more convincing than those of earlier periods. The appearance of the grapevine as a design element is also new in the context of mirror design. Since it was an imported plant, its inclusion was liberating as well, breaking the exclusive tie to Chinese tradition. The visual enchantment of this series of mirrors was so strong that, for a while, the mirrorsmith and his clientele were oblivious to the need for written words. Inscriptions disappeared and returned only sporadically.

High Tang Dynasty (8th century) I

The art of the mirror changed significantly during the Tang period. It acquired new shapes, the main varieties being, the *kuihua* (the lobed mirror) and the *linghua* (the foliated mirror).

These two shapes are remarkably suitable for floral motifs. Although some of the floral motifs are recognizable and identifiable, others, especially the rosette forms, bear little resemblance to actual specimens (e.g., cat. nos. 57–58). These have been loosely grouped under the vague term *baoxiang hua* (flowers of precious appearance), a term with a Buddhist origin. However, such a Buddhist linkage is not always warranted. There is, of course, little doubt that the Tang Chinese were fond of flowers, and catalogue number 59 portrays a total of eight blossoming plants in four different varieties: peony, camellia, begonia, and gardenia.

At the same time, bird motifs (cat. no. 60), already introduced in the animal-and-grape mirror type, were combined with insects and plants in the “garden of plenty.” Migrant birds, such as wild geese, also appeared (cat. no. 61), sometimes with long tassels as symbolic of longevity and the prospect of official advancement or promotion.

In addition, the technique of gold and silver cutouts embedded in the lacquer elevated the mirror to the status of a luxury object (cat. no. 61). This type of mirror, and other objects enriched by the same technique, was popular among the nobility and high officials.

High Tang Dynasty (8th century) II

“Revolving” images continued to occupy a significant place in Tang mirrors, which featured riders on mythic animals (cat. no. 62), hunters on horses chasing prey (cat. no. 63), or mythic animals and birds such as the phoenix (cat. no. 64).

As time went on, the image of paired phoenixes gained even greater importance. At first, phoenixes were only part of the revolving pattern, but here, suddenly, the revolution has ceased, and the paired phoenixes confront each other across a vertical axis. As usual, the birds create a dramatic counterpoint, with their heads thrown back, chests projecting forward, wings spread out, and long tails becoming marvelous displays of rich plumage. Tassels emerge from their beaks, symbolic of longevity and official advancement. The presence of the vertical axis now enforces a specific viewing position. The decoration on the back of the mirrors has now become a picture (cat. nos. 65–68).

Over time, mirror designs began to confirm both the vertical axis as well as the horizontal, so that the hemispherical knob becomes the mirror's very core (cat. nos. 65–67). This design evolved into even more complex imageries and rhythms, with more birds and more floral motifs added to stir ripples across the surface. Catalogue number 68 represents the culmination of this process.

From Mid-Tang to the End of the Dynasty (750s–907)

The rapidity with which the paired phoenix design ended its reign can be easily observed. After so much repetition, the birds became more habitual than meaningful, especially when placed alongside incompatible motifs and themes.

Catalogue number 69 illustrates the twin phoenixes holding between them a cosmic diagram: the circle (heaven) above and square (earth) below. As awareness of such incompatibility deepened, the mirrorsmith tried letting one phoenix go (cat. no. 70). Deprived of its mate, the lone phoenix became easily dispensable.

Even before the paired-phoenix design left the scene, the mirror's back had been ready for new kinds of imagery. Human figures appeared (cat. nos. 70–71). Dragons also made their way back (cat. nos. 72–73). Catalogue number 72 features a dragon treated in a courtly style, whereas catalogue number 73 recalls ancient ritual bronze decorations. Two additional mirrors (cat. nos. 74–75) represent the later phases of the Tang period when time and circumstance were less appropriate for costlier reflectors. The casting favors thinner discs and simpler designs, as with catalogue number 74, which features a pair of lions in inverse poses. Another popular mirror type is represented by catalogue number 75. Bearing the symbol of , it is Buddhist in nature and was found in burials of the faithful. The popularity of this mirror type extended into the next phase, specifically in the northern kingdom of Liao.

Liao, Song, and Jin Dynasties (916–1234)

The Carter collection includes only one example from the Liao—a Buddhist mirror with the character of (cat. no. 76). In contrast, the Song and subsequently the Jin are better represented. The Song may have an edge over its northern neighbors, as its mirrors won converts across East Asia. Aside from the flower-and-bird mirrors, for which the Tang influence can still be observed (cat. nos. 77 and 79), those with pure floral decoration, such as catalogue number 78, bear the mark of innovation in the subtle shaping and delicate detail of the blossoms. Such mirrors were either exported to or replicated in both the Liao and Jin territories. Mirrors with narrative subjects, traceable to Tang inspiration, were particularly popular and featured folklore such as the Herdboy and Weaver Maid (cat. no. 81). Two other subjects, Ci Fei the Dragon Slayers (cat. no. 80) and Emperor Ming's Visit to the Lunar Palace (cat. no. 81) were found first in the Song territories, and then made their way into the northeast and from there to Korea. Others, such as those featuring the *Dading* coinage (cat. no. 84), young children as riders (cat. no. 85), and twin fishes (cat. no. 86) were Jin products. They were popular in the lands under Jurchen rule.

Yuan to Qing Dynasties (1279–1911)

Two Yuan period mirrors are shown here. Catalogue number 87, which contains twin dragons, possesses a primal power that can be found in mirrors from archaeological sites across several regions. Catalogue number 88, with a debased Sanskrit mantra, (an incantation, prayer, or mystical formula) indicates the importance of the Buddhist religion during a period when the Mongols ruled China.

As Confucian teachings permeated the fabric of Chinese society during the Ming period, the tendency to produce mirrors with moral maxims grew stronger (cat. no. 89). Thus the saying “Joy in Performing Good Deeds” was the only decoration for this small Ming mirror. Generally speaking, Ming mirrors are well cast, since their alloy is a revival of the high tin/low lead formula. The mirror from Huzhou (cat. no. 90), a center of mirror production that could trace its history back to the Song period (960–1279), is as severe in its design as it is elegant in its simple, metallic surface.

From the Qing period comes a fine brass mirror with a handle (cat. no. 92). Mirrors with handles had appeared as early as the Tang period (618–907), apparently due to Western influence. This mirror was not used for reflective purposes. Rather, it served as a ritual implement in the marriage ceremony, with the appropriate symbol of “double happiness” at its center.

Circles of Reflection

The Carter Collection of Chinese Bronze Mirrors

The exhibition was organized and circulated by the Cleveland Museum of Art. The exhibition curator is Cleveland curator of Chinese art, Ju-hsi Chou.

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