

Chinese, Jiangsu Province, Lake T'ia Region, Tang-li  
*Ceremonial Gate*, dedicated in 1728

Ceramic tile

H. 192 x W. 114 x D. 35 in.

Gift of Bruce and Ruth Dayton

98.61.3

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### **Key Ideas**

This elaborate ceramic gate once adorned the interior courtyard of a large 18th-century Chinese home, serving as a passageway to and from the family's private ceremonial space. The gateway's decorative tiles depict the Confucian themes of duty to family and state and bear the four-character inscription, "In Celebration of Bestowed Glory."

### **In Celebration of Family and State**

This impressive gateway served as a monument to honor the family. As inscribed on the panel, the gate was dedicated in 1728 to the family by the state for government service. The spotted deer, found in the deeply carved boxes to either side of the inscription, probably symbolize the attainment of high office. Thus, the gate's decorative carving serves to reflect the respected social position and aristocratic nature of the family.

Confucian philosophy stressed family relationships and service to the state. Confucianism took hold in the 5th century B.C. and remained central to Chinese thought during the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644–1911) when this gate was constructed.

### **The Four Noble Agrarian Professions**

Agriculture was the basis for the wealth and prosperity of many aristocratic Chinese families, so it is fitting that the carved ceramic tiles adorning the gate depict the "four noble agrarian professions" with images of a fisherman, a woodcutter, a farmer, and a scholar/landowner. The economy and social well-being of the agrarian society depended on the productive management of the land, water, and forests. Stewardship of these natural resources was a great concern of the government.

On the right, the fisherman stands in his boat upon the rolling waves. Fish, consumed in massive amounts in China, were raised on fish farms under bureaucratic direction. Next is the woodcutter with a yoke upon his back, walking through a heavily wooded area. Then comes the farmer with a hoe over his shoulder leading a water buffalo. To the far left is the scholar/landowner. He sits in a studio looking out on a small garden of plants and rocks. Although he represents the educated gentry class, he is very much a part of this agrarian fellowship, for it is the landowner who ultimately bears the responsibility for the management and prosperity of the land.

## **Private Contemplation**

As this gate celebrates the virtues of family, it also serves to define the family's celebratory space. This monument of honor was not for public display. Rather, it was meant for the family's contemplation as part of the home's private interior space. The gate's decorative frieze faced the interior of the courtyard, north toward the ceremonial hall. This hall was the family's most important building and gathering space. It was located at the opposite end of the residential complex from the public entrance. Here, the family would meet on special occasions to honor ancestors, pray, greet special guests, and celebrate other important events.

## **The Courtyard House**

The gateway and ceremonial space were once part of a large enclosed Su-chou-style courtyard house from the West Tung-t'ing Hills district of Lake T'ai in southern China. Large dwellings such as this one comprised several buildings with gardens and courtyards, all contained within a walled complex (see illustration). Larger homes had several courtyards with more than one commemorative gate.

The gated wall provided both protection and privacy and was an essential architectural component of Chinese cities and homes. The enclosed space often housed large extended families and their servants. Based on Confucian principles, the family was patriarchal and may have consisted of as many as four or five generations living together.

## **The Production and Use of Ceramic Tile**

The ceramic tiles were fired in a kiln and then intricately carved by hand. The decorative tiles are carved in relief, a method in which the figures project out from the background. The completed tiles were then set into place with a thin layer of mortar. This type of carved ceramic work, a 2,000-year-old Chinese tradition, was a specialty of the craftsmen from the Su-chou region. Ceramic tiles were used as roof, wall, and floor coverings because they were durable, relatively inexpensive, and attractive.

All of the carved ceramic tiles on the upper half of the gate and the heavy wooden cross-beams are original. The smooth tiles on both jambs, or supporting posts, are modern replacements. The original 18th-century passageway had large wooden doors that swung from the door jambs on iron pivot hinges.

## **Construction of the Gate**

The construction of this ceramic gate derives from earlier wooden forms. All the elements of the wooden gates were carefully reproduced. Ceramic blocks, such as those that support the projecting roof, were cut in the same shape and size of the timber prototypes and put together with notched and housed joints.

Although beautifully carved, this gate was never embellished with colored glaze or paint. Left unglazed, the ceramic gate better suited the refined tastes of scholarly aristocrats, but also adhered to strict government-imposed sumptuary laws. Building codes were dictated by social status and government rank wherein certain colors of decorative glazes were reserved for the buildings of the royal court.

## **EXTEND THE DISCUSSION**

See “Tips for Talking about Art” in the introductory pages for more ideas.

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### **LOOK**

What words or phrases would you use to describe this gate?

What do you think is the most important part of the gate? What do you see that makes you say that?

Look for clues. What kind of person do you think might have owned a gate like this? What do you see that makes you think that?

### **THINK**

What parts of this gate do you like the best? Why?

The gate has the images of the “four noble agrarian professions,” which include a farmer, a fisherman, a woodsman, and a landowner/scholar. Why do you think these images were included on this gate? What kinds of scenes would you put on your family gate? Why?

Would you like this gate in your home or yard? Why or why not?

This gate was left plain, without color, to suit the taste and status of the family who owned it. How would this gate be different if it were painted in many colors? What colors would you paint it, if you could? What things in your home are left unpainted? What things are painted?