

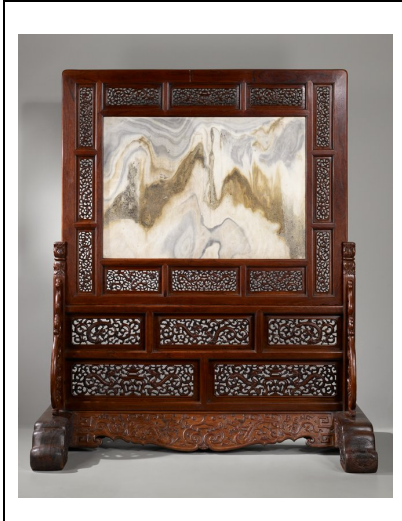
---

## Title of Object

Screen

---

## Photo of Object (optional)



---

## Object Information

**Artist:** unknown

**Culture:** Chinese

**Date of Object:** 17<sup>th</sup> century

**Country:** China

**Accession Number:** 96.120.7A-D

**File Created:** 11/1/2016

**Material/Medium:** Huang-hua-li, tie-li-mu, and ta-li marble

**Author of File:** Terry Keir

**Department:** Chinese, South and Southeast Asian Art

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 8/29/2017

---

## Tour Topics

Symbolism-art, symbolism-in-art, Group 6, Highlights 1600 to 1850, Daoism, Nature, Landscape, wood carving, marble, mountain, power/status, writing/calligraphy

---

## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. Look closely at the Standing Screen. What do you notice?
2. What do you see that might be a symbol?
3. How would you use a screen like this?
4. What furniture or settings do we use today to confer status?

---

## Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

- This large screen is carved in openwork from huanghuali hardwood. The large feet are made from pieces of tieli wood harvested from tall, hardwood evergreens producing an exceptionally strong base.
- The carved openwork shows hornless dragons and cloud patterns, creating an interesting three-dimensional effect when viewed from near or far. This theme of dragons and clouds is a propitious or auspicious theme. (Handler)
- The wooden members of the frame are mortised and tenoned.
- The dali marble from Yunnan province suggests a scene of tall mountain peaks surrounded by swirling clouds. The marble appears to be original to the screen as the groove cut into the wood matches the uneven surface of the marble. (Handler)
- In the Chinese imagination, mountains were also imbued since ancient times with sacred power as manifestations of nature's vital energy (qi). They not only attracted the rain clouds that watered the farmer's crops, they also concealed medicinal herbs, magical fruits, and alchemical minerals that held the promise of longevity. Mountains pierced by caves and grottoes were viewed as gateways to other realms—"cave heavens" (dongtian) leading to Daoist paradises where aging is arrested and inhabitants live in harmony. From the early centuries of the Common Era, men wandered in the mountains not only in quest of immortality but to purify the spirit and find renewal. (Nature, Met Museum)
- The natural world has long been conceived in Chinese thought as a self-generating, complex arrangement of elements that are continuously changing and interacting. Uniting these disparate elements is the Dao, or the Way. Dao is the dominant principle by which all things exist, but it is not understood as a causal or governing force. Chinese philosophy tends to focus on the relationships between the various elements in nature rather than on what makes or controls them. According to Daoist beliefs, man is a crucial component of the natural world and is advised to follow the flow of nature's rhythms. Daoism also teaches that people should maintain a close relationship with nature for optimal moral and physical health. Within this structure, each part of the universe is made up of complementary aspects known as yin and yang. Yin, which can be described as passive, dark, secretive, negative, weak, feminine, and cool, and yang, which is active, bright, revealed, positive, masculine, and hot, constantly interact and shift from one extreme to the other, giving rise to the rhythm of nature and unending change. (Nature, Met Museum)
- The Chinese term huanghuali literally means "yellow flowering pear" wood. Only highly skilled craftsmen were allowed to make furniture from this wood. The wood's beautiful warm color and grain remind the viewer of the tree trunks from which it was made. (Five Facts, artsmia.org)
- "The most valuable and precious of all of these materials are zitan and huanghuali, two types of hardwood found, among other places, on China's largest island, Hainan. Along with having beautiful lustrous qualities, the woods are difficult to harvest and mostly found outside China, making them even rarer....Chinese furniture is generally made without any glue or nails — rather, the pieces are held together by a complicated network of joints. The sophisticated technical abilities of the cabinetmakers and carpenters who made them were incredibly advanced...It's very impressive to see the complexity and intricacy of the joints." (Christie's)

- It is estimated that only 10,000 pieces of huanghuali furniture exist in the world. Auction prices for such furniture have skyrocketed in the last 20 years. (The Independent)

- Tieli wood comes from the tallest Chinese hardwood, and was cheaper than huanghuali. It has durability, with an open thick-lined grain and a coarse texture. (Handler, 227)

---

### Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

- Screens were important and widely used piece of furniture. This screen with the marble panel was probably made for a large room because of its weight and how difficult it would be to move. Standing screens are the rarest category of Ming-style furniture. Only one other large screen of this type has survived. (artsmia.org and Handler)

- Stationary screens were typically placed inside major entrances to important buildings and rooms. They acted as a privacy buffer and also helped block drafts. Because the Chinese believed negative spirits traveled in a straight line, they also blocked and protected the homeowners from any harmful negative spirits. (Jacobsen)

- Screens were also used as honorific backdrops for chairs or thrones of important individuals, indicating this was an object used by those of high social status. This screen was meant to be seen on both sides, being finely finished on both. (artsmia.org and Handler)

- The best screens were made to impress the observer and reflect the hierarchical values of traditional China. In the lowest openwork panels, you see a stylized shou (longevity) character, in the middle between the carved dragons. The dali marble was prized for the abstract mountain shapes that emerged from the stone. (Handler)

- The feet are fashioned of large pieces of tieli wood. Relief carvings or pearl-chasing dragons and scrolls fill the sides of the tieli foot base. In the huanghuali panels above, the dragons swoop in clouds. The posts of the feet terminate in carved reversed lotuses. (Handler and artsmia.org)

- The lotus is the flower of the sixth month and summer. It is a symbol of purity because it rises out of the mud to bloom. Lotus blossoms are often depicted as a throne for the Buddha, and the lotus is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism (ba jixiang 八吉祥). (British Museum)

- The dragon motifs carved on the screen represent power and status. The Chinese dragon is the ultimate symbol of the cosmic energy qi 气 and the most powerful symbol of good fortune. Ranked first among mythical beasts, it can bring rain to parched lands, which in turn represents abundance and relief. A dragon and phoenix (king of all winged creatures) symbolize the emperor and empress as well as marital bliss. The dragon is often used as an emblem of high rank and power on the robes of emperors and princes as well as on imperial art objects. (British Museum)

- Earlier screens were smaller as people sat on the floor and were used to protect people from drafts, divide room spaces and acted as decorative privacy screens. During the Five dynasties and Song periods there was a transition to chair-level seating and large screens became popular. By the Ming dynasty portable screens in all sizes were popular for shielding the wind, creating privacy, maintaining geometric harmony and expressing social status. (Jacobsen and Handler)

- Mountains lie at the very heart of Chinese culture and art. A bridge between the human and transcendental realms, they have provided an enduring source of inspiration for poets, scholars, and artists and remain a potent theme within China's landscape painting tradition. The idea of retreating from society into a life of reclusion in the mountains has a long-standing history in China. The practice thrived in ancient China, in part because it found support in the philosophies of Confucianism, Daoism and later Buddhism. The motivation for reclusion could be spiritual or ethical. For Daoist adherents, the mountains offered the opportunity to encounter immortal beings and were therefore a path to transcendence. For some intellectuals, the politics of the court and the burdens of society or perhaps fame proved unbearable. Retreats built in mountain or streamside settings promised a peaceful and unfettered life in simple circumstances where they could indulge in scholarship and the practice of art. The ethos of reclusion so influenced the Chinese intellectual class that it left an imprint on almost every facet of artistic endeavor. (Artsmia.org, Transcendent Mountains)

- During the Cultural Revolution the inset marble panel was used as a coffee table, the other parts were cased up and kept from view, especially from the authorities, who would have destroyed the screen. When private ownership came back under Deng Xiaoping, the screen was secretly taken to Hong Kong and then to California where in 1996 it set the record at auction for Chinese furniture. (artsmia.org, audio clip)

---

### **Current Mia Label Information (optional)**

Large screens are probably the rarest category of surviving Ming style furniture. Solid panel screens were placed inside the main entrance to buildings where they provided privacy and protection from draughts while dispelling negative cosmic energy (ch'i) seeking to harm the occupants within. They were also used as honorific backdrops for the chairs or thrones of important individuals.

Monumental in scale and exceptionally well carved, this rare stationary screen with its original marble panel is considered by many to be the finest of its type in existence. The wooden members of this large frame are mortised and tenoned. The central marble panel is surrounded by an inner framework filled with perforated tao huan panels elaborately carved in openwork with hornless dragons. The extraordinary openwork carving is double-faced and cut from timber thick enough to impart a sense of three dimensionality. Marble panels from Ta-li in Yunnan province, evocative of mountainous landscapes in their natural figurations, were favorite panel insets for solid screens.

---

### **Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)**

Below is a painting by Du Jin, Enjoying Antiquities, in the collection of the National Palace Museum in Taipei; check out the marble screen: [https://www.npm.gov.tw/exh101/du\\_jin/en/en\\_01.html](https://www.npm.gov.tw/exh101/du_jin/en/en_01.html)



Handler, Sarah. [Austere Luminosity of Chinese Classical Furniture](#), 2001, various pages, including the chapter on screens (pp.268-291, our screen is shown on page 284) (Preview available on google books).

Jacobsen, Robert D., *Classical Chinese Furniture: In the Minneapolis Institute of Arts*. pp. 152-154

Collecting Guide: 10 things to know about classical Chinese furniture, Christie's:  
<http://www.christies.com/features/Classical-Chinese-Furniture-Collecting-Guide-7612-1.aspx>

Mia label and audio clip - <http://collections.artsmia.org/art/9061/screen-china>

Exhibition, 2015-2016, Transcendent Mountains, Chinese Landscape painting:  
<https://new.artsmia.org/exhibition/transcendent-mountains-chinese-landscape-painting/>

Nature in Chinese Culture, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Heilbrun Timeline.  
[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cnat/hd\\_cnat.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cnat/hd_cnat.htm)

Chinese Symbols, British Museum: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Chinese\\_symbols.pdf](http://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Chinese_symbols.pdf)

Rare wood sparks buying frenzy in China, *The Independent*, June 11, 2011:  
<http://www.independent.co.uk/property/house-and-home/rare-wood-sparks-buying-frenzy-in-china-2296824.html>