

Prosperity Gate



Overview:

Any sweet tea-drinking, biscuit-loving person who's stepped foot on a wrap-around porch in the southern United States knows that the odds of coming upon welcoming pineapple décor at a home's entrance are very good. Just as in the South, entryways to courtyard-style Chinese homes during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912 CE) incorporated meaningful imagery in their designs. This gate, dating from 1858 with origins in Shanxi province, would have stood at the entrance to the residence of a middle-class family. While the portal's two doors remain open in Mia's galleries, only the outermost doors would have been kept open, mirroring the layout of a temple's entrance. Traditionally, the second doors were always shut, with the exception of weddings or funerals, during which both sets of doors were opened to let the couple or casket pass through. With its auspicious motifs, Mia's gate wishes prosperity and happiness to all those who pass beneath its elegant carvings.

Details:

1) The Grapes of Fertility

- a. In Confucianism, filial piety is of particular importance; well-wishers give gifts with auspicious motifs representing many sons to newly married couples. Along the gate's arch, the artist carved broad leaves cradling bunches of globular grapes. While this fruit may call to mind wine or harvest, the grape cluster's many seeds symbolize multiple offspring.

2) Family Matters

- a. The concept of the family lineage is especially important in Chinese culture, so much so that the family name is placed before an individual's "first" name. The long vines connecting all of the grapes are symbolic of the family lineage, which persists with each new generation, ever growing and persisting with the passage of time.

3) The Pursuit of Happiness

- a. Peeking out from the leaves at the edges of the lintel are two small bats. The appearance of these auspicious creatures is a clever homophone - the Chinese word for bat, *fu*, is pronounced similarly to the Chinese term for happiness or good fortune. Because the bats are so near to those who pass below, those who do so are then close to happiness.
 - i. <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/17069/twelve-symbol-robe-china>

4) Keep off the Grass

- a. Bamboo is a significant motif with multiple meanings in Chinese art. Because this sturdy grass endures winters, the inclusion of bamboo on the gate connotes longevity. The significance of bamboo also lies in its structure; while the inside of bamboo is hollow, the shoots are strong so that it may bend but not break. This flexibility and absence of interior substance represent the ideal gentleman: open-minded, humble, and of integrity.
 - i. <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/4839/bamboo-and-rocks-zheng-xie>

5) Balance of the Sexes

- a. Following the concept of yin-yang in Chinese tradition, men and women complement each other's dissimilarities. The dragon represents the male, while the phoenix signifies the female. In gates such as this one, the dragon is typically placed above the phoenix to convey male superiority. However, in this gateway, the phoenix is atop the dragon, suggesting that the household to which this gate belonged was headed by a woman.
 - i. <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/17922/ornament-one-of-a-pair-china>
 - ii. <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/1046/winged-dragon-one-of-a-pair-china>
- 6) **“King of the Flowers”**
- a. Along the outer edges of the frontal posts are peonies, wishing the family prosperity. Called the “king of the flowers” and symbolic of wealth and honor, the peony grew popular in the Tang dynasty (618-906 CE). Famously grown in Luoyang during the Tang, the peony came to represent opulence and Chinese history’s most famous consort, Yang Guifei, who was tragically hung by the emperor himself, against his will.
 - i. <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/106719/flower-painting-mianyi>

More:

1) The Four Essential Arts

- a. The tripartite section of panels present visual representations of the four essential arts in which every scholarly gentleman must perform well: *qin*, a musical instrument of the literati (a seven-stringed zither that is also called the *guqin*); *qi*, Go (a type of strategic board game that is similar to chess, though much more complex); *shu*, calligraphy; and *hua*, painting. In the leftmost panel, a Go board rests beneath a table, on top of which lies a *qin*. The third section embodies the activities of a scholar, for the carved table supports an open book on its surface. Representing painting, an open scroll fills part of the background; an expanded album symbolizes calligraphy.
- b. Qin at Mia:

2002.8



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Department: Chinese, South and Southeast Asian Art
Object Name: Zither (Qin)
Classification: Musical Instruments
Period: 5th century BCE
Dynasty: Warring States period
Origin: China, Asia
Medium: Lacquer over wood core
Dimensions: 2 3/4 x 3 5/16 x 34 1/4 in. (6.99 x 8.41 x 87 cm)
Credit Line: The Asian Art Deaccession Fund

c. Wikimedia Commons qin audio

2) Timeline

- a. The gate was originally constructed in the Mount Wutai area of Shanxi province, west of Beijing. Shanxi's dry weather is helpful in preserving wooden structures; because of the climate, this province has the highest concentration of old houses in China. All existing Tang architecture is located in Shanxi, in addition to 70% of the remaining 100 pre-Song dynasty constructions. In 2004, the gateway was purchased by the Sun Gallery in Minneapolis, and soon made the long trek to the US.



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- b. After the gate was dismantled and packed, the 251 crates were shipped by freight to the coastal port city of Shanghai. There, the boxes were fumigated with a disinfectant prior to export.
- c. Once the crates arrived in CA, they were shipped over 6,700 miles via freight to Minneapolis. Not long after, the gate made its way back to the Golden State, where it was reassembled and inspected by specialists associated with Evelyn's Antique Chinese Furniture.

- d. Following six years of resting in storage, the dismantled gate made the journey to Minneapolis. In 2017, Mia began installation at the entrance to its Chinese galleries. To provide expertise, the museum invited three craftsmen from the Shanxi Museum to help oversee the structure's assembly.
- e. The rectangular stone bases were removed, and six holes were drilled into the gallery floor to allow a metal rod to connect the gate's pillars with the floor. The craftsmen pieced the upper sections of the gate together before adding it to the pillars' capitals. Once the gate's wooden structure was standing, the craftsmen laid the interlocking tiles for the roof.
- f. Minor repairs were made – slivers of rotted wood were carved out, refilled, and stained using soy sauce (a tasty alternative to typical wood stain) mixed with water and dust from the tiles. Finally, the doors were attached and doorways made more visitor-friendly. Thanks to the talent of Mia's woodshop, the visiting craftsmen, and countless other staff members, the wooden gateway stands as a warm welcome to the Chinese galleries.

3) Timelapse

- a. Mia's team filmed the entire set-up process from start to finish.
- b. <https://vimeo.com/225920791>