
Title of Object

Phoenix Hair Ornament

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Country: China

Date of Object: 7th-8th century (Tang Dynasty)

File Created: 4/11/2018

Accession Number: 51.27.189

Author of File: Lynn Brofman and Sue
Hamburge

Material/Medium: Gold

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Department: Chinese, South and Southeast
Asian Art

Last Updated/Reviewed: 4/24/2018

Culture: China

Tour Topics

Bejeweled, Bedazzled, Be-wear!; jewelry tour, birds, gold, fashion/dress, hairstyle, hair, women, ceremony, China, Tang Dynasty, beauty, ancient culture, funerary, symbolism, mythology, nature

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

When you hear the word “jewelry,” what images come to mind?

What kind of hair ornaments do people use today? What do they mean?

What is one thing that impresses you about this work?

What did you think about when you selected your jewelry today?

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

5 pieces formed ornament for head as seen on stone sculpture—Tang, similar to later Ming (see prop photo of such an ornament on a sculpture). This piece is a little over 6 inches high, and it has a symmetrical design, with the feathers of the phoenix curling outward. The gold is delicately worked,

with wire used to emphasize the lines and curves. Plenty of open space in the overall design lending a delicacy to the pin.

The floral style derives from Tang dynasty (618-906) and is seen in gold and silver hair ornaments, which were popular with the aristocracy.

For information on how the gold was worked, see a series of “how to” videos in the Sources. The generic term for hairpins and hair clasps is ji. A one bar ji keeps coiled hair in place, and a two bar ji is a feature of the hairstyle itself. Before the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) both Chinese men and women wore their hair in a coiled bun with a ji to keep it in place. The fashionable designs and diverse patterns of these ornaments made them a favorite ornament with women of all social strata. (China Daily)

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

Across the world and throughout the millennia, people have adorned themselves with jewelry in life and in death. Jewelry can denote status, power, wealth, and role in society. To the wearer, jewelry can offer protection, demonstrate religious devotion, and assure well-being in the afterlife. It can tell a story or convey a secret. Jewelry can open a door to how people lived and unveil stories of war, migration, and slavery. Jewelry can explain the effects of colonialism and cultural exchange. Both the rulers and the ruled are linked to jewelry.

Silversmithing in China can be traced back to the gilded, silver-filigree ornaments of the Zhou dynasty in the 2nd century BC (Duda 2002: 11). Shang and Zhou period tombs contain much jewellery: earrings, belt hooks and hairpins were particularly common (White 1994: 13). Hair ornaments became especially popular in the Han period (206 BC – AD 220). Both men and women wore hairpins. The principal hair ornament used by women in the Han period was the zan, a decorated hairpin which protruded from the top of the hair arrangement. Occasionally these were decorated with a buyao, an ornament attached to end of the zan which quivered as the wearer moved (Ibid. 21). Hair ornaments continued to develop through Chinese history, becoming more like crowns in the Tang period (618 – 906 AD). New innovations such as the crown-like wide diadem developed during the Song, Yuan and Ming periods. Buddhist imagery also began to be incorporated from the Tang dynasty onwards (Pitts-Rivers Museum).

Specifically looking at this hair ornament, the phoenix was associated with the empress of China and the auspicious motif was standard in wedding attire throughout the later dynasties (12th-20th century). (artsmia.org, Phoenix hair ornament)

Upper-class women of Tang, Song (960-1279), and Liao (916-1125) required a variety of hair combs and pins to maintain the elaborate hairstyles that were fashionable. (artsmia, hair ornament one of a pair)

Fashioned in materials that included jade, gold, silver, ivory, bronze and carved wood, the style, materials and craftsmanship of these hair ornaments reflected both social status and Chinese ethnic culture. The patterns, craftsmanship, materials and number of hair ornaments a woman wore signified her social rank. Feudal etiquette defined the style of hair ornaments women wore on formal occasions, such as weddings or court ceremonies.(China Daily)

Hair ornaments worn by women of wealth also took the form of gold flowers encrusted with jewels depicting flowers or animals. Among popular decorative patterns were auspicious birds and beasts, such as the dragon, phoenix, crane, deer and the 12 animals of the Chinese "zodiac." The deer was considered a propitious animal because its pronunciation in Chinese is the same as that for six, which

denotes success. Hairpins in the design of a mandarin duck denoted married bliss. Patterns of flowers and fruit-bearing trees featured the peony, lotus flower, plum, guava and asphodel. The five petals on a plum represent blessings, high-salary, longevity, luck and wealth. (China Daily)

But to the women of ancient China the ji was far more than just a hair ornament. The ji ceremony, which bestowed a hairpin upon a young woman when she reached the age of 15, was a rite of passage signifying that she had reached marriageable age. A hairpin also functioned as a love token. When Chinese lovers of ancient times were forced to part they would often split a hairpin, both keeping a half with them at all times until they were reunited. (China Daily)

Rare Collection of Chinese Gold given in memory of Charles Stinson Pillsbury by Mrs. Charles Stinson Pillsbury of 269 pieces, C.T. Loo collected over 40 years—article of personal adornment. Gold Phoenix hair ornament shows Tang workmanship—spirited, full of movement. Hair ornaments had changing designs from late Chou to Qing. Early—value in the work not precious stones and some may be worn by men and women. We are uncertain of the context for many of these because of tomb looting (Bulletin).

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

No label for this object.

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

Phoenix Hair Ornament, one of a pair (11th-12th century):

<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/1168/phoenix-hair-ornament-one-of-a-pair-china>

Hair ornament, one of a pair, 11th century: <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/4693/hair-ornament-one-of-a-pair-china>

Bulletin, *The Minneapolis Institute of Arts*. March 1, 1952, Vol. XLI, #9 pp 42-51

Imogen Clark, *Chinese Hairpins*, Pitts-Rivers Museum: <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/rpr/index.php/object-biography-index/1-prmcollection/290-chinese-hairpins/index.html>

Check out the series of videos from the Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, tied to an exhibition of ancient Chinese gold work:

Gold wire and engraving: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCihYXMPx3M>

Gold and silver inlay: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIVSSXUQCc8>

Splashing method: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06v1pY91AvU>

Granulation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmLcRxly2iA&t=15s>

Historical hair ornaments and their social connotations, China Daily (USA edition): http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/2011-03/04/content_12118404.htm

