

A Dragon Bed for a Nobleman

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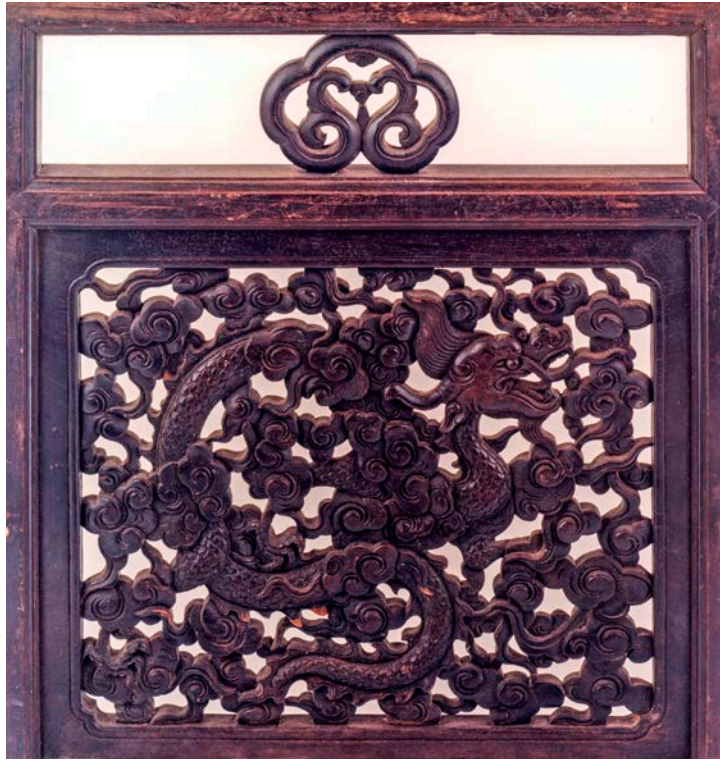


Canopy beds of fine craftsmanship and precious materials were prized possessions and symbols of status. Paramount amongst the dowry suite, its decoration frequently displayed auspicious themes sending forth wishes for the newlywed bride to give birth to male sons, along with the ensuing promise of officialdom and prosperity of the lineage continuing into the future generations. Amongst extant examples crafted from prized *huanghuali*, the canopy bed in the MD Flacks Collection is distinguished by exquisite decoration suited to a nobleman.

The underlying design and construction of this canopy bed is associated to a related group of extant beds which, when stripped of secondary decorative elements, reveals nearly identical superstructures. The identification of these patterned productions has led to speculation of a workshop in northern China that specialized in canopy bed production. Individuality was expressed through variations in the style of openwork panels that were fitted within the patterned framework, as well as in the style of relief carving that was added to broad surfaces. Relative to its patterned framework, the MD Flacks bed stands on common ground with the best examples of this group. Moreover, with superbly carved decoration and motifs associated with the Imperial aristocracy, this example stands alone.

Thirty-two dragons surround the upper frieze of the canopy. Three distinctive patterns typical of the early Qing period are exhibited. Bracket-like spandrels about each post appear as immature *chi*-dragons with angular scrolled tails. Adolescent *kui*-dragons with fiercely animated faces and angular-scrolled bodies confront a stylized longevity character in the central panels. Further

developed dragons patterned in a fluid, scrolling style appear in the panels to either side. The pierced carving vibrates with energy and serves as an ever-present reminder of Imperial mandate.



The railings around the platform are bordered with cloud-shaped medallions, each appearing as a motif of embryonic regeneration, and openwork panels in the railings display auspicious decoration. The two panels at the entrance to the bed depict four-clawed dragons soaring amongst clouds. Since antiquity, the five-clawed dragon was an emblem of Imperial power devoted to the Emperor and immediate family. During the Qing period, sumptuous regulations permitted princes of the third and fourth order as well as nobles the use of the four-clawed dragon as an insignia. The style of the two dragon panels, which each face the entrance of the bed, can be compared to that of rank badges found on dragon robes. Panels appearing like *qilin* rank badges are also evident

on a bed formerly in the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture—a bed that also belongs to the above-mentioned related group (Wang and Evarts, pl. 11). The masterfully carved dragons appear fully developed with all of the ‘nine-resemblance’ characteristics: 1) Camel head; 2) Deer horns; 3) Rabbit eyes; 4) Cow ears; 5) Snake neck; 6) Frog belly; 7) Carp scales; 8) Hawk claws, and; 9) Tiger palms. The writhing dragons are portrayed soaring through clouds, which were also said to have formed from the powerful might of his breath. The style of the dragon and clouds are typical of the 18th century.



The central panel of the back railing is decorated with lotus and waves; in panels to either side, pairs of phoenixes amongst peony flowers. The lotus (*lianhua*) is traditionally symbolic of summer and its fruitfulness, as well as the Buddhist and Confucian virtues of purity and perfection. Scrolling lotus also implies continuous or uninterrupted, both in its visual appearance as well as on account of its homophone *lian*, which indicates a ‘connection’ or ‘joining.’ The wave motif—which in

its representation of the tide (*chao*)—also forms the homophonous symbol for ‘dynasty’ (*chao*). Thus the combined rebus sends forth an Imperial wish for continuous, uninterrupted rule of the dynasty.



The phoenix, second to the dragon among supernatural creatures, is also said to only appear when peace pervades throughout the country. It also has great influence on the begetting of children and, according to tradition, ‘two phoenixes piercing the blossom’ denotes connubial intercourse. The large rich blossoms of the peony are regarded as a sign of spring and omen of good fortune. It is considered to be ‘King of the Flowers’ and embodies the male *yang* principle. While also known as the *fuguihua* or ‘flower of wealth and rank’, further associations extend

to love, affection and feminine beauty. The composite symbology is thus rich in its multiple interpretations.

Motifs with pomegranates, crab apple (*haitang*) and birds appear in the side panels. The pomegranate, filled with countless seeds, is emblematic of posterity through fruitful offspring, and opportunity for rise to fame and glory. The crab apple is emblematic of peace, which joined with long-tailed *shoudai* birds, sends blessing of living comfortably into old age.



The platform of the bed is of waisted, corner-leg style with bulging legs that terminate with hoof feet—a departure from the highwaisted style predominating amongst the beds of this related group. The surfaces of the legs and aprons are sumptuously decorated with lotus blossoms and scrolling foliage. The relief carving is raised against a smoothly worked ground, and the decoration as well as the beading is detailed with fine secondary incising that is rarely encountered.

While canopy beds bear traditional associations with quarters of the opposite sex, the predominantly masculine themes of this bed’s decoration suggest that it was made for a nobleman of the Imperial aristocracy. Decorative style and carving technique suggest production during the early Qing period (1650-1750). Other examples of *huanghuali* furniture that exhibit carving of similar exceptional quality include the Luohan bed a the

Fine Arts Museum, Boston (Berliner, pl. 15) and the marble panel screen formerly in the Museum of Classical Chinese Furniture (Wang and Evarts, pl. 72). This bed is an exceptional example—with classical Ming-style form and proportions, exquisite workmanship, rich visual imagery, and ample decorative interpretation—all suggesting a provenance bearing Imperial association.

Bibliography

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