

res 24 autumn 1993
anthropology and aesthetics



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CARL SCHUSTER (1904–1969)

Carl Schuster received a Harvard master of arts degree in oriental studies, then moved to China, where he read under Baron von Stael-Holstein, a Baltic refugee and scholar of high distinction.

"In 1932, after three years' study in Peking, I undertook a long walking tour through Western China, where I noticed, and began to collect, cotton embroideries traditionally made by village women until about the end of the 19th century. I continued these walks in 1935, 1936 and 1937–8, extending them into Southeast Asia."

His map of those walks resembles an artery system. He covered a vast, impoverished area, some of which was in revolt. He was very poor. "I found that by roughing it and going third class I could probably manage to keep myself in the field the better part of a year, where I am anxious to be active, though of course there won't be much in the way of books on non-Chinese areas. But they can be had later, whereas the material I am after is likely to die out."

Carl called it "chance" that he first noticed the patched clothing of Han Valley urchins, but it was no accident that he recognized the significance of those embroidered scraps. He collected over two thousand examples. Then he wrote a doctoral dissertation on them in Vienna, under the supervision of Josef Strzygowski, a leading Warburg scholar.

We will never again see the like of those Warburg scholars: the training that produced them no longer exists. Vienna also had the Kulturkreis theorists, but Carl ignored them. I suspect he rejected more than just their theories.

The motifs that interested him most "appealed more to the popular imagination than to the highly skilled professional artist, who generally strives for a certain refinement of naturalism. Experience proves that it is chiefly the refined products of such professional art which, in tombs and palaces, are preserved for the archeologist's spade, while the humbler creations of popular taste were always left to perish, as they are still left to perish wherever they happen to survive in the living traditions of our day."

And again: "We may conceive of popular tradition as an undercurrent which flows deeply beneath the reflecting surface of history, a movement of long duration and great force which, though generally hidden from the academic view, comes to the surface occasionally in unexpected places, bringing with it momentoes of distant times and places."

Carl sold a very small number of blue-on-white, West Asian peasant embroideries to a few museums and collectors before selling the bulk of that collection—some eight hundred

pieces—to the Field Museum in Chicago. He applied unsuccessfully to that museum for funds to write a catalog for the collection. (The following essay is condensed from that application.) His vast knowledge on this subject is now lost.

A few weeks before his death, he wrote: "It had been my hope (for many years) to prepare a catalogue with comparative study of some of the designs for the Field Museum; but alas nothing has come of that plan; and it now seems unlikely that anything will ever come of it. I hope not to sound immodest if I say I believe it would have been an important thing. Probably very few other collections of such material exist; and certainly none of such geographical scope within China—and of course there are no comparative studies—which would be fascinating."

In 1977, examples from the collection were illustrated in an expensive manual for hobbyists who embroider. In the Introduction, the Field Museum's assistant curator of Asian ethnology dismisses Carl's approach as "unfashionable"; erroneously identifies him as a member of the Kulturkreis school; and expresses regret that Carl concentrated on collecting specimens instead of recording meanings. But, as Carl noted, in spite of the best will in the world, owners no longer recalled meanings.*

By 1938, Carl had moved on to other subjects, first a study of the Sun Bird, then a survey of genealogical iconography. He never returned to his first study. He occasionally talked about writing it up. Every specimen was documented. There were also related photographic files, bibliographic references, and much correspondence. But he put all this aside in favor of ongoing research. He remained an explorer, drawn to the unknown.

This brief essay may alert scholars to the existence of his collection. Like the man who assembled it, it is a unique treasure.

Edmund Carpenter

* Baker, Muriel, and Margaret Lunt, *Blue and White Embroideries of Rural China*. New York, 1977.

Comparative studies of certain motifs in cotton embroideries from western China

CARL SCHUSTER

I

The embroidered bed-valance in figure 1, from Szech'uan in western China, is 1.8 meters long. Like most of these embroideries, it is cross-stitched, with homespun indigo-blue cotton cloth. Its decoration is typical: five densely filled medallions or roundels, each of different design, enclosed on three sides by an elaborately worked border consisting (as such borders do) of an undulating "vine" with a variety of filling motifs, chiefly auspicious fruits and flowers. (There is no border at the top because there the valance was stitched to a bedsheet.)

Compare figure 1 to figure 2, a Central Asian fresco of the ninth century A.D. reproducing a type of silk textile made earlier in Sassanian Persia. This frescoed reproduction of a textile was applied to the front of a low, long benchlike platform along one wall of a room—a position corresponding exactly to that occupied by figure 1, which hung almost to the floor from the level of the sleeping platform of a Chinese four-poster bed. Correspondences also include the duck-medallions in figure 1 and figure 2 and, on other

examples, Chinese bed-valance medallions enclosed within circular "pearl-bands" like those in figure 2.

I suspect that fabrics of the Sassanian epoch (226–641) found their way into China at least by T'ang times (618–908), and that the West Chinese tradition of hanging medallion-valances from bed-platforms goes back at least to T'ang times.

II

In figure 3, a Chinese medallion, we see females on the left and males on the right, flanking a table from which hangs a table-valance with a blessing: "May gold and jade fill your home." Though the word "home" is omitted from the inscription, it is implied by the family scene. At the bottom, a horseman is attended by a smaller figure, apparently a groom, and followed by a still smaller figure who appears to be kneeling behind the rider. The rider wears a special hat with a sprig of cassia (a kind of laurel) in it, and carries a fan. He is the *chuang-yüan*, or valedictorian, of the triennial "civil service" examinations under the old imperial system—a popular hero who reappears constantly in these



Figure 1. Chinese bed-valance. Szech'uan, China. Collected by Carl Schuster. Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. Schuster Collection.



Figure 2. Fresco found by A. von Le Coq in a ruined Buddhist temple at Qyzil in Chinese Turkestan, ninth century A.D. duck-frieze, presumably reproducing a silk textile made earlier in Sassanian Persia. From A. von Le Coq, *Die buddhistische Spätantike in Mittelasien*, vol. 4, *Atlas der Wandmalereien* (Berlin, 1924), pl. XV.

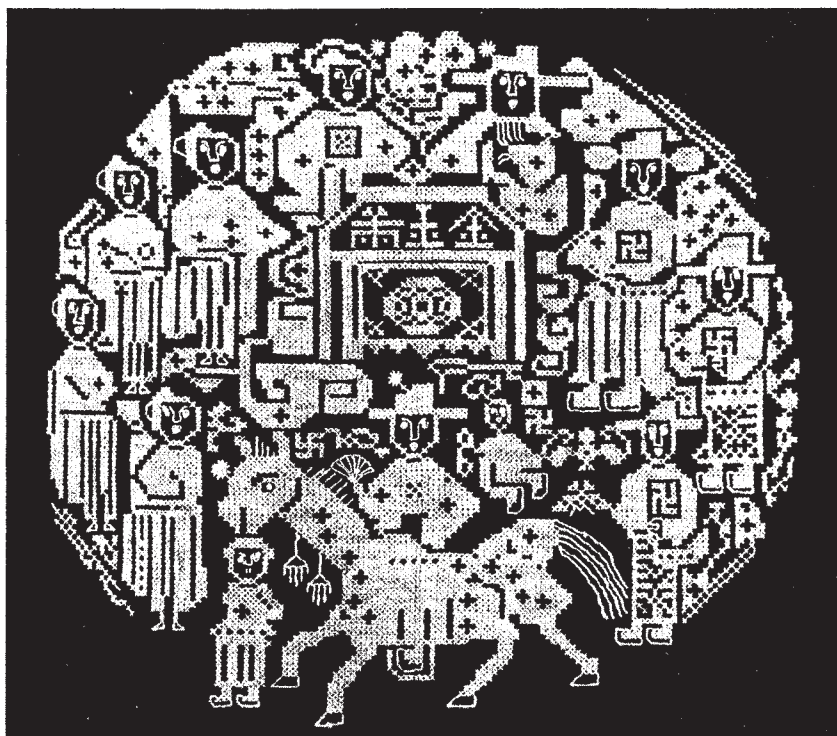


Figure 3. Central medallion of a door-hanging from Tung-Ch'uan, Yünnan. White cross-stitch on blue ground, showing triumphant Chuan-yüan. Collected by Carl Schuster. Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. Schuster Collection.

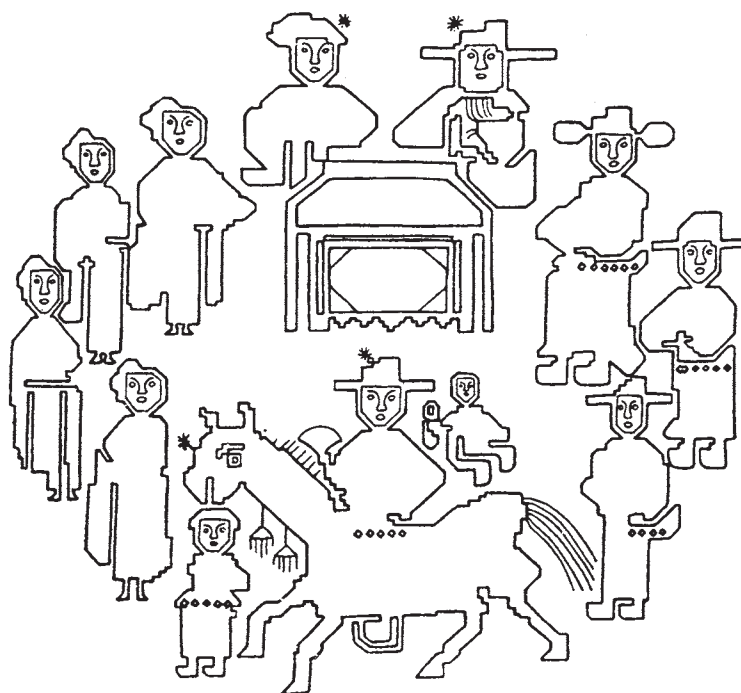


Figure 4. Drawing of Figure 3. Drawing: Carl Schuster.

embroideries, and who represents every woman's ambition for the son to issue from the marriage-bed for which, as part of her trousseau, the bride-to-be embroidered the valance.

The scheme of figure 3 can be seen more clearly in figure 4, in which irrelevant filling elements have been suppressed. Compare the equestrian group at the bottom of figure 4 with figure 5, the central scene of a Sassanian rock-carving of the third century which shows the Persian emperor Shapur presenting the freedman Cyriades to the vanquished Romans as their emperor. If the supplicant Roman general corresponds, at least in position, to the "groom" before the *chuang-yüan*'s horse in figure 3, then the "angel" in figure 4, flying toward Shapur and holding out to him the scarf of victory, corresponds to the little figure "kneeling" in the space behind the *chuang-yüan* in figure 3: he is the Chinese equivalent of the Sassanian "flying victory." (In other Chinese examples of the same composition, this little figure holds out to the *chuang-yüan* a sprig of cassia-laurel.)

As for the Chinese ideas associated with figure 3, the figures surrounding and surmounting the equestrian group illustrate the Chinese ideal of family life epitomized in the expression "five generations living together." In terms of this ideal, the *chuang-yüan* represents the fifth generation, who has brought glory (and official hats) to his four successive living ancestors. For the little "kneeling" figure there is, to my knowledge, no Chinese explanation: he is just a



Figure 5. Detail of Figure 6. Drawing: Carl Schuster.

traditional part of the scene.

Though the five males and five females of figure 3 seem to be thus adequately accounted for in terms of purely Chinese conceptions (the fifth female being the bride of the *chuang-yüan*), we cannot really appreciate the relation of the surrounding figures to the *chuang-yüan* without referring to the total Sassanian scene of which the mounted Persian king, figure 5, forms the center. In figure 6, we see that this central equestrian group was, in fact, surrounded by several groups of warriors, variously and distinctly dressed to represent their membership in the armies that were opposed in

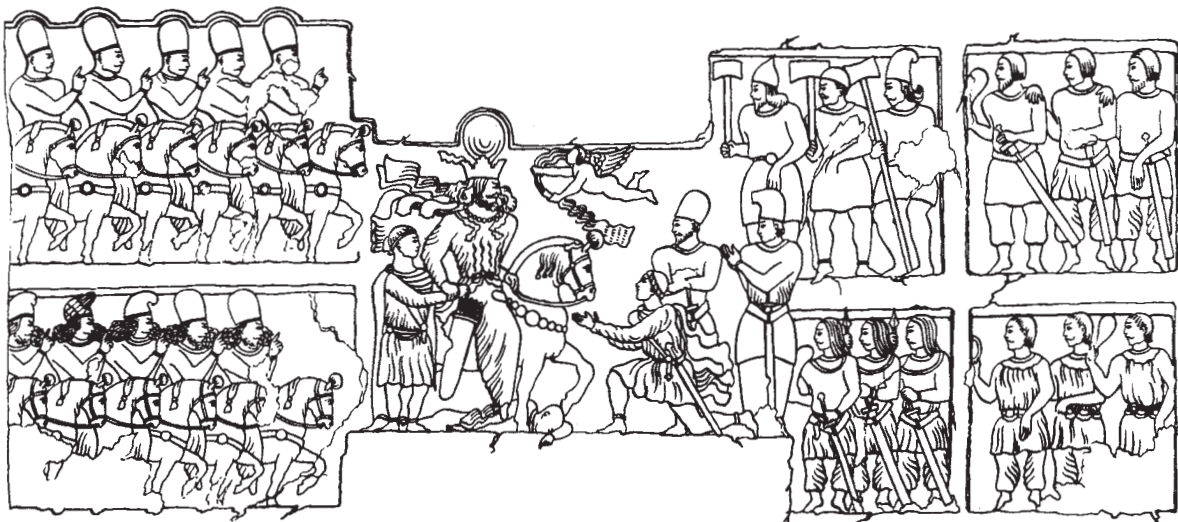


Figure 6. Sassanian cliff sculpture of Shapur presenting the Freedman Cyriades to the Romans as their emperor, third century A.D. From a photograph in the Fogg Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. Drawing: Carl Schuster.



Figure 7. Roman coin, Asia Minor, first to third century A.D.
Drawing: Carl Schuster.



Figure 8. Archaic Greek vase painting. From O. Höfer, "Nike," in Wilhem H. Roscher, *Ausführliches lexikon der griechischen und römischen mythologie*, 3/1, (1884), cols. 305–361 (from *Archäologische Zeitung*, 13/2 [Leipzig, 1881]). Drawing: Carl Schuster.

the battle preceding the victory commemorated in the center. Despite the difference in intention, I think that these groups of opposed warriors ultimately inspired the opposed groups of males and females surrounding the equestrian group in figure 3. The details of the process by which the representation of an imperial triumph was converted to the illustration of a civil and domestic one can only be guessed. Perhaps the famous Persian cliff carving, figure 6, was soon reproduced in some portable and perishable copy for the T'ang "tourist trade" and thus found its way to China, where its potential for the illustration of specifically Chinese ideas was ingeniously exploited.

Though the Sassanian Persians probably inherited the idea for the *central* part of their commemorative carving, figure 6, from earlier classical models (for example, the Roman coin in figure 7 and the archaic Greek vase painting in figure 8), the "victories" presenting their laurel crowns to the riders in these compositions are females. Only in Sassanian Persia (or in the slightly antecedent Hellenistic culture) does the female victory become a male, as in figure 5 and figure 3. Insofar as the groups of warriors surrounding the mounted victor also represent a Sassanian innovation, the mere fact that these groups have their formal counterpart in figure 3 may be regarded as further evidence of its Sassanian inspiration.

III

Hellenistic influence in Chinese embroideries may be seen in the Chinese "fisherman medallion" in figure 9. Wearing a wide sun hat and standing under a flowering tree at the left side of this medallion is the fisher-lad with rod in hand. Biting at the end of his line is an enormous fish, whose curved body follows and fills out the curvature of the medallion at the right. In the water (presented conventionally by series of parallel zigzag lines) at the bottom of the medallion is a curious three-legged aquatic monster, the "denizen of the deep"; and under the fisherman's right hand is a "creel" containing a fish (of normal proportions) that he has already caught.

The Hellenistic counterpart of figure 9, and surely its prototype, is figure 10, a terracotta plaque found in Alexandria, but presumably made in Asia Minor in the third or second century B.C. Again we see a wide-hatted fisherman seated under a flowering tree and hooking an enormous fish, whose bodily curvature follows the curve of the medallion. Under the fisherman's seat is his creel (assuming that to be the

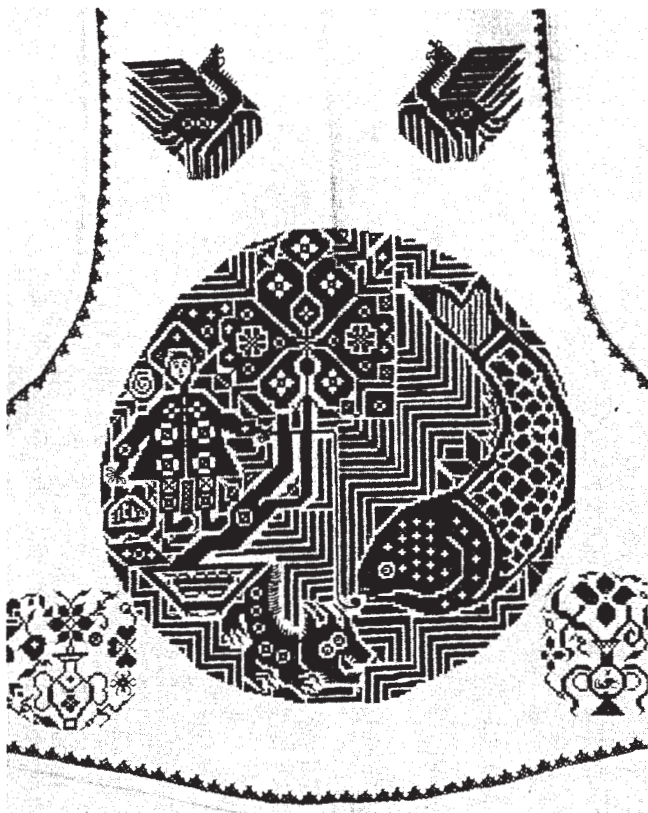


Figure 9. Chinese embroidered medallion from bodice of woman's shirt, embroidered with gold and woolen threads, from Menacha, a mountainous district in Yemen. Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin. From Helmut Theodor Bossert, *Ornament in Applied Art* (New York, 1924), pl. 60/8. Drawing: Carl Schuster.

purpose of the leather wine-skin, or "askos," there represented); and in the water at the bottom of the medallion is a squid as "denizen of the deep." Correspondences between figure 9 and figure 10 are so extensive that a relation between them cannot be seriously doubted. How that relation is to be explained historically is more difficult than recognizing its existence; and the exact nature of the circumstances under which this design found its way across a continent must remain speculative. Presumably figure 10 wasn't unique, but belonged to the class of *terra sigillata* manufactured in quantity from molds that were easily portable. However, its composition (with or without the fisherman in a boat) might have been popular in contemporary and later textiles, even in embroidery: such things would have been easily portable, though perishable, leaving no direct trace.

The fisherman of Hellenistic times, figure 10, has

earlier antecedents. Thus in figure 11, a roundel painted inside an Attic red-figured kylix of the fifth century B.C., the crouching fisherman, with creel beside him and squid below him, has hooked a fish (of normal size). However, there is no attempt at the suggestion of a landscape, as in figure 9 and figure 10. So it might seem reasonable to look for the prototype of figure 9 in Hellenistic-Roman times rather than in remoter antiquity.

As for the Chinese ideas associated with figure 9, again these have a disarmingly Chinese flavor. We are told that the fisherman is Chiang T'ai-Kung, a lad so famous for his virtue that the fish came to be caught by him, even though his line had no hook—a phenomenon that presaged his later elevation to the



Figure 10. Terracotta plaque, found in Alexandria, but presumably made in Asia, third to second century B.C. Skulpturensammlung, Dresden. From Rudolf Pagenstecher, "Über das landschaftliche Relief bei den Griechen," in *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften Philosophisch-Historische Klasse* (Heidelberg, 1919), pl. 2. Drawing: Carl Schuster.



Figure 11. Interior of Attic red-figured kylix, fifth century B.C. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 01.8024. Drawing: Kathleen Kitsos.

imperial throne. This legend belongs to a type widely spread in the oral literature of the world, but the diffusion of the legend as such must be much older than this rendition of it in art, which presumably found its way across Asia after the time of Christ.

IV

Figures 9–11 illustrate the penetration into West Chinese popular tradition of scenes and compositions from urban cultures of the Western World in a period corresponding roughly to that of the Roman Empire. But one of the most curious, complex, and puzzling of

outside relationships to the designs of these Chinese embroideries is provided by the second medallion from the left of the bed-valance, figure 1, as isolated in figure 12.

It is impossible to explore here all the ramifications of relationship of this design, but consider several:

First, the central motif of figure 12 (isolated in figure 13) is strangely un-Chinese. It is, in fact, the assemblage of four birds' heads, attached to a "body" showing several voided spaces, including a large void in the center (more or less filled with a rosette), and by smaller voids variously disposed about the body. Hanging from the bottom of this assemblage are three

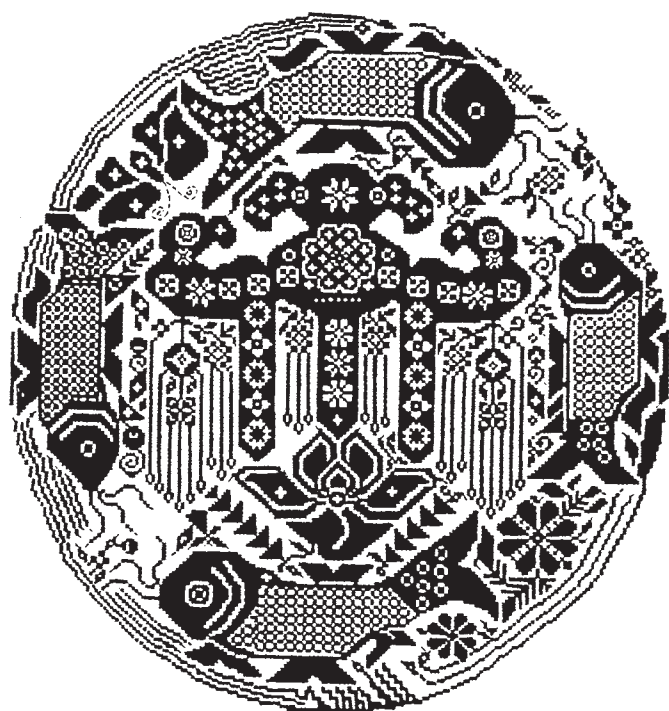


Figure 12. Detail of figure 1. Drawing: Carl Schuster.

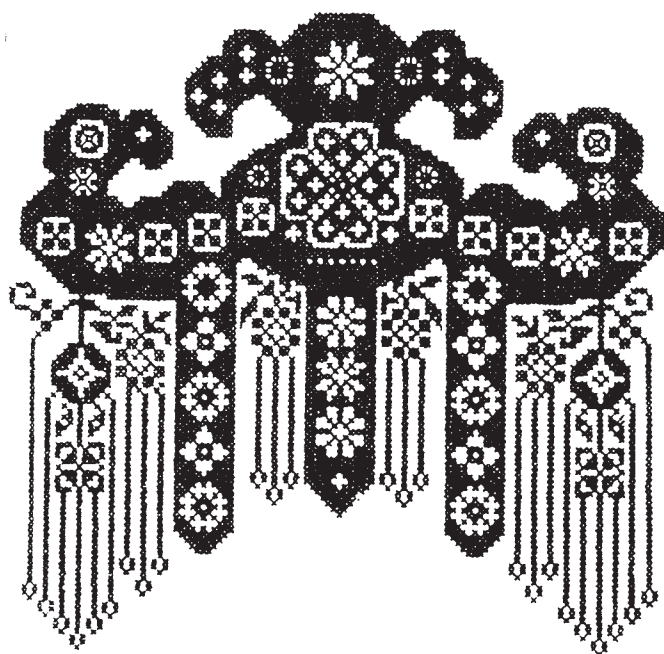


Figure 13. Detail of figure 12. Drawing: Carl Schuster.

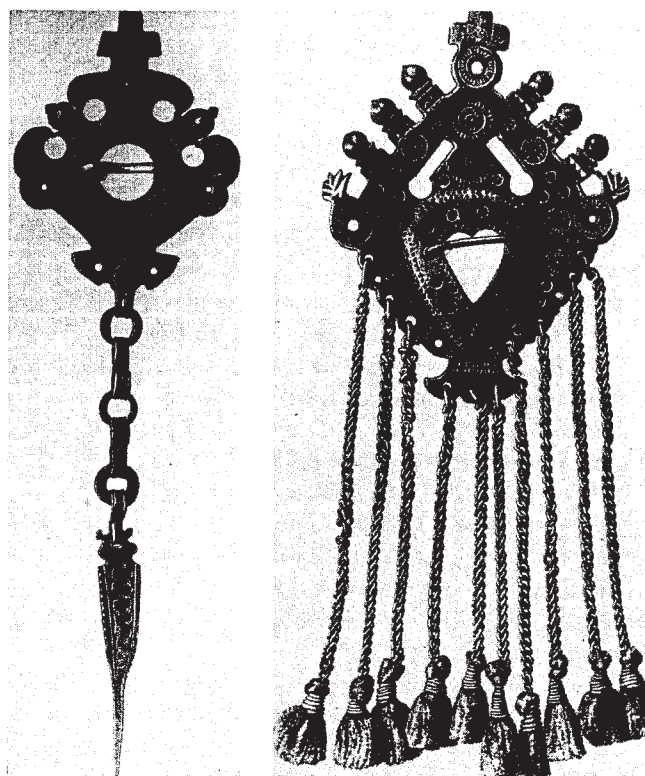


Figure 14. White metal pendant, *spinka*, Carpathian Mountains, Poland. Tatra Museum, Zakopane, 1995. Drawing: Carl Schuster. Figure 15. Metal pendant, *spinka*, with tassels, Carpathian Mountains, Poland. Tatra Museum, Zakopane, 1995. Drawing: Carl Schuster.

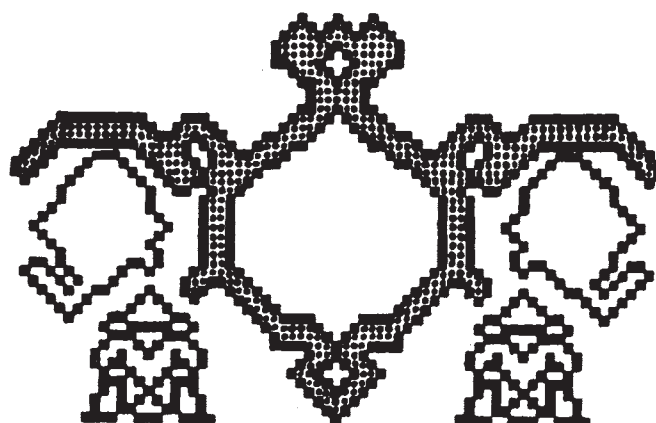


Figure 16. Detail from a carpet knotted by Turkish nomads, Persia. From George Wilke, *Kulturreziehungen zwischen Indien, Orient un Europa* (Wurzburg, 1913), fig. 135b. Drawing: Carl Schuster.

pointed "tabs" interspersed with four "tassels"—as tassels are commonly rendered in these embroideries.

Taken as a whole, this enigmatic (and very un-Chinese) device shows an extensive similarity with certain brass brooches which were, until recently, made and worn by pastoral peasants, the Góral, in the Tatra Mountains of the Western Carpathians, between Poland and Slovakia. Two of the main types of these Góral brooches are reproduced in figure 14 and figure 15. These brasses show similar arrangements of birds' heads on a body with a large, round central perforation, or "void," and with engraved rosettes corresponding to the smaller "voids" on the "body" of figure 12.

Moreover, figure 15 is provided with real tassels, corresponding to the embroidered representations of tassels in figure 12. The other type of Carpathian brooch, figure 14, generally has a brass pipe cleaner hanging from its "tail"—a pointed object with engraved decoration that might possibly be equated with one of the three pointed "tabs" attached to the bottom of figure 12.

That the four fishes on the periphery of figure 12 stand in conceptual relation to the bird-headed device that they surround appears from certain analogies in the textile folk art of Europe, which, however, I shall not attempt to introduce here. The point is that the presence of the fishes in figure 12 supports the interpretation of the central "bird-headed device" as representing a *bird*—but a very special bird, highly conventionalized and showing a number of distinctive peculiarities.

The nature of these peculiarities becomes clearer in the light of a third analogy that, together with the Chinese "bird-headed device," figure 13, and the Polish brooches, figures 14 and 15, forms the third side of what may be described as a triangular relationship. This third analogy is provided by a design commonly found on the borders of certain types of carpet knotted by Turkish nomads of Persia, as in figure 16. Taking the central element of this design as the representation of a bird (probably a double-headed bird, though the heads appear to be recessive, as in the brooches), we see that its outspread wings have been conceived as birds' beaks. The eyes (which appear as voids) occupy headlike expansions at the bases of the beaks, where they also serve as "joint-marks" for the wings. The "wing-heads" of figure 16 may be compared with both the wing-beaks of figure 14 and the ocellated wings of figure 15.

The relation of the "bird" in figure 16 to the central feature of figure 12 is not so immediately obvious;

though placing birds' heads *upon* outstretched wings, as in figure 12, also has its analogy in certain other carpet designs, related to figure 16, but not considered here.

Perhaps the main telltale of relationship among the three classes of design is the void in the center of the bird's body, which in figure 16 is so greatly expanded that the body is reduced to a ring.

But this is not the end of correspondences. Under the wing-heads of figure 16 are two shapes, each of which ends at the bottom in a kind of hook. These motifs are still recognized by the carpet-knotters themselves today as representing "fishes" (Persian: *mahi*). Though I have not been able to elicit any native name for the carpet motif of figure 16, which I here call a "bird," I think that the traditional designation of these embroidery shapes as "fish" justifies the inference that the main design is indeed a bird, of which the fish are prey. Possibly the "fishes" associated with the bird in figure 16 have their analogy in the more naturalistic pairs of fishes surrounding the bird-headed device in figure 12; or in the (zoomorphic?) pipe cleaner with its hooked "tail" attached to figure 14.

However this may be, correspondences between figures 16, 15, and 12 permit another inference: that the pair of roughly triangular elements below the two "fishes" in figure 16 are conventional representations of *tassels*, as we know them from figure 15, and as we have recognized them in figure 12.

I think we are dealing with a complex of traditions derived from a common original. This common original may have been in the nature of a metal pendant (or amulet), more or less similar to the Polish-Carpathian brooches, figures 14 and 15, which are probably very archaic in form. The design on this metal prototype was then translated into two different textile media: knotting and embroidery—under circumstances that remain obscure, or at least unexamined.

However difficult it may be to determine where and when this hypothetical prototype existed, it was likely somewhere in western Asia (the locus of the modern carpet-knotting tradition), and it might go back at least to the fifth or fourth century A.D., when the area north of the Black Sea was occupied by Germanic Goths, who seem to have been chiefly responsible for the subsequent diffusion of various types of bird-headed fibulae throughout Europe.

Nevertheless, the most distinctive feature of all three of these designs—the bird's wing conceived as a bird's eye—might have been still more ancient history, since motifs corresponding to this conception (namely "joint-

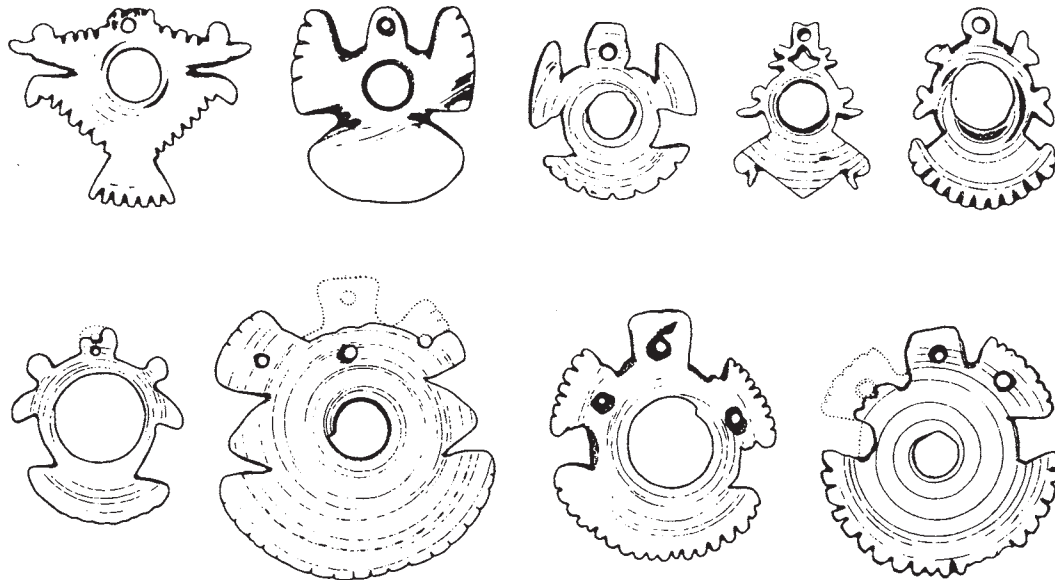


Figure 17. Shell ornaments, *kesi*, southern Bougainville, Solomon Islands. Formerly in the A. H. Voyce Collection, Kieta, Solomon Islands; present whereabouts unknown. Drawing: Carl Schuster.

eyes," more especially on quadruped animals), are characteristic of Scythian metalwork as early as the fifth century B.C., and since the bird's wing-head plays a prominent role as a detached emblem in the bronze-age art of the Dongson culture of Southeast Asia around and somewhat before the time of Christ. One of the two known foci of the Dongson culture was in Yunnan, the province adjoining Szech'uan, where the "bird-headed device" became extinct recently, in the tradition of our embroideries.

Even this is not the end of the matter, the amulets cut out of *shell*, in shapes startlingly reminiscent of the modern Chinese, Polish, and Persian motifs, were until recently made by inhabitants of the Solomon Islands in the Western Pacific. These Melanesian shell pendants also come in two main types, corresponding roughly to the two types of Polish brooches in figures 14 and 15. Both types are characterized by a pair of recessive birds' heads at the top of a centrally voided "body," at the sides of which we sometimes see perforated wing-heads, very much like those of figure 15. Three examples of this are shown at the bottom of figure 17. Moreover, some of these Melanesian pendants, called *kesi* or *keti* in southern Bougainville, also have "tassels" or rather "tinklers," made of other shells attached to strings of shell beads (that is, "chains") hanging from little perforations in the birds' tails, for example, in figures 18 and 19.

Figure 18 represents a reconstruction, undertaken on

the authority of a missionary long resident in Bougainville. He assured me that the purpose of the small holes in the "tails" of such *kesi* was to attach strings of shell beads ending (generally) in olivella shells to serve as tinklers, though he told me that he had never succeeded in acquiring a specimen with such a component of tinklers intact. All Carpathian brooches of the type in figure 15 have chains ending in tassels. Many end in shoe buttons.

Kesi 18 has caudal perforations, presumably made for the same purpose. On the other hand, *kesi* 19 is exceptional: tinklers are attached, not to the "tail," but to the lateral wing-heads, here atypical in form. I include this specimen nevertheless, as it is the only one known to me that retains the tinklers as they were originally attached by the natives.

Finally, for comparison, figure 20 shows typical "wing-heads" of the second type of Carpathian brooches; of the Dongson drums; and of the Solomon Island *kesi*.

Significance

Taken all together, correspondences between the Solomon *kesi* and the Carpathian brooches, as well as their western and eastern Asiatic congeners, are so extensive that they cannot possibly be fortuitous. Actually, these correspondences lose some of their implausibility in light of considerable and growing

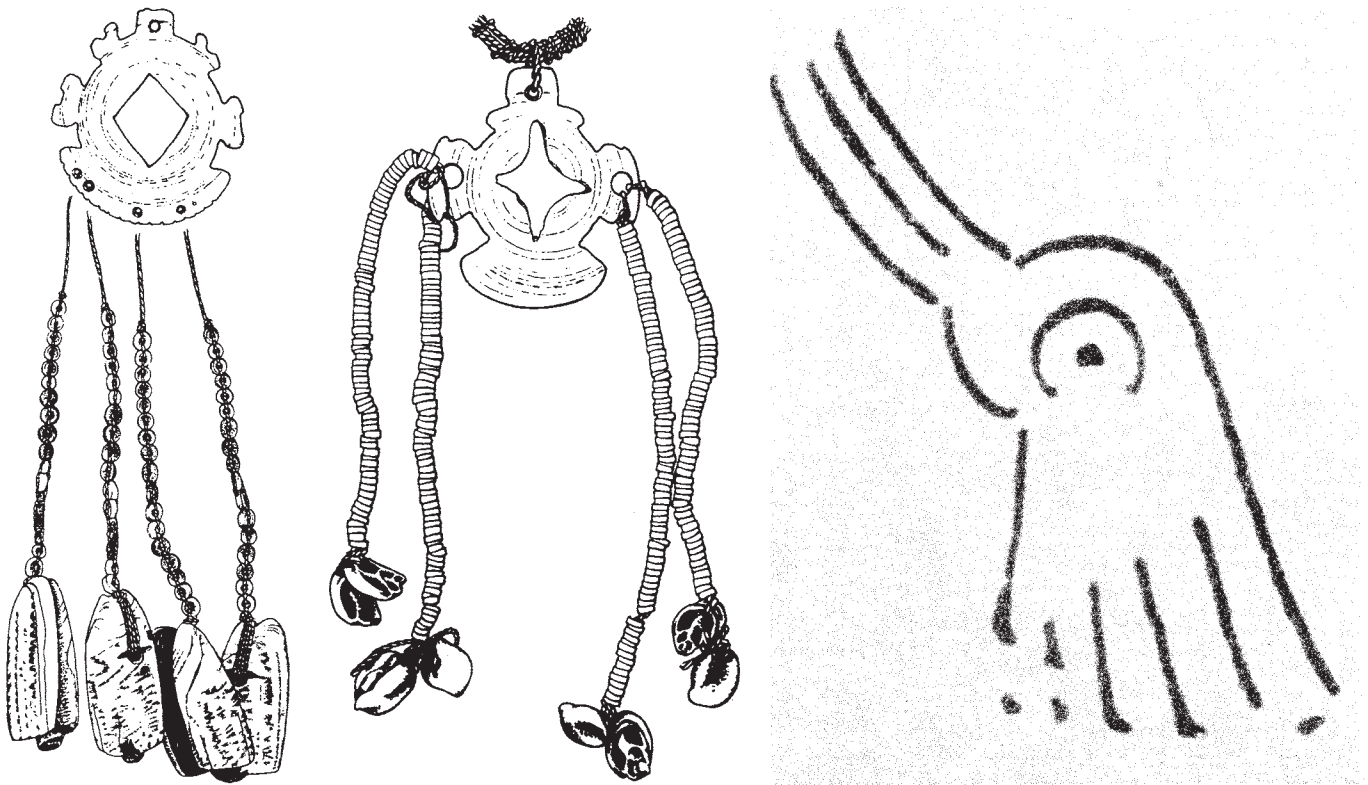


Figure 18. Shell ornament, *kesi*, with tassels, southern Bougainville, Solomon Islands. Trinity Theological College, Auckland, 3327. Drawing: Carl Schuster. Figure 19. Shell ornament, *kesi*, with tassels, southern Bougainville, Solomon Islands. Otago Museum, Dunedin, 358.14. Drawing: Carl Schuster. Figure 20. Detail of a Don-S' standard, Tonkin drum. Present whereabouts of drum unknown. Drawing: Carl Schuster.

evidence of bronze-age influences in Melanesia. Solomon Island *kesi* may simply represent a translation into shell of metal prototypes that presumably reached southwest China and what is now Vietnam before the beginning of the Christian era, from an ultimate source somewhere in western Asia. Whence their characteristic forms somehow became independently embedded in artistic traditions still surviving, or but recently extinct, in Poland and Persia.

The modern Chinese, Persian, and Melanesian manifestations touched upon here, though they undoubtedly represent important archaic survivals, remain as good as unknown. All are the last remnants of sometimes exceedingly old traditions, preserved from the universal collapse of such traditions in our epoch. In each case, they were recovered solely by accidents of circumstance, such as my first journey into western China, or the collecting activity of a provincial Polish

museum curator in the Carpathians, or that of a New Zealand missionary in the Solomons.

This situation is bound to change, but when that happens it will be too late to rescue any more of such precious evidence for the reconstruction of human cultural history.

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