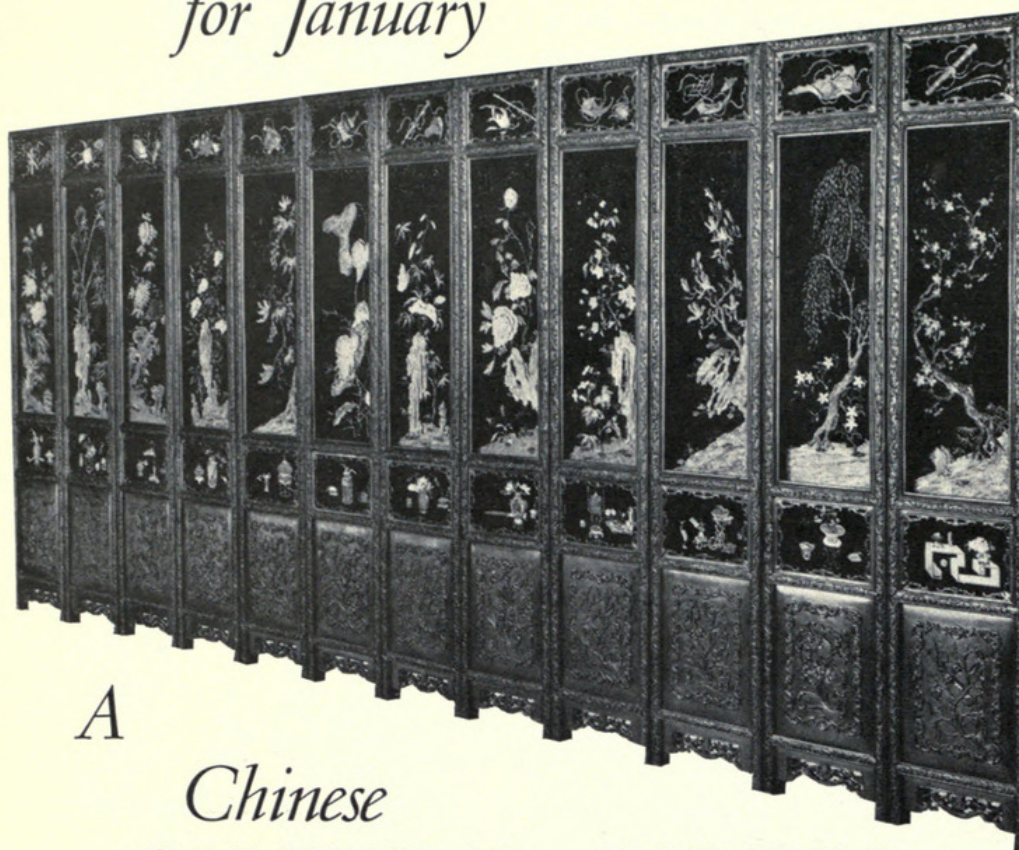


# FEATURED EXHIBIT

## for January



# A

## Chinese

# CALENDAR SCREEN

By Kenneth Starr, Curator Asiatic Archaeology and Ethnology



PICTURED on our cover is what Western visitors to China call a "calendar screen," so named because the floral motifs dominating the twelve panels of the screen represent the twelve months of the year. Although not so common as the representations of the four seasons so frequently seen in Chinese art, these calendar screens traditionally have been prized as decorative pieces. The specimen illustrated is remarkable because the decorative elements on the face of the screen are formed from thin strips of wood upon which are glued bits of the brilliant blue plumage of the kingfisher. Made very likely either in Soochou or in Yangchou in Kiangsu Province, and

dating probably from the nineteenth century, the screen was acquired for the Museum in China by Dr. Berthold Laufer in the course of the Blackstone Expedition, 1908-1910.

Measuring nearly eight and one-half feet in length by slightly more than three and one-half feet in height, the screen consists of a twelve-sectioned frame of "blackwood," into which are set twelve decorated wooden panels. The backs of the panels are admirable in their own right, for they are lacquered in dull red flecked with gold, but it is the front faces of the panels that command attention, for they bear flamboyantly decorative motifs outlined against fine black velvet. The panels are divided by the construction of the wooden frame into three groups of designs: the upper groups portray various traditional objects symbolic of Buddhism, Taoism, and Chinese folk lore; the large central motifs show some flower or plant; and the lower design areas depict ceramic and bronze pieces, most of them containing floral sprays.

It is the brilliant central floral designs dominating the front face of the screen that are associated with the months, and so give the screen its name. Just as in the United States we associate particular flowers and plants with certain holidays or seasons of the year—tulips with spring, roses with summer, chrysanthemums with autumn, and poinsettias with Christmas and winter—so also the Chinese associate various flowers and plants with the flow of the seasons—the plum with spring, the orchid or lotus with summer, the chrysanthemum with fall, and the bamboo or peony with winter.

Looking at the screen from right to left, in Chinese fashion, we see that the flowers or plants represented are as follows: 1st month, plum, the "prunus" so common in Chinese and Japanese art; 2nd month, weeping willow and *ch'a-mei* flower; 3rd month, magnolia; 4th month, peach; 5th month, the herbaceous peony; 6th month, poppy; 7th month, lotus, symbolic not only of summer, but also of Buddhism, particularly, and Taoism; 8th month, grape; 9th month, rose; 10th month, chrysanthemum, one of the oldest cultivated flowers in China and generally accepted as the symbol of autumn; 11th month, bamboo; and 12th month, the tree peony, which, like the plum, lends itself to indoor cultivation and so becomes a symbol of winter.

The dominant color in these floral motifs is the bright natural blue of the kingfisher's feathers, with pink being next most prominent, and with tinges of such other colors as canary yellow, Chinese red, purple, and several shades of brown. The choice of flowers and their arrangement is arbitrary on the part of the artisan.

Such objects as this screen, it must be emphasized, cannot be judged as botanically accurate. Neither should they be considered as fine art. Rather, such pieces must be recognized for what they represent, namely, the decorative, but overrefined work for which one class of Chinese artisanship is renowned. Seen so, our screen deserves some praise for the ingenuity, skill, and patience involved in its making.

The screen is exhibited in the Chinese gallery (Hall 24), at the north end of the second floor, near the east stairway.





Chester, K. Starr. 1961. "A Chinese Calendar Screen." *Bulletin* 32(1), 8–8.

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