

### Stroud Piano, New York, ca. 1933

Decorative analysis by Dr. Ann Barrott Wicks, Asian Art History  
February 19, 2016

The piano is painted with willowy Chinese figures in traditional Chinese garden settings. The motifs are similar to the fanciful *chinoiserie* furniture decoration that was popular in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe and America, but the figures of the women are painted in a somewhat modernized style, almost reflecting sketches of high-fashion design models of the 1930's—slim and elongated. (Figs. 1 and 2)



Fig. 1 Elizabeth Erwin, *History of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fashion*, 1992.



Fig. 2

The wispy, sometimes broken strokes used to outline the figures are meant to imitate the painted brush strokes of the Chinese literati. The elongated style of the rocks and trees matches the highly stylized figures.

Figure 2 shows a scene of music and dancing. The seated woman plays a *pipa*, and the young man plays a bamboo flute. The long sleeves of the dancer on the right are typical and add to the effect of the dance. The flowery clothing and hat of the youth are fanciful, as is his depiction as one of the musicians. Ordinarily the music in a scholar's garden would be furnished by women for the scholars' entertainment, or by the scholars themselves.

The garden elements of the scenes painted on the piano are the same as those described in the ideal garden of the Neo-Confucian gentlemen of the Song dynasty (960-1279). These gardens were built for government officials to momentarily escape the bureaucratic life and refresh themselves as if they were in the mountains. Remnants of famous gardens of the scholarly elite built during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties still remain in the southern cities of Suzhou and Hangzhou. In theory, the Chinese garden is a microcosm of the universe, and should include four important elements—mountains, water, trees, and humans.<sup>1</sup> Garden architecture, such as pavilions and bridges, represents the human element even when a human being is absent. Bizarre rocks, such as those seen in the foreground of the composition below, are used to represent mountains. Mountains, both sacred and magical places in China for millennia, were considered places for spiritual renewal. The landscape scene on the piano lid below is organized spatially, moving from the low hillocks in the foreground to the distant mist-covered mountains. While the essential element of water is seldom specifically painted, it is implied, in this case with a lone fisherman in a boat. (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3

This same organization of a landscape is repeated three times on the lid of the piano. The center landscape includes a moon, which is a conventional poetic reference. (Fig. 4) You will note the

---

<sup>1</sup> These four elements are also the fundamentals of Chinese landscape painting.

same organization of hillocks, architecture, foliage, and mountains along the side of the piano. (Fig. 5)



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Fishermen are idyllic characters frequently found in Chinese landscape painting, as well as poetry. They represent the simple, carefree life in natural surroundings, romanticized by the literati. A peasant carrying a pole hung with baskets on his shoulders would be a realistic part of city or country village life, but would never be found in a gentleman's garden. The presence of one on the piano comes from the western imagination of a quaint Chinese scene.

Pine trees are depicted with stylized clumps of needles, as seen on the right in the detail below. Pines traditionally symbolize longevity. Clusters of daisy-like shapes indicate flowering trees, seen below left, but with no indication of what they might be. The best guess would be plum blossoms, commonly depicted in early spring scenes. (Fig. 6) Another stylized tree painted on the piano is the willow, a symbol of farewell or parting. (See figure 2 above.) These heavily stylized flowering trees and willows are borrowed directly from the famous "blue willow" ware designed in England in the 18<sup>th</sup> c. (Fig. 7)



Fig. 6



Fig. 7 Google Images

The heavy, carved piano legs are in the Jacobean style, which was sometimes used in depression-era American furniture. The designs on the side of the piano are also recognizable as ones used to embellish 1930's furniture. (Figs. 8, 9)





Fig. 8 Google Images



Fig. 9 Google Images

As mentioned above, bizarrely-shaped rocks represent mountains in scholars' gardens. These rocks were highly prized and collected by connoisseurs. The most expensive rocks were those eroded by water in Lake Tai, in the southern province of Jiangsu. (Fig. 10) Most of the strange rocks on the piano are depicted with an extremely stylized ribbon-like curve. (Figs. 11, 12). One of them is even colored white, looking more like a piece of fabric than a rock. The most realistic of the rocks is next to the peddler crossing a bridge on the right side of the piano.



Fig. 10 Google Images



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

A rather curious figure is a seated woman in a voluminous white dress and somewhat elaborate headgear. She faces a boy who reaches toward her. (Fig. 13) A woman alone in a garden with her son is a familiar motif in Chinese painting. Boys symbolize wealth and continuation of the family line.<sup>2</sup> But the woman's oversized dress, colored white and decorated with giant flowers, is fantastical. White clothing in traditional China is reserved for funerary attire. While not known in the West, this would presumably have been known by a Chinese painter. While the artist is unknown, s/he obviously had training in Chinese painting, and was more than likely Chinese. Because of the headdress and clothing, my first thought was that the woman might represent a goddess, as a picture of a ghost in a garden would be most inauspicious for the owner of the piano. But there are no particular attributes that identify a specific deity. Thus, it should be assumed that this is simply an oddity.

---

<sup>2</sup> Another mother and son walk together in the same garden, across the bridge from this pair.



Fig. 13

Note the stylized pine and eccentric rock behind the lady, features that have been discussed above. Note also the V-shaped fence that is often seen in *chinoiserie*, a remnant of the zigzag fence in the Blue Willow pattern. The Blue Willow fence itself is a reference to the zigzag bridge across a pond that is common to Chinese gardens. Additional small, angled fences are painted in other scenes on the piano.

Floral motifs decorate the music stand and keyboard cover. In keeping with the overall style of the figures, rocks, and trees, these floral arrangements are also elongated. Note the ribbon-like rock outlines in the foreground of the flower arrangement below. (Fig. 14) The flowers are probably meant to represent the peony, symbolizing wealth and beauty, and azaleas, symbol of happiness and prosperity.



Fig. 14