

**Chinoiserie Art Case Weber Piano with Hand-painted Garden Scenes
Rebuilt and Restored May, 2016**

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The scenes painted on this early twentieth-century piano feature lively figures in a garden setting. Gold plants and figures painted directly on the dark wood of the piano playfully alternate with colors on bright green ground to form a pleasing contrast. The effects of wispy lines and bold color contrasts make this decorated piano a true gem. Below I will explore the meaning and style of figures and plants in the various scenes.

Three separate scenes outlined in gold and painted directly on the dark wood appear on the lid of the piano. (Fig. 1) These scenes are arranged in a loose triangle that follows the shape of the lid. Two of the scenes feature women in a garden—one seated and one standing. The third scene is a larger-than-life arrangement of colorful flowers set in an outdoor landscape with butterflies. A wide green border along the edge of the piano surrounds these large center scenes. Set in the border and outlined with gold are opaque green cartouches placed at regular intervals. These cartouches are filled with pleasant vignettes of boys at play.



Fig. 1

The matronly seated woman seems to preside over all activities in the garden, like a Confucian matriarch looking out on the secondary wives and children of the family, all of whom are beholden to her. The standing woman is younger and actively enjoying a corner of the garden.

We can imagine her as one of the secondary wives. (Fig. 2) Standing under a gracefully asymmetric tree she examines a patch of flowers. The gold, stylized foliage of the tree is unidentifiable, but the flowers opposite the woman are chrysanthemum, the flower of autumn and a symbol of longevity. The chrysanthemum, because of its association with the poet Tao Yuanming (372-427), was a favorite in the gardens of the educated elite. Two curiously angled triangles, tilted forward in space, separate the woman from the flowers. This suggestion of a fence can be found in various scenes on the piano. Its style references the zigzag fence of the “blue willow” pattern on ceramics, a *chinoiserie* design first made in England in the 18th century. (Fig. 3)

The parasol, while not seen in traditional Chinese painting, is a European method for indicating that the figure is an East Asian woman. This means of type-casting is ubiquitous in *chinoiserie*, as the face and hair of the figure represented below are otherwise indistinguishable from Caucasian features. The clothing is also generalized, without specific reference to Chinese or Japanese costume.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3, Google images

Various birds and insects, as well as spots of color indicating flowers, enliven the garden scenes in multiple areas, adding interest and atmosphere. Most are not specific enough to be identified. We do see, however, a swimming duck and birds that appear to be seagulls. The music rack features a scene of two boys with nets catching butterflies. (Fig. 4) In Chinese poetry and art, a pair of butterflies is symbolic of conjugal felicity. But capturing butterflies represents a man's freedom to have concubines, thus "drinking the nectar" from more than one woman. For that matter, there are quite a few traditional paintings of palace women that show the concubines punishing a butterfly/man by hitting it with their fans.¹ Other examples of boys with nets are elsewhere on the piano. For example, a detail from the closed fall board shows a boy holding a net to catch dragonflies and butterflies. (Fig. 5)

¹ For examples, see Ellen Johnston Laing, "Chinese Palace-Style Poetry and the Depiction of a Palace Beauty," *The Art Bulletin* 72:2 (June, 1990), pp. 284-295.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

The open fall board (Fig. 4, just above the keys) has cartouches with flower arrangements painted on opaque green ground on either side of the gold-lettered name of the manufacturer. The name is also included in a gold-rimmed cartouche, but without the opaque green ground. The floral arrangements bend inwards toward each other, framing the words, so that the decoration on the fall board is seen as a unified composition.

A particularly noteworthy scene is located in the second cartouche on the right side of the piano. (Fig. 6) The lovely treatment of the pine and rock is very true to the traditional imagery of a Confucian gentleman's private garden. Pine and rock together represent strength, endurance, and longevity. Eccentric rocks like the ones shown here have been highly prized by Chinese connoisseurs for more than a thousand years. Harvested from the freshwater lakes—most notably, Lake Tai in Jiangsu province, the water-worn rocks became a standard in the gardens of wealthy men at least as early as the 10th century. The rocks were meant to represent mountains in the garden of the cultivated landowner. The Neo-Confucian theory of both gardens and landscape painting was that the ordered world included mountains, water, foliage, and people.² Both gardens and landscape paintings were thus regarded as microcosms of a controlled and well-ordered world.



Fig. 6

A figure beneath an overhanging branch is another traditional Chinese motif, especially in the paintings of the Song dynasty (960-1279). Artists in the Southern Song court academy, such as Ma Yuan (1160-1225) and Xia Gui (1195-1224), painted idyllic scenes of figures, most often scholars, under branches like this. (Fig. 7) Landscapes in this style were very popular in Muromachi period Japan (1392-1573). The asymmetry and gentleness of these 12th-century paintings made them a favorite of westerners in later centuries when they first became

² For more on Chinese rocks, see John Hay, *Kernels of Energy, Bones of Earth: The Rock in Chinese Art*. New York: China House Gallery/China Institute in America, 1985. See also, Kemin Hu, *Scholars' Rocks in Ancient China: the Sunyuan Stone Catalogue*. Trubull, CT: Weatherhill, 2002.

acquainted with Chinese ink painting. There are numerous other examples of the rock and overhanging pine motif painted on this piano. For example, see Fig. 2.

The overhanging branch (Fig. 6 above) extends toward a man fishing. Romanticized in both Chinese painting and poetry, the fisherman represents the simple, unburdened life. The curving bridge and red conical hat of the man fishing in this scene, however, are another example of the European imagination frequently found in *chinoiserie*. The man is also wearing elaborate clothing incongruous to the life of a fisherman, indicating that the painter was either unaware of the romanticized Chinese concept of fishermen, or simply repeating an expected motif.



Fig. 7 Ma Yuan, *Walking on a Path in Spring*, 12th c. Handscroll, ink and colors on silk, National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan. [Google images]

While the painted décor on the piano is without a doubt *chinoiserie*, some very interesting references to the 16th – 17th century Japanese Kanō school of painting can also be seen. (Fig. 8) For example, figures are painted against a flat ground of opaque color, punctuated at points with indigo blue openings that suggest a bank and water. In the blue beneath the fisherman in Figure 6, one sees very Japanese-like stylized gold wave marks. The mysterious blue openings are a staple of Momoyama period (1573-1617) decorative screens and murals. Another reference to the 16th – 17th century Kanō school murals is the extensive use of gold paint.



Fig. 8 Kano Eitoku (1543-1590), *Cypress Tree*, 1566. Eight-fold screen, colors and gold on paper. Juko-in, Daitokuji, Kyoto. ArtStor

Also from the side of the piano is a charming scene of two women and a boy. (Fig. 9) During the Ming period (1368 – 1644), especially, pictures of mothers and sons together in gardens were made. Boys were the hope and promise of continuing the family line. Educated boys had the potential to pass the imperial exams and become prestigious and wealthy civil servants. Pictures of boys playing in a garden, often pretending to practice the scholarly arts, became very popular as early as the Song dynasty. The theme of “a hundred children at play” has been represented in both painting and the decorative arts ever since. In fact, the subject of boys at play could be considered the main theme in the decoration of this piano.



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

Another cartouche features boys playing at music and Chinese chess.³ (Fig. 10) Music and chess are two of the Four Arts that were traditionally enjoyed by Confucian gentlemen at leisure in their gardens. The other activities are calligraphy and painting. Most admired was the man who had mastered all four. Technically, the scholar-musician should play the *guqin*, a seven-stringed instrument similar to a zither. The banjo-like instrument depicted is more like a Chinese *yueqin*, which was more often played by women. It is interesting that the *yueqin* painted above has an end-scroll like western stringed instruments.



Fig. 11

³ Called *go* in Japan, Chinese chess is a game of military strategy.

Two boys play at archery in a cartouche from the band that wraps around the lid of the piano. (Fig. 11) Archery was one of the Six Arts recommended by Confucius (551 – 479 BCE) for a man's well-rounded education. Besides archery, the Six Arts included rites, music, charioteering, calligraphy, and mathematics. Though they share music and calligraphy in common, the Six Arts differ from the previously mentioned Four Arts, in that they were categorized much earlier in the history of China. The Four Arts comprised leisure activities in later imperial China.

In conclusion, the decoration of this piano is both elegant and cheerful. Boys at play, lovely married women, scholarly motifs, and auspicious plants combine to make the designs an artistic program of good wishes.