

For Greg:
Comments on a decorated Steinway at Piano Pros
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The vintage Steinway at Piano Pros is *chinoiserie* at its finest. Beautifully decorated. The design elements are inspired by Willow pattern ceramics but they are based on actual Chinese motifs. The piano features more naturalistic willow trees, rocks, birds, and plants than the plate. Patterns from the Western plate, however, can be seen in the designs that pattern the architectural structures on the piano. [Compare figs. 1 and 2]



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The scenes on the piano are based on Chinese landscape paintings and gardens. The basic elements of a Chinese landscape—mountains, water, trees, and humans—are meant to convey a microcosm of an orderly world. Traditionally, mountains, the most important element of a Chinese landscape painting, are a source of *qi* 气 (pronounced “chee”), or life-restoring essence.

Chinese gardens are designed as three-dimensional landscapes, where people can go if a trip to the mountains isn’t practical. In a Chinese garden, eccentric rocks represent the mountains. Numerous examples of these rocks are painted on the piano. [Fig. 3] Wealthy men collected these odd rocks for their gardens; the most famous rocks are from Lake Tai near Suzhou. Thus, the garden is a miniature landscape where one can restore his vital essence.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4 Chinese garden in Montreal: Note eccentric rocks; window lattice patterns and tile roof.

General description of scenes on the piano

The pattern of trees and rocks framing a bridge over water is repeated with minor variation continuously around the sides of the piano. Lines of rocks are calligraphic; rock shapes are built one behind the other as they would be in authentic Chinese landscape paintings. (See Fig. 3 above). Figures, trees, plants, birds, rocks—everything is outlined in the same way that a traditional Chinese brush painter would portray them.

A variety of fishermen in boats or on land are illustrated in the gardens and landscape scenes on the piano. Fishermen are a Daoist symbol of the simple life in nature. Upper-class Chinese gentlemen fantasized about the carefree life of a fisherman or a woodcutter. In reality, however, fishermen and woodcutters worked long hours and lived in poverty.

More fanciful elements include the hat-like roofs on the pavilions. [Fig. 5]



Fig. 6

In the fanciful motif above a beautiful woman carrying an umbrella crosses a wooden bridge over water, followed by a boy with a net and a fisherman with his pole. [Fig. 6] It is highly unlikely that two actual fishermen would be allowed to follow an upper class Chinese woman across a bridge. The bridge and the parasol are somewhat “Japanized.”

In traditional Chinese painting, willow trees can represent both spring and the advent of prosperity. [Fig. 7] In Chinese poetry the willow usually represents parting, as the name of the willow (*liu*) is a pun for “to leave.” Pine trees represent strength and longevity in any context.



Fig. 7

Materials

It looks like the piano was painted green, leaving an even border of the original mahogany. Two types of paintings were made on the green background. The two-dimensional figures are outlined, then mostly filled in with gold paint. In some cases, such as roofs and flowers, the outlines are filled in with red. The three-dimensional figures were built up with gesso, then colored with gold paint. The raised figures and landscape elements are also beautifully linear, and the rocks are built one shape upon the other as though it were traditional Chinese landscape painting.

Underside of lid [Fig. 8]

A wonderful combination of the traditional Chinese theme of *huaniao* 花鳥, (“flowers and birds”). Artistically balanced and really beautiful. Paintings of flowers and birds almost invariably have auspicious meanings. The flowers depicted here are stylized peonies, Chinese symbols of wealth and status.

Birds or butterflies in pairs usually symbolize a happy marriage. They can also symbolize the souls of dead lovers reunited as butterflies or birds. The birds are composites of generic bird parts. The long beaks are reminiscent of kingfishers perching on rocks above the water. The spreading tail feathers look a bit like the tail of a Chinese phoenix, symbol of the Empress of China.



Fig. 8

Details from the top of the lid

The back half shows an archer kneeling to shoot a bird in a fully realized landscape setting. [Fig. 9]



Fig. 9

A detail on the front half shows a peddler kneeling before two women, holding up wares from his box. [Fig.10] Peddlers were most definitely not allowed inside private Chinese gardens, the kind of garden that seems to be illustrated on the piano. There are instances in paintings, however, of eunuchs dressed as “peddlers” in scenes with children at play in a garden. This was a game for imperial children to pretend to purchase knick-knacks, toys, or sweets.

The woman in the center holds a lotus flower, a symbol of purity. The lotus is associated with Buddhist deities. The woman is somewhat like a goddess or a female bodhisattva. This is an example of various traditional Chinese elements put together in a charming, but unlikely combination.

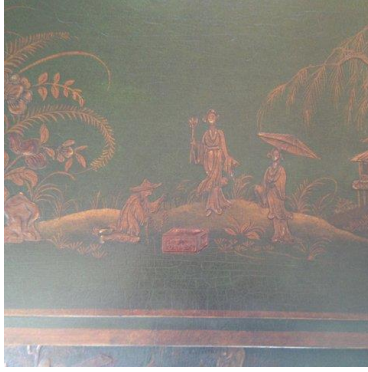


Fig. 10

Front Board [Fig. 11]

Dancing male and female in center. Lovely lines. Each holds a fly whisk in the outside hand. The woman is probably also meant to be holding a fan; while the man holds a covered basket. The fly whisk (*chenfu* 塵拂) is an attribute of the Daoist Immortal Lü Dongbin 吕洞賓. It represents “whisking away difficulties.” It is often seen in the hands of a servant or a scholar gentleman. A fly whisk in the hands of dancers is something I haven’t seen.



Fig. 11

Stylized chrysanthemums are seen above the piano keys. [Figs. 12, 13] A beloved flower in China, the chrysanthemum represents autumn and the ninth month of the lunar year.



Fig. 12



Fig. 13