Paintings of Birds by Basins

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Paintings of birds and flowers have occupied a prominent place in Chinese visual culture since the Tang dynasty (618-907), when floral images gradually became a central subject of paintings rather than merely the background for human figures. Bird-and-flower paintings of the early eighth century typically include flowers, birds, grass, and rocks arrayed on opposite sides of a central axis, with flowers and leaves distributed on opposite sides of the plant stems (see Figures 7.1 and 7.2). These compositions remained popular for centuries.

Not all Tang bird-and-flower paintings follow this pattern, however. An intriguing departure is found on the walls of some late eighth and ninth century tombs: a basin filled with water surrounded by flowers and birds on both sides. These paintings depict ornamental plants, birds, and a basin made of precious materials, usually juxtaposed with Taihu 太湖 rocks. The theme first appeared in the Tang dynasty, flourished during the subsequent Five Dynasties (907-960), and continued into the Song period (960-1279).

This essay examines the visual, cultural, and historical significance of the relatively unstudied pictorial imagery of birds by basins. Its sources are murals from two Tang tombs, extant scroll paintings, and literary references of several sorts. It argues that the bird-by-basin theme reflects elements of Persian visual culture introduced to China in the Tang period.

Two “Golden Basin and Pigeons” Paintings in Tang Tombs

In the tomb of Princess Tang’an 唐安公主 (dated to 784) in modern Xi’an, Shaanxi Province, a screen of birds and flowers was painted on the western...
FIGURE 7.1 Painting of birds and flowers, the High Tang, setting on the walls of M217 tomb in Astana, Turpan, height 150 cm, width 375 cm. AFTER LOU AND LIAO, GUDAI BIHUAMU, P. 132, FIG. 30.

FIGURE 7.2 Painting of birds and flowers setting on the walls of the tomb of Wang Gongshu (died in 838) in Beijing, height 156 cm, width 290 cm. AFTER BEIJING HAI DIAN WENWU GUAN LISUO, "BEIJINGSHI HAI DIAN QU BALIZHUANG TANGMU," PLATE 2.