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The Triumphant Equestrian

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## The Triumphant Equestrian

The two embroidery designs illustrated below constitute a supplement to *A Comparative Study of Motives in Western Chinese Folk Embroideries*, pp. 21-80 of the present volume. The design on the left is the scheme of a medallion from a Chinese folk-embroidery reproduced photographically in Fig. 8 (plate IV, facing page 42), while the drawing on the right represents a portion of a seventeenth century folk-embroidery from the Ionian Islands to the west of Greece, after the color illustration in A. J. B. Wace's *Mediterranean and Near Eastern Embroideries from the Collection of Mrs. F. H. Cook*, London, 1935, II, pl. XIX. This Greek Island embroidery design came to my attention unfortunately too late for inclusion in the main body of my article.

For the sake of clarity I have omitted from the drawing of the Greek Island embroidery all the filling ornament of the background. On the original the group of three figures which appears on the left of our drawing occupies the center, and the equestrian group on the right of our drawing is repeated on the left, making a symmetrical composition, of which our drawing reproduces about two thirds. "In the centre", as Wace describes the design of this embroidery, "stands the bride crowned, in a rich gown of figured silk and gold tissue, with her hands modestly at her waist. On her left is her father, on her right her mother, both holding candles . . . Beyond . . . on either side is a bridegroom riding towards the bride. He is richly habited in figured silk and his horse is led by a groom. A white dog runs by his side. Above these in the field wherever space allows are crowned harpies, birds, eagles, and jugs with flowers."

The reader who has followed our discussion above, pp. 40-80, will at once recognize the kinship of this design with the motive-group which we have designated "the triumphant equestrian". It should be said at once, perhaps, that though the empty space along the upper border of the Greek design is occupied in the original by "harpies, birds and eagles", actually there are only two harpies, and each of these hovers over one of the mounted bridegrooms. In the light of our previous comparisons there cannot be the slightest doubt that the harpy belongs specifically to the equestrian group and represents the "hovering genius" (see the table of iconographic correspondences facing page 76). In looking for the immediate ancestry

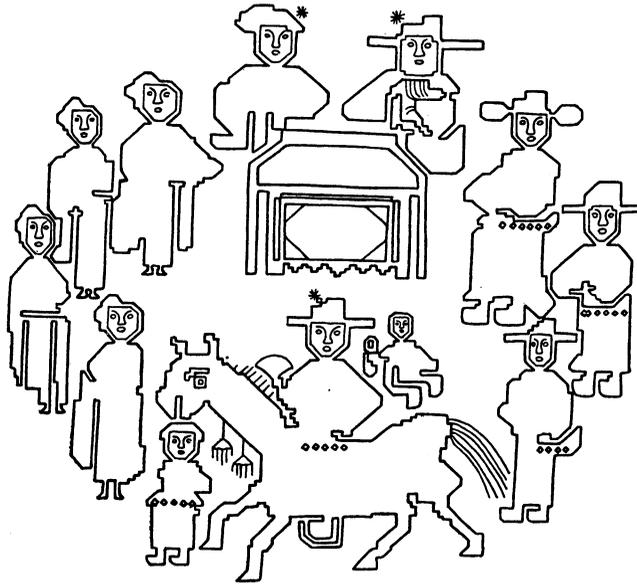


Fig. 1

of this harpy we naturally turn to the triton accompanying the Coptic saint in the fresco of Bawit, for this representation would seem geographically and culturally closest to the Greek Islands, but the shoes so proudly displayed by this harpy seem to suggest that it is, contrary to the classical tradition for harpies, conceived as a male, and that it has a certain affinity with the heavily shod genius of the Chinese design (and the male Iranian *sraosha*). The groom who leads the horse of the bridegroom in the Greek Island embroidery has his precise analogy, among all the examples we have studied, only in the Chinese embroidery. And there is another feature of the Greek equestrian group which seems to recall specifically the Chinese design: the great tassel hung from the neck of the bridegroom's horse (the tassel is white; the horse blue) has its counterpart in the red tassels, 紅纓, which are prescriptive for the horse of the Chinese *chuang yüan* and which can be seen hanging from the horse's neck in the Chinese design. It should be added that similar tassels belong to the accoutrement of Sassanian steeds. (Probably these tassels represent *apotropaia* or amulets for the royal mount, and were made originally of yak's hair, like the royal chowry). The little dog running along under the bridegroom's horse in the Greek island embroidery is more than merely incidental: he corresponds to the dog accompanying Dürer's mounted knight and to the dog running under the horse's legs in the Turfan fresco, while ultimately he no doubt represents not an ally of the equestrian but a foil, his victim,



Fig. 2

trampled underfoot like the dragon of St. George. The little dog under the horse's legs does not appear in our Chinese design, but it does occur in these Chinese peasant embroideries under the legs of certain conventionalized representations of horses without riders.

These formal correspondences between the equestrian group on the Greek Island embroidery and the Chinese folk-embroidery, however, are perhaps even less striking than the conceptual correspondence between the remaining group of figures in the two designs and in the significance of these representations as wholes. For both the Chinese and the Greek designs represent wedding scenes, and in this they are different from all the other designs we have studied. The group of attendant figures who represent religious or mythological ideas in Gandharan sculpture, or military hosts in Sassanian sculpture, appear in the Chinese and Greek folk-designs — and only in these two designs — as guests at a wedding, in which the riding equestrian is the bridegroom. The father and mother who preside at the top of the Chinese design appear in the Greek embroidery as the parents of the bride who stands between them, while on the Chinese design the bride stands inconspicuously before the horse as one of a larger group of female figures.

This conceptual correspondence in terms of a wedding scene between the Chinese and the Greek Island versions of the motive points to the interesting conclusion that the folk-art of these two widely separated regions is connected by a particularly close bond of kinship. The question at once arises where and when this type of composition was first turned to the representation of a wedding scene. If this formula first arose out of mythology (the triumph of the sun-god), as we have proposed, and was then seized upon by religion and the state for the representation of the Buddha or the divine king, we may suppose that the

use of this formula to represent the bridegroom at his wedding is not merely a secondary but a tertiary development, since marriage rites are almost universally modeled after the rites and forms of kingship. This appears very clearly in the Chinese design (and in the old-fashioned Chinese wedding ceremony), where the bridegroom is actually represented as the *chuang yüan*. Still even this tertiary development in the history of the design must be an old one, since we find it so widely diffused in folk-art.

For the actual historical connections between the Chinese and the Greek designs we are thrown back upon conjecture. All we can say is that the use of this design-formula for the representation of a wedding scene is deeply rooted in folk-tradition, that the "wedding" recension of the formula is apparently a characteristic development of folk-art, and that this popular version of the theme has a wide diffusion of its own, apparently independent of the ancient and monumental representations with which we have been chiefly concerned. Though it is difficult, and will perhaps remain impossible, to discover the precise lines of historical connection between two such widely separated versions of the theme, we may see a clue, perhaps, in the fact (which I believe I shall be able to demonstrate in another connection later) that the Greek Island embroideries show considerable evidence of inner-Asiatic and perhaps specifically Turkish influence. Further light on the subject must await the future.

Carl Schuster.