

PAIR OF DEER, SYMBOLS OF IMMORTALITY



CHINA

QING DYNASTY, 19TH CENTURY

BRONZE WITH COPPER ETCHED ENGRAVING

MARK OF XUANDE EMPEROR (1426-1435), MING DYNASTY

DIMENSIONS :

H. 95 CM – L. 98 CM – L. 27.5CM

H. 37^{13/32} IN – L. 38^{37/64} IN – L. 10^{5/8} IN

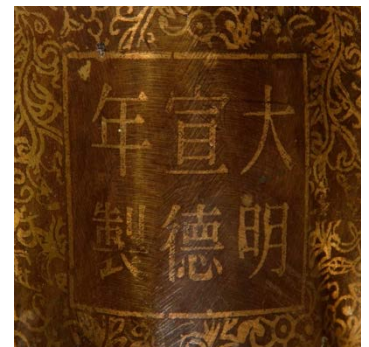
27, Quai Voltaire, 75007 Paris

Our pair of bronze deer is etched with pointed acid needle drawing floral patterns. They are represented in a standing position, each slightly bending a front leg thus giving the impression of movement. The realistic modeling reveals their elegant musculature.

The animals' heads are created with almond-shaped eyes, ears tilted back, grasping a curled sprig of lingzhi mushroom in their mouths. They both feature multi-pronged antlers. At the back, the small tails seem to be agitated.

The patinated bronze surface is finely enhanced by precious acid-etched chiseling. Among the vegetal ornamentation, five medium-sized circles stand out on each side of the body depicting cranes, ducks and Chinese landscapes. We also notice three larger circles, two on each side of the body and one on the neck on which appears *Shou* – the Chinese symbol of longevity.

An apocryphal reign mark of Emperor Xuande (1426-1435), Ming Dynasty, is placed at the beginning of the tail. For hundreds of years Chinese artisans copied reign marks from earlier dynasties out of a respect and reverence for these earlier periods, they are often referred as 'apocryphal' marks. The Xuande period is acknowledged as a high point in the production of bronze works of art, and the vast majority of bronze censers made during the 17th and 18th centuries have Xuande marks to their bases.



Incense burner in bronze, gold leaf chips

China

Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Xuande Period (1426-1435)

Metropolitan Museum, New York

SYMBOLS OF IMMORTALITY

The depiction of the deer dates back to the dawn of Chinese art history. In the Kingdom of Chu (central China, 453 – 223 BC), whose culture is known for its affinity with shamanism, we know a production of funerary sculpture – *Zhenmushu* – the tomb guardian animal. This monstrous creature with a hanging tongue features upturned fangs, a flat nose and large round eyes. The head is surmounted by large deer antlers. Endowed according to the popular imagination with a supernatural power, they were supposed to chase away evil spirits and guarantee the eternal rest of the deceased. They were placed at the entrance of Chinese burial chambers.



Wood, Paris, Cernuschi museum

In China, the deer is the symbol of wealth and longevity. According to legends, this animal can live a very long time and even achieve immortality. According to these accounts, the fur of this animal turned gray when it reached the age of a thousand years. It turned white as snow five hundred years later when he became immortal, and his horns turned black then. Faithful companion of *Shou Lao*, God of longevity, and of the goddess *Magu*, the animal is the only being able to find this famous mushroom of immortality, the lingzhi.

We know several representations of deer accompanied by Lingzhi or Reishi – the Asian mushroom with remarkable antioxidant properties to fight against premature aging. In Chinese art the lingzhi symbolizes immortality.



Deer lying with bronze lingzhi
Ming Dynasty, Changhua Period, dated 1474
Sale Sotheby's Hong Kong, April 8, 2014, lot 86

Each deer is adorned with numerous circles, each representing a symbol of long life. We recognize the crane, a couple of ducks as well as the Shou symbol.

The crane called red-crowned crane in China because of its vermilion red spot on the head, is also nicknamed crane of the immortals because of its relationship with the eight Immortals, deities of Taoism. Indeed, in Taoist mythology, she carried them on her back, serving as a mount. It is the symbol of longevity and is one of the superstitious emblems that are erected in front of pagodas or in front of the main entrance of houses. In popular tradition, the crane also symbolizes lasting feelings and protection.



Pair of bronze cranes at the entrance to the Summer Palace
Beijing Imperial Garden, China

A couple of mandarin ducks is a symbol of marital fidelity. This is because Mandarin ducks are paired for life. According to legend, if one dies the other remains alone and soon dies of loneliness. Because of this love and fidelity Mandarin ducks symbolize a long happy life together for Asian civilizations and particularly Chinese and Japanese. They are depicted side by side looking in the same direction.



Dish with Mandarin ducks and lotus
China, Ming Dynasty XV-XVI centuries
Cloisonne enamel
Metropolitan Museum, New York



Shou is a Chinese symbol that represents longevity. It is part of the trio of ideograms corresponding to three deities of popular Chinese religions: Fu, Lu, Shou – Luck, Prosperity and Longevity.



Fu



Lu



Shou