

From lotus to Lotto - Trials and tribulations of the lotus

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*Various kinds of celestial flowers, such as utpala, padma, kumuda and pundarika rained down naturally from the sky*¹. The Buddha had finished his commentaries and among other celestial offerings a shower of lotuses was thus recorded in the Threefold Lotus Sutra. The flower of the lotus, *padma*, was indeed one of the most appealing visual attributes of Buddhism as the new faith spread from India into Central Asia and further to the distant lands of far eastern Asia. As reported in various Tang sources² its four colours were blue, pink, yellow and white. Blue lotuses are by far the rarest and perhaps never existed³. The flower itself represents a pure being rising from slimy waters and since the early days of the Tang dynasty (618-906 AD) even the petals of the lotus acting as a cushion for Buddhist thrones suggested the importance of its symbolic value. Earlier still the circular base of the 2nd-3rd century famous Barman reliquary, now in the British Museum, was adorned with delicately carved petal panels. Some paintings in the caves of Dunhuang and other Inner Asian Buddhist sites depicted the *Padmapani* Bodhisattva holding the lotus-flower by its stem. As the centuries went by the symbolism of purity and perfection became lost as non-Buddhist craftsmen adopted only the enticing outline of the flower which nonetheless always retained the power of visual attraction.

Botanically it is 150 million years old and until the 1990s its classification had been rather confusing. Two wild species of the *true* lotus are recorded in the latest classification: the *Nelumbo nucifera Gaertn.* corresponding to the *Nymphaea lotus* or *Nelumbo speciosa*. This is the sacred lotus of Egypt, the oriental *Nelumbo* which spread across Asia from the delta of the Volga. There are now numerous varieties developed by the Chinese and these lotuses have often been mistaken for water lilies such as those found on the Nile, *Nymphaea caerulea*, or the Indian lotus, *nymphaea stellata*. The other species is found in the New World as far south as Colombia. This is the *Nelumbo lutea Willd.* or *Nelumbo pentapetala*⁴. Over the centuries great confusion resulted from the misuse of the terms *lotus* and *water lilly*, with the lotus usually taking over the meaning of both.

In the Mediterranean world Chinese patterned silks of all kinds, damasks, gauze, satins and embroideries, had been in great demand since Roman times. Such was the demand for silk in the 1st century AD that the Roman senate issued an edict which forbade men from wearing silken clothes. Important fragments were recovered in the excavations of Dura Europos and Palmyra, both towns having been conquered in the second half of the

¹ *The threefold Lotus Sutra*, translated by Bunno Kato, Yoshiro Tamura and Kojiro Miyasaka, New York 1975, 16.

² Schafer E. H., *The golden peaches of Samarkand*, Berkeley 1963, 127-130.

³ Hergé, *Les aventures de Tintin, reporter en Extrême Orient: Le lotus bleu*, Tournai 1936.

⁴ Roguet D., le lotus botanique et ethnobotanique, in *Autour du lotus*, Musée Ariana, Genève 2000, 3-9.

3rd century AD by Persia. Byzantium and the late Sassanian Empire had by then started their own state monopoly of silk production which became part of the economic world of the Umayyads and then the Abbasids. Thus a thriving market existed for many centuries both for local silks and the exceptional Chinese production.

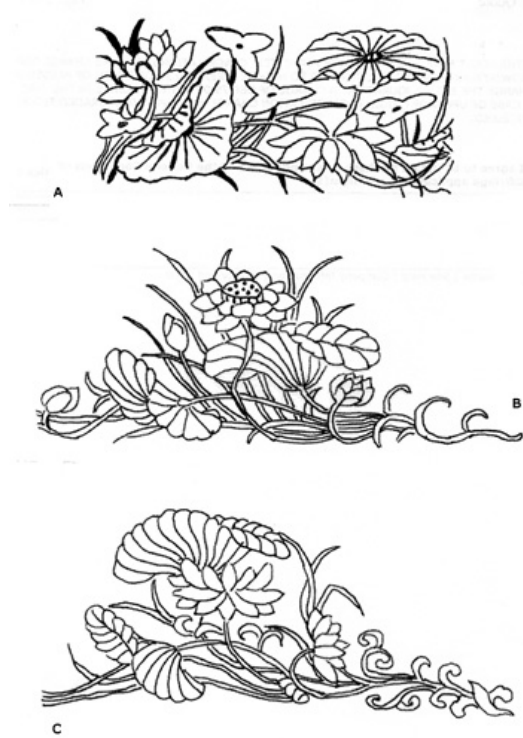


Plate 1
a, b, c
examples taken from the *Yingzao Fashi*, a manual of architectural styles, see note 5.

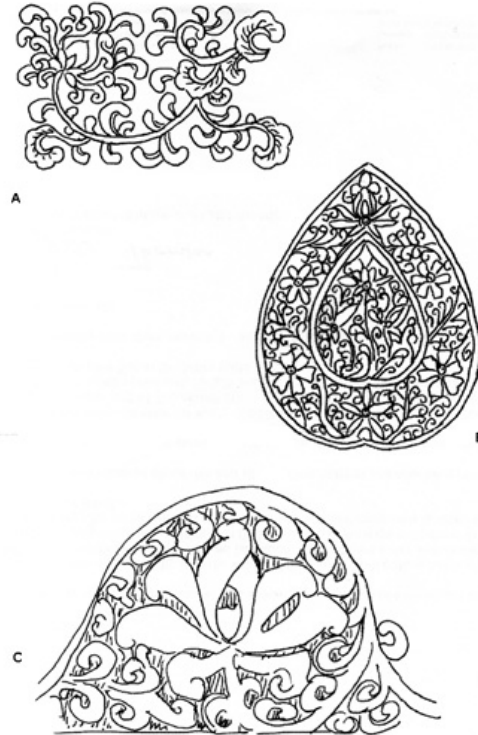


Plate 2
a) *ibid.*
b) see note 7, no. 290, p. 79.
c) Cizhou carved porcelain, 14th century, detail.

Yet it was not until early Chinese texts, in particular encyclopaedias, were printed during the Song dynasty that numerous patterns became available to painters and craftsmen alike. Regular *reprints* acted as the guardians of standardised models for many generations of artists. An interesting volume, printed in 1103 and called *Architectural Styles*, contains series of line drawings dealing with geometric, floral and animal ornament⁵. It was possibly at this time that similar shapely outlines of the lotus flower appeared on Chinese textiles (plate 1 a,b,c, plate 2 a) and incised or carved ceramics such as on Ting, Suzhou and celadon wares, many of which were exported across Asia (plate 2 c). The middle of the 13th century witnessed the end of the Caliphate and the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols, when the whole of Asia from the Mediterranean lands to the Sea of China, became even more accessible to commercial exchanges with the presence of tireless merchants such as Marco Polo, or ambassadorial missions such as those of the Armenian kings of Cilicia or the two Franciscan friars John of Plano Carpini and William of Rubruck⁶.

⁵ *Yin zao fashi*, a manual of architectural styles, compiled by Li Jie, commissioned in the 1090s, printed in 1103. Reprint in 1954. I am grateful to Sheila Vainker for this information.

⁶ *The mission of Friar William of Rubruck*, edited by P. Jackson and D. Morgan, London 1990.

As well as the line drawings in the Song volume on *Architectural Styles*, the welcome publication of a Chinese archaeological report in 1982 presented the contents of the tomb of a young Chinese lady, Huang Sheng who was buried in 1243, one year after her wedding. The tomb contained among other funerary objects what seems to be her entire marriage trousseau: 153 pieces of cloth and 201 garments. Her husband was a magistrate and her father a supervisor of foreign trade in the prosperous port of Quanzhou which would explain the high quality of the textiles. The most revealing item from the point of view of lotus design was a small purse with its framed decoration of lotuses⁷ (plate 2 b). The lotuses are accompanied by a slightly smaller flower similar to a dianthus. It is the same combination of lotus and dianthus which decorates a number of tiles from the Takht-i Sulayman⁸ and the clothing of several riders on some paintings in the *World History of Rashid al-Din* in Edinburgh dated 706/1306-7⁹. The combination of the two flowers was indeed a most popular design throughout the 14th century in Iran and the Mamluk world.



Plate 3

- a) Ayers J., *The Kager collection*, London 1985, fig. 91. Porcelain flower-pot holder with applied relief designs and coloured glaze, late 15th century, detail.
 b) see note 10, fig. 55. Blue and white dish, late 14th century, detail.

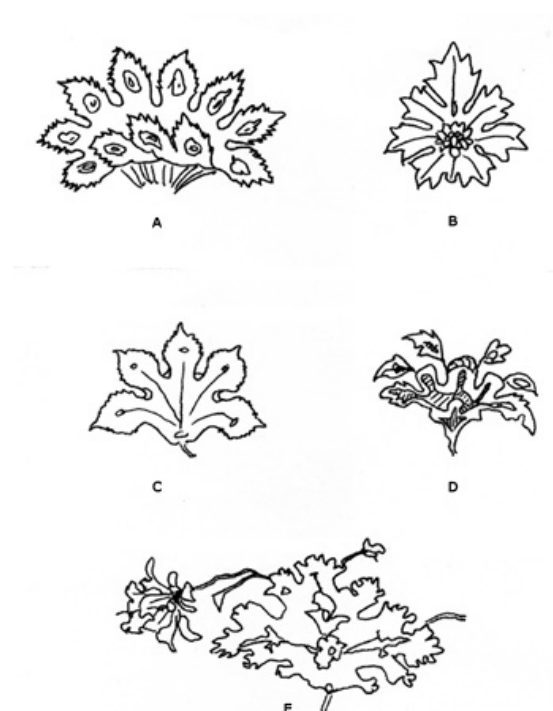


Plate 4

- a) see note 12, fig. 157
 b) *ibid.* fig. 158
 c) *ibid.* fig. 159
 d) *ibid.* fig. 154
 e) detail from an Ushak carpet

⁷ *Fuzhou Nan Song Huang Shang* (The Southern Song tomb of Huang Shang in Fuzhou), Fuzhou Provincial Museum, edited by Wenwu Press, Beijing 1982, 79.

Crowe Y., Late thirteenth century Persian tilework and Chinese textiles, in *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* ns 5 1991 153-161.

⁸ *The Heritage of Genghis Khan*, an exhibition, New York 2002.

⁹ Talbot Rice D. and Gray B., *The illustrations to the World History of Rashid al-Din*, Edinburgh 1976, figs. 56, 58.

Whereas the first wave of lotus designs was due to the import of Chinese textiles, the second wave was most likely the result of imported Chinese applied arts including lacquer works and ceramic wares reaching western Asia by the middle of the 14th century (plate 3 a). Yet it was blue and white porcelain of the highest quality which appears to have made the greatest impact as John Creswell has demonstrated over the last thirty years¹⁰. More complex patterns of lotuses and other flowers such as chrysanthemums were painted on larger Chinese dishes, ewers and bowls suitable for a foreign way of eating and drinking. Geometric compositions were devised to fit larger surfaces. The lotus was accompanied by its leaf, either spiky or bent over by the wind or otherwise torn by the rain and wind into its autumnal form (plate 3 b). The painting on the so-called Hama plate keeps closely to the design on Chinese export dishes, but soon the local artists simplified the outline as can be seen on the well known tiles on the walls inside the mosque of Murad II in Edirne.

During the 15th century, the Timurid century, line drawings from royal pattern books reflect the growing influence of similar imported Chinese designs, albeit with some adaptations and misunderstanding of the original motifs. Floral themes on book bindings and margins of paintings, on textiles as well as imitations of lacquer wares reflect important influences from China. Even the deep carving of contemporary Chinese lacquer is reproduced in different media, such as ceramics, wood and stone¹¹. Thus amongst other flowers the lotus maintains its ubiquitous presence.

Line drawings from pages in the Berlin Diez album and in the Topkapi Saray Museum collection are among the best examples to be used as guides to the new and fast developing style¹². They indicate clearly the different ways in which the shapes of both lotus flower and leaf evolve in the 15th century prior to the establishment of the Safavid dynasty in 1501 (plate 4a, b, c, d). The overall tendency for the Timurid designer appears to be a desire to overemphasise the cut-out shape of the leaf, whether its shape is rounded or slightly flattened out (plate 4a and d). The lower part of the leaf has occasionally been blown upward, a design which occurs on Chinese blue and white ceramic painting in the early Ming period (plate 3 b). This feature is already clearly visible on the early drawings of the *Yinzhao fashi* manual in the 12th century (plate 1)

If one is to search for further examples in the development of the lotus and leaf pattern at the start of *modern times*, a definite choice must be made among the large field of available examples. In choosing the specific domain of Ottoman carpets, the demonstration may be pursued. The great Ushak carpets offer clear examples of a Timurid design being taken one step further to fill delicately the ground design around the central medallion (plate 4 e). The cut-out leaf is elegantly remodelled and expanded while the lotus bud or flower is clearly of less importance. This is not necessarily the case with Persian carpets as may be noticed with the Ardabil ground design.

¹⁰ Carswell J., *Blue and white: Chinese porcelain around the world*, London 2000, in particular pp. 59-78 and 168-192.

¹¹ Crowe Y., The chiselled surface, in *Silk and stone, the art of Asia*, the third Hali Annual, London 1996 60-69.

¹² Rawson J., *Chinese ornament: the lotus and the dragon*, London 1984.

Besides their display on Ottoman medallion carpets in light or dark shades according to the blue or red ground, the lotus flower and leaf undergo a very different treatment in the case of so called *Lotto* carpets. A selection of similar designs has been taken from a collection of carpets exhibited in 1989 at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris¹³. The main characteristic

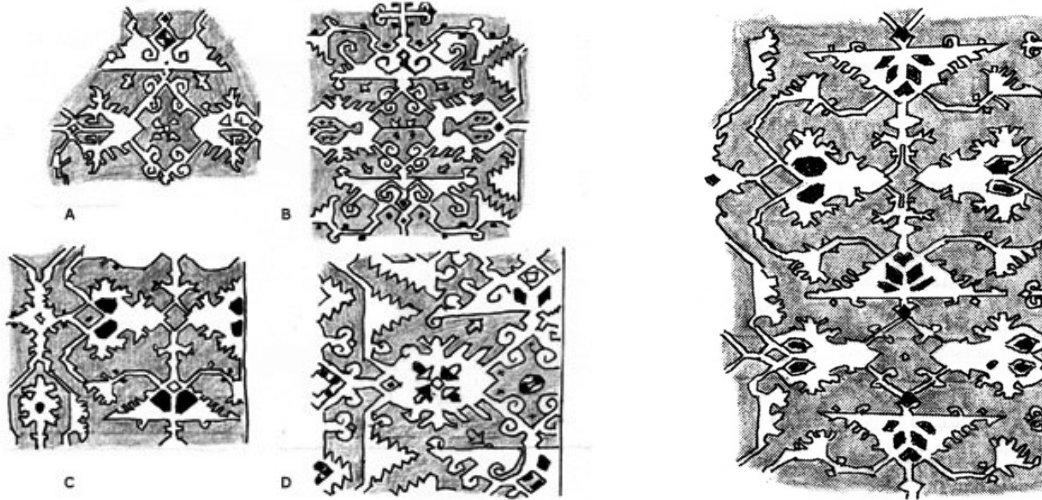


Plate 5

- a) see note 13, no. 67, 190 x 110 cm. 1600 k. per dm².
- b) *ibid.* no. 71, 167 x 130 cm. 1600 k. per dm².
- c) *ibid.* no. 69, 197 x 107 cm. 200 k. per dm².
- d) *ibid.* no.77, 170 x 127 cm. 1050 k. per dm².

Plate 6

Lotto carpet detail
Victoria & Albert Museum



Plate 7

Detail after a Lotto carpet in the
Jacquemart-André Museum, Paris.

of the repeat pattern is its striking angularity, probably due to an average number of knots per square decimetres. There is also a definite balance in the drawing of the two elements of the pattern: a flattened triangle and a vertically elongated triangle. Both triangles may be equated first with a lotus leaf and second with a lotus bud or perhaps its flower. In simplifying the outline of both flower and leaf, the designer has made the task easier for the manufacturing of this type of pattern. The placing of the repeat pattern on most of these carpets seldom takes into consideration the whole repeat and in certain cases it hardly repeats twice. Nonetheless they were obviously exported in great number to Europe where they became popular enough to appear on important paintings. To this day *Lotto* carpets are still appreciated and some specimens are sometimes available on the open market if not always in good condition.

¹³ Tapis présent de l'Orient à l'Occident, an exhibition, Paris 1989.

Yet it is surprising that after such a long carrier in the decorative arts of Asia the lotus seems to have completely disappeared from the repertoire of potters, book binders, painters and other craftsmen. Could it be that with the coming of European industrialisation in the 18th century new foreign ideas and techniques took over the field of design and its more painstaking traditions? In the world of ceramics the discovery of transfer printing in Liverpool by John Sadler in 1755, brought to an end much of creativity in the potteries which could no longer compete in price with such an invention. Innovations no longer came from the world east of the great Muslim empires, but from the west meaning a radical change in fashion and therefore taste. Style became European and eventually in the last fifty years one has come to witness a globalisation of taste. The varieties of paintings presented in a recent exhibition in Paris indicate quite clearly the immense variety of approaches seized upon by all Muslim nations.