26. Lobed Bronze Mirror with "Celestial Horses"

Diameter: 23.3 cm. (9 1/8 in.)
Tang dynasty
8th century A.D.

Recent provenance: an American collection

The mirror is heavily cast with a pierced hemispherical knob and the main decoration inset within with an eight-lobed rim. A pair of confronting horses balance on lotus blossoms that emerge from furled lotus leaves, the stems entwined and joined in the center with a larger lotus leaf. The steeds rear back, the extended front leg of each is undercut, the manes and tails are swept up and the mouths are open. Above the horses is a pair of geese in flight carrying scrolling lotus stems in their beaks. The wide rim is cast with clouds in thread relief alternating with pairs of streaming lotus stems beneath a raised rim. The silvered bronze surface has some bright green encrustation mostly on the rim, crossing onto the lower left quadrant and distributed on the reflecting surface of the reverse.

In the arts of the Tang the horse is a noble, fiery, limber, and wonderful creature; and there was hardly a medium where it was not given a place, center stage when possible. In the mirrors of the Tang, horses take to the skies, assuming powers to float on flowers and soar with the birds. Here the horses have been imbued with a light, airy, and from a western standpoint, fairytale like quality, existing in a land where flowers and their leaves are gargantuan or horses are like Tinker Bell. What in the Chinese psyche of the Tang would have resulted in the image? Was it simply a design problem elegantly solved or is there something more deeply profound in the image?

The likely inspiration would have had its roots in the Han period when "bloodsweating" horses from Ferghana became the most revered of horses in the Han imperial stable and most important for the emperor’s military campaigns. These horses, unnaturally large in size compared to what the Chinese at that time were accustomed to, powerful and resilient on the hoof, were rumored to have descended from supernatural horses. A well-known bronze image from the Han period of a "Celestial Horse" depicts the heavenly creature with head held high, mouth open and tail raised, and borne on the back of a swallow (fig. 1).

We might note that the composition in the mirror design here, its symmetry compromised by the naturalistic rather than heraldic flight formation of the geese, is repeated in a number of published mirrors, one from Shanghai and another from the Palace Museum, Beijing, both reproduced here (figs. 2-3). Further examples of what must have been a popular type within Tang
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Fig. 2: Lobed bronze mirror with horse décor, Tang dynasty, 7th-8th century A.D., Shanghai Museum, after *Ancient Bronze Mirrors from the Shanghai Museum*, Shanghai, 2005, pl. 78, p. 233.

Fig. 3: Lobed bronze mirror with horse décor, Tang dynasty, 7th-8th century A.D., Palace Museum, Beijing, after *Gugong cang jian*, Beijing, n.d., pl. 91, p. 91.

aristocratic circles, and yet quite rare today, are in such distinguished collections as the Sumitomo in Japan and the Nelson Gallery in Kansas City.¹