

# A Digression into Natural History

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Two handscrolls painted and written by the Ch'ien-lung Emperor, though not in any way remarkable as works of art, provide a personal link with the man who ruled the Chinese empire, then at a pinnacle of power, from 1736 to 1795, and who assembled the greater part of the extraordinary collection represented in the exhibition of Chinese Art Treasures, which will be at the Museum from mid-September through October.

The Emperor modeled himself, in his cultural activities, upon the unfortunate Sung emperor Hui-tsung who, besides being an outstanding collector and patron of the arts, was himself a gifted painter and calligrapher. While Hui-tsung had lost the northern half of his empire to the Chin Tartars and died in captivity, the Ch'ien-lung Emperor's military campaigns were markedly successful. He conquered Ili and Turkestan and subjugated the Sungars and Eleuths, the Burmese and Annamese, and even the Gurkhas of Nepal. His achievements as an artist were less remarkable. Though more than forty-two thousand poems are attributed to him, he certainly did not write them all and, in any case, was essentially not a poet. Some of his verses have been characterized as doggerel. Unfortunately many important works of art from his collection are covered with poetic effusions. He wrote these, and his critical comments in prose, in a calligraphy which, though it imitates the style of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang, a leading seventeenth century connoisseur and critic, is facile and somewhat flaccid. As a painter, his merits are even more modest, as we shall see.

The two handscrolls by the Ch'ien-lung Emperor were acquired by the Museum in 1913 from John C. Ferguson. Like so many other objects,

they probably left the imperial palace during the declining years of the last dynasty or under the republic. Both are realistic brush drawings, probably in dilute ink mixed with brown color, of the antlers of deer.

The first drawing (Figure 1), dated 1762, is of the antlers of the spotted deer (*Cervus mandarinus* or Peking Sika). The text accompanying it begins with a note on the spotted deer, known to the Emperor as the *lu*. According to Chinese cosmology, the succession of natural phenomena during a calendar year is determined by the two forces and substances called *yin* and *yang* which gradually supersede each other. The *lu* deer belongs to the category *yang* (male, sun, and so forth); therefore it sheds its antlers in mid-summer, the fourth or fifth moon, and begins to grow new ones. The new antlers are, the Emperor goes on to tell us, somewhat longer each year; they also grow more points, up to eight per horn, and by that time the stag is several times ten years old. Antlers with more than eight points are extremely rare, and the age of a stag that has them is impossible to compute; it must be several hundred or a thousand years, he thinks.

The Emperor writes that as a child he had often, in the imperial armory, looked with wonder and reverence at the antlers here depicted. The stag had been bagged by his august grandfather, the K'ang-hsi Emperor, near Lake Payen-to-lo (probably in Central Asia). The antlers are described as being 3 feet 9.5 inches long from the cranium to the point, with a distance between the top points of 4 feet; they have sixteen points in all, the two top ones not pointed but shaped like a fishtail or the lobe of the mysterious *ling-chih* fungus, food of the Immor-

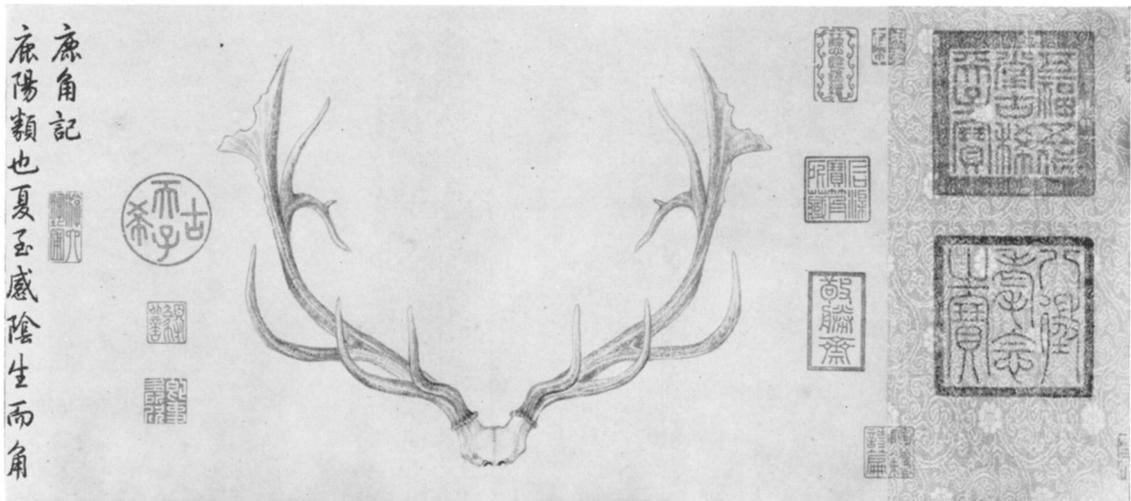


Fig. 1. Antlers of a spotted deer. Detail of a handscroll by the Ch'ien-lung Emperor, dated 1762. Ink and color on paper. Height 9 7/8 inches Gift of John C. Ferguson, 1913

tals; the circumference of the horn above the skull is 8.2 inches.

The Emperor decided that this “magic charm of the mountains gathered by [his] august grandfather’s divine majesty” should not remain concealed but that the “miraculous animal” could serve to “edify the wise.” It was to be reverently preserved in the imperial palace so that his descendants in future generations might not forget his late grandfather and might have their military accouterments and weapons well arranged.

The text goes on to quote the ancient peasant calendar *Yüeh-ling* embodied in the Book of Rites: “In midsummer, the horns of the *lu* are shed; in midwinter, the horns of the *mi* are shed.” This puzzles the Emperor, for he knows that the *lu* (spotted deer) of the imperial hunting grounds at Jehol and the *mi* (elk or moose, *Alces machlis*) of Kirin province all shed their horns in summer.

In the second scroll (Figure 2), dated 1767, he provides an answer to this problem; it had continued to bother him because it implied an erroneous statement in the Classics. At the beginning of winter, he had suddenly remembered that in the Southern Park, an imperial hunting preserve south of Peking, there was a kind of deer called *chu* (David’s deer, *Elaphurus davidianus*). He dispatched somebody to check whether these were perhaps shedding their horns now, in winter, and in fact they had just begun to do so!

“The laws of nature are difficult to fathom, and her creatures not easy to classify,” he continues, and, with a sigh of relief, remarks that the *Yüeh-ling* was right, after all, as apparently the ancients confounded the *mi* with the *chu*. He adds a drawing of an *Elaphurus* trophy together with a shed antler to illustrate his discovery and has the scroll incorporated in the imperial collection.

David’s deer is named after a French naturalist, the Lazarist abbé Armand David (1826-1900), who discovered it for the West. In the 1770s the animal still was seen wild, in the Tarbagatai and southwest of the Koko-nor. In 1865 David saw a herd of about one hundred and twenty deer in the imperial park; in its wild state the animal already was extinct. In 1894, floods breached the park wall and many deer escaped, to be devoured by the famished population. The last were killed by foreign troops during the Boxer War of 1900-1901.

At some time, however, the Duke of Bedford had managed to obtain some of these rare animals and to breed them in his deer park in England, where they grew into a large herd. The Peking Zoological Garden was presented with some specimens after the First and again after the Second World War. The Bronx Zoo in New York has a herd of them, established here in the 1940s and derived from the Duke of Bedford’s stock.

Elaphurus is described as reddish gray to brown, with blackish marbling in the summer. It drops its horns after the winter solstice, and the young are born in May or June. The animal has the feet of the reindeer, the horns of the deer, and the long tail of certain antelopes. The Chinese called it *ssu-pu-hsiang* ("four not like"), for it has a head somewhat like that of a spotted deer, a tail like that of a donkey, a back like that of a camel, and a hoof like that of an ox.

The Chinese have been preoccupied with the stag since their early history, and we find it in the decoration of some magnificent bronzes of the Shang dynasty. The antlers of the *lu*, which are *yang*, have played a prominent role in Chinese medicine; they provided the basis for numerous drugs, tonics, and aphrodisiacs. The burgeoning velvet horns of the new antlers were considered particularly potent. Even today, antlers are to be seen in the window of every Chinese pharmacy. Those of the *mi*, as the *Elaphurus* was erroneously called in classical literature, are *yin* because they are shed after the winter sol-

stice. Their use in medicine was more limited. Because of a pun on the word *lu*, which can mean either "deer" or "prosperity," the deer has become, over the centuries, a symbol of good luck and as such is often encountered in Chinese art.

After this digression into natural history we return to the Emperor's drawings. They have a curiously Western character; the approach is painstakingly realistic and attempts to render the three-dimensional quality and even the texture of the horns. This reminds us that among the many artists patronized by the Emperor there were several European Jesuits: the *fratres* Joseph Castiglione (1688-1766), Ignace Sichelbart (1708-1780), Jean Denis Attiret (1702-1768), and Jean Damascène Salusti (died 1781). Their paintings and drawings, especially those of Castiglione, had a certain curiosity value for the Emperor and his court and exercised a noticeable if restricted influence. It appears that the two imperial drawings are done in the manner of the Western barbarians.

Fig. 2. Antlers of an *Elaphurus* deer. Detail of a handscroll by the Ch'ien-lung Emperor, dated 1767. Ink and color on paper. Height 9 3/4 inches Gift of John C. Ferguson, 1913

