

## The Use of Colour in Chinese Folk Art



FOLK ARTISTS in China have the knack of making their art products extremely attractive. Be they portraits, sculptures, new-year pictures or lanterns, these goods are all donned in bright, sharp colours which make them equally eye-catching whether viewed closely or at a distance. The maxims for colour treatment in Chinese folk art are “sharp” (*chien* 尖) and “bright” (*yang* 陽), and they stand for a style that has its peculiar merits.

Artists who manufacture new-year woodblock prints like to give their prints strong, bold colours to make them impressive and easy to sell. In their jargon, to make a colour “sharp” means to “bring it out”—“what is red should be made redder, and what is green greener.” *Yang* is derived from *t'ai-yang* 太陽, the sun. Colours must be as bright as the sun, i.e. they should have a glaring and fiery quality that can catch anyone's eye from far or near. The colouring in new-year pictures is bold and daring, though there are plain ink pictures too.

Lanterns decorate all seasons of the Chinese calendar, and paintings on them can be very sophisticated. Very fine colouring is required of lantern-painting. Artists only use the lightest parts of colour solutions, while dense colours are usually avoided. There is a strong lean on vegetation-extracted pigments. Thus the colouring on lanterns is sharper and brighter than in traditional Chinese paintings, which may use bright colours but always

to a soft, calm and never glaring effect. Lanterns must look exciting enough to attract people even at a distance, hence the necessity to give them eye-dazzling glamour, no matter how superficial that may be.

The control of colouring is important because a lantern has different appearances by day and by night. In daylight, the viewer looking from one angle sees only one face of the lantern. At night, however, when the lantern is lit up from behind by a candle or electric bulb, the viewer also sees its back face. The silk lantern shade, which carries the painting, is alum-coated. Since illumination comes from behind it, and the viewer is looking from the front, a painting executed in dense colour will not look good, because it will appear as a vision of dark shadows rather than a variation of colour tones. Even if the colour density is alternately dense and thin, the viewer will only see dark, unattractive patches. Therefore, lantern-painters only use the lightest and purest parts of colour solutions, which yield bright and lovely hues alike in daylight and under illumination at night. Colouring on lanterns must first be thin, to enable light to shine through the shade. It must also be even, without any trace of brushwork or water-mark. The painting must have a smooth, even look without and within, and no viewer must detect any shadow on it.

Translated by D. Y.

From *A Study of Colour in Chinese Painting*

中國畫顏色的研究 by Yu Fei-an 于非闇