

# Samite with Paired Lions in Pearl Roundels: A Tang Dynasty Interpretation

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## Abstract

The animal motifs within pearl roundels of the Tang Dynasty hold a significant position in the evolution of ancient Chinese decorative patterns. This article focuses on the Tang Dynasty Brocade with Pearl Roundel Facing Lions Pattern housed in the China National Silk Museum as the primary object of study. The analysis is divided into three parts: first, an examination of its technical characteristics and achievements; second, an exploration of its artistic features, including pattern design and color application; and finally, an investigation of its historical value within the context of historical development. The study also summarizes and organizes the relationship between its techniques, artistic expression, and stylistic attributes.

**Keywords:** pearl roundels, paired lions, Tang Dynasty, decorative patterns

## 1. Technical Characteristics of the Brocade with Pearl Roundel Facing Lions Pattern

### 1.1 Weaving Structure and Techniques

Brocade refers to silk fabrics adorned with colorful patterns. The Chinese character for brocade (jin) combines the elements for “gold” and “silk,” reflecting the original understanding and appreciation of its value. According to the *Shiming* (Interpretation of Names), “Jin means gold. Made with meticulous craftsmanship, its value is comparable to gold, hence the character combines gold and silk.” The high value of brocade lies in its intricate production process and the difficulty of weaving, making it one of the most luxurious and exquisitely crafted fabrics.

Traditional Chinese brocade is generally categorized into three types: dark-patterned brocade, double-layered brocade, and special-knot brocade. Over a span of more than 2,000 years, from the Western Zhou to the Song Dynasty, dark-patterned brocade predominated. This type can be further divided into warp brocade and weft brocade. Warp brocade, where patterns are formed by the warp threads, is the earliest type and flourished from the Warring States period to the early Tang Dynasty. Around the Sui Dynasty, twill-patterned warp brocade emerged.

By the early Tang Dynasty, with the increasing exchange of dyeing and weaving techniques between China and the West, weft brocade began to flourish. By the mid-to-late Tang Dynasty, weft brocade had largely replaced warp brocade, becoming the dominant type. Tang Dynasty brocade can also be divided into two categories: one interwoven with a group of visible warps and concealed warps alongside weft threads, with the visible warps always appearing on the surface of the weft. This type, known as full-warp brocade, is typical of Tang Dynasty brocade and is commonly referred to as “Tang-style brocade,” characterized by its twill weave.



Figure 1. Fragment of Tang Dynasty Brocade with Pearl Roundel Animal Pattern

Due to limited access to physical artifacts, the analysis in this study is based on high-resolution photographs of the Brocade with Pearl Roundel Facing Lions Pattern fragments. As shown in Figure 1, these fragments are likely examples of twill-weave weft brocade, typical of the Tang Dynasty.

## 2. The Artistic Characteristics of the Brocade with Pearl Roundel Facing Lions Pattern

This brocade fragment is a silk textile from the Tang Dynasty, measuring 30 cm in length and 38.7 cm in width. It preserves two relatively complete pearl roundels featuring paired lion motifs. As both motifs are identical, the analysis focuses on one group in detail.

### 2.1 Pattern Elements

#### 2.1.1 Lion Motif

The lion, historically referred to as “狻猊” (suanni) or “白泽” (baize), is known as the king of beasts but originates as an imported species from Africa and Southwest Asia. In Persian art, lions were regarded as incarnations of Mithra, a deity associated with the Persian supreme god, Ahura Mazda. According to *The Book of the Later Han*, compiled by Fan Ye, Volume 88, lions were first introduced to China as “tribute” from the Parthian Empire along the Silk Road. Accompanying these exchanges were brocades featuring lion motifs, brought into China by Central Asian traders. After their introduction, lions were regarded as sacred and mythical beasts, symbolizing good fortune and auspiciousness.

Lion motif brocade gained popularity during the Tang Dynasty due to the lion’s symbolic association with power and its status as the king of beasts, which resonated with Chinese cultural values and aesthetics.

In Tang Dynasty brocades, lion imagery can be broadly categorized into two types: upright lions and dynamic lions. Upright lions are further divided into symmetrical and independent arrangements. In this brocade, the roundel features upright, symmetrical lions. The two lions stand firmly on a floral pedestal, depicted as a pair of majestic male lions with their heads and feet facing each other. Their manes are rendered in straight, lattice-like patterns of brown and yellow, giving a sense of transparency and vitality.

The lions’ front legs are slender, while their hind legs are muscular and powerful. Their tails curve upward, and their postures suggest confident strides, with open mouths roaring, evoking a sense of dynamic confrontation. The overall design is rounded and visually striking, conveying a sense of divine courage and majesty.



Figure 2. Detail of the Fragment of Tang Dynasty Brocade with Pearl Roundel Animal Pattern (1)



Figure 3. Detail of the Fragment of Tang Dynasty Brocade with Pearl Roundel Animal Pattern (2)

Interestingly, parts of the lions’ bodies integrate a secondary pattern resembling a bird foraging for food. The bird’s head is distinctly visible, with its beak directed toward a circular dot on the lion’s hindquarters, suggesting an interaction. The bird’s body merges seamlessly with the lion’s legs, creating an imaginative and vivid composition, as shown in Figure 2.

Outside the main roundel, there are additional pairs of dynamic lions, which appear more archaic in style. These

lions, also depicted head-to-head and foot-to-foot, are shown in fierce combat postures, roaring and grappling with each other, as illustrated in Figure 3.

### 2.1.2 Pearl Roundel Pattern

The pearl roundel pattern, also known as the “carpet pattern,” was widely popular in China from the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties through the Sui and Tang dynasties. Introduced to China via the Silk Road, this decorative motif is believed to have originated from Persian Sassanid brocade weaving. It first appeared during the Northern Dynasties and reached its peak of popularity during the Tang Dynasty. The pattern was extensively used in silk textiles and other decorative items, becoming a prominent design element of the era.

The true meaning of the pearl roundel pattern has been a subject of scholarly debate, with three primary interpretations:

- 1) It symbolizes the sun.
- 2) It represents Buddhist prayer beads.
- 3) It signifies the cosmos and life.

Among these, the first interpretation—that the pearl roundel pattern symbolizes the sun—is the most widely accepted by scholars, as it is considered the most plausible explanation.

This motif reflects the cultural exchange between China and foreign civilizations, integrating external influences into traditional Chinese aesthetics and contributing to the development of classic decorative patterns.

## 2.2 Characteristics of Form and Color

### 2.2.1 Characteristics of Form

The pearl roundel pattern is not a central motif but rather a structural framework. It consists of geometrical frameworks formed by connecting similarly sized dots, within which various motifs, such as animals and flowers, are placed. Common frameworks include symmetrical grids, hexagonal (tortoise-shell) grids, interlocking wave grids, clustered-four grids, and clustered-two grids.

The Brocade with Pearl Roundel Facing Lions Pattern discussed in this article differs from the common scattered-dot roundel framework. Here, the pearl roundels are horizontally connected but not vertically linked, forming a clustered-two framework. Although only fragments of the brocade remain, the arrangement and features of the roundel elements indicate that it follows a clustered-two roundel structure. The roundels are horizontally interconnected, while dynamic smaller paired lions are positioned above and below the main motifs outside the roundels (Figures 4 and 5).

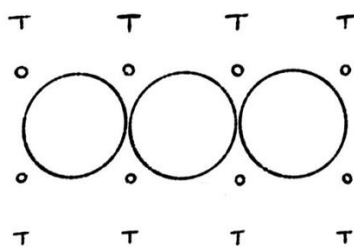


Figure 4. Framework Arrangement of the Pearl Roundel Facing Lions Brocade



Figure 5. Line Drawing of the Pearl Roundel Facing Lions Brocade

The overall form of the brocade's roundels is rounded and full, creating a balanced and unified composition that evokes a sense of richness and primitive charm. The clustered-two framework ensures a stable and harmonious visual arrangement.

Within the roundels, the paired lions are depicted with a blend of angular and curved lines, emphasizing symmetry and duality. This conveys an admiration for and pursuit of power. The layered complexity of the brocade's design lies in the interplay between the ring of the roundel and the central motif. The central motifs are characterized by their dense, focused, symmetrical, and balanced composition, which creates a cohesive and stable visual impression.

The roundel rings, with their consistent motifs and uniform width, introduce a sense of visual order. The combination of the roundel rings and the motifs within creates an overlapping and interconnected design, adding a rich sense of depth and dimension to the brocade.

### 2.2.2 Characteristics of Color

Color serves as the first impression in visual perception and occupies a crucial role in analyzing the artistic features of patterns. While motifs are typically observed at close range, color effects can be appreciated both up close and from a distance. Based on historical records, paintings, and murals, the overall color palette of Tang Dynasty silk textiles is characterized by a dignified and elegant tone. In pearl roundel patterns, the contrast between the motif and the background colors often creates a striking visual effect.

Due to the passage of time, most Tang Dynasty textiles are excavated artifacts, and their colors have often been altered by soil erosion and environmental factors, sometimes resulting in severe color distortion. Consequently, conclusions about the original colors are not always entirely accurate.

Analyzing the colors of the Brocade with Pearl Roundel Facing Lions Pattern fragments from images reveals that the overall palette is dominated by yellow-brown tones. The bodies of the lions within the roundels appear to be rendered in a greenish-blue hue, while other parts are brown. The dynamic smaller paired lions outside the roundels are predominantly yellow, adorned with small brown triangular patterns on their bodies.

Overall, the brocade fragment primarily features a brown background with extensive use of yellow as a complementary color, and selective accents of greenish-blue. This combination creates a vividly contrasting and striking color scheme, typical of Tang Dynasty brocade.

## 3. The Historical Value of the Brocade with Pearl Roundel Facing Lions Pattern

The animal motifs within roundels in Tang Dynasty textiles represent an inclusive style that emerged in the context of the Silk Road's cultural integration. These motifs reflect the Tang audience's open attitude of embracing foreign cultural elements while maintaining a foundation in local traditions. Within this cultural framework, the pearl roundel patterns of the Tang Dynasty were continuously adapted and transformed to integrate into native Chinese aesthetics.

The lion, an imported motif, underwent significant changes as it was introduced to China. Early representations, such as winged lions, symbolized power and strength. However, the Brocade with Pearl Roundel Facing Lions Pattern discussed in this article features upright, wingless lions, which were adapted into symbols of auspiciousness and protection. This transformation highlights the merging of Eastern and Western artistic traditions, where foreign motifs were localized to align with Chinese cultural values and aesthetic preferences. It underscores how artistic images evolve into distinct cultural symbols, influenced by different social contexts and audience needs.

### 3.1 Composition and Social Aesthetics

In traditional Chinese design, symmetry and balance are fundamental principles of aesthetics. Heavily influenced by Confucian ideology, axial symmetry represents the relationship between "ritual order" and "space," creating a sense of harmony and ceremonial beauty. This aesthetic shaped the decorative arts of ancient China, embodying the philosophy of symmetrical aesthetics.

The motifs within the pearl roundels impact the overall arrangement of the design, reflecting two forms of balance: compositional balance and arrangement balance. Compositional balance in roundel motifs is categorized into three types: axial symmetry, rotational symmetry, and independent forms. The Brocade with Pearl Roundel Facing Lions Pattern employs axial symmetry, where the two lions on either side of the central axis are identical, creating a stable and balanced composition. The symmetrical arrangement of the paired lions within the roundels emphasizes a sense of grandeur and fullness, aligning with the Tang Dynasty's decorative style and national ethos.

In addition to cultural influences, advancements in textile technology also significantly shaped the patterns. Variations in weaving techniques led to distinct differences in textile patterns, which further enriched their visual appeal and cultural significance.

### 3.2 Motif Themes and Cultural Significance

In traditional Chinese culture, most decorative patterns carried symbolic meanings, often reflecting humanistic or auspicious connotations. Animal motifs, for instance, transitioned from representations of spiritual and religious significance to symbols of good fortune. The lion, originally a symbol of strength, evolved into a sacred and auspicious creature in Chinese culture.

The Tang Dynasty, known for its openness, rapidly absorbed and integrated foreign cultures. The pearl roundel lion motifs, with their strong Persian influences, underwent a process of localization, acquiring humanistic and auspicious connotations. This transformation elevated the motifs beyond their aesthetic appeal to encompass symbolic meanings.

During the early Tang Dynasty, when the state emphasized martial strength, roundel motifs predominantly featured powerful animals and birds of prey, often combined with exotic elements such as ribbons and floral trees from Western regions. As the imperial examination system matured and Confucian values of ritual and music gained prominence, roundel motifs gradually shifted to themes of floral and avian designs. This evolution suggests that the Brocade with Pearl Roundel Facing Lions Pattern likely dates to the early Tang Dynasty, reflecting the era's aesthetic style and cultural preferences.

## 4. Conclusion

The Brocade with Pearl Roundel Facing Lions Pattern not only highlights the cultural exchanges facilitated by the Silk Road but also exemplifies the Tang Dynasty's ability to integrate foreign motifs into its aesthetic and symbolic systems. This study fills a gap in previous research by systematically analyzing the transformation of lion motifs from symbols of power to auspicious emblems, contextualized within the interplay between Confucian values, textile technology, and artistic preferences.

Furthermore, the clustered-two pearl roundel structure reflects an advanced understanding of symmetry and balance in design, offering valuable insights for both historical studies and contemporary applications in decorative arts. By bridging technology and aesthetics, this research demonstrates how limitations in weaving techniques shaped visual expression, suggesting a framework for exploring the material and symbolic evolution of ancient patterns.

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