This exquisite chamber, built in the early 1600s, was once the main reception hall in a palatial compound in Beijing (bei-jing), China’s capital. The exposed roof timbers are painted with lively, auspicious designs in vibrant colors. The design motifs range from animals to flowers and fruits to stylized dragons. The main tie beam (seen in this detail and at the top of the image on the reverse) displays the peony, a Chinese symbol of spring, and peaches, which symbolize longevity. Seasonal flowers also appear on the other beams, including plum blossoms for winter, the lotuses for summer, and chrysanthemums for autumn.

The carved, painted ceiling is the most elaborate architectural element of the reception room. Two large, red pine tie beams fit into columns that help support the weight of the heavy roof, whose outer surface would have been covered with clay roof tiles. Above these beams, smaller ones run parallel, topped with decoratively carved, scroll-shaped elements. Purlins run perpendicular to the tie beams and support the rafters. This twenty-six-foot-high construction impresses Museum visitors today as much as it must have done to visitors to this palace complex in Ming dynasty Beijing.

The reception hall, the most formal space in a residential complex, was where noblemen greeted important guests and where family members celebrated birthdays and anniversaries and performed Confucian rituals honoring their ancestors. The family’s most elegant and luxurious collections would have been displayed here. Today, the room is furnished with decorative objects (including Moon Crystal and Dog Cage) made from lacquer, porcelain, rock crystal, jade, and enamels, which enhance the hall’s grandeur and beauty and indicate the extravagant wealth of the Ming and Qing (ching) dynasty courts.

Reception Hall from the Palace of Duke Zhao (Zhaogongfu)
First half of the seventeenth century
China (Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644)
Wood, stone
Height at peak 26 feet, width 45 feet, depth 35 1/2 feet