Visit to the Palace Museum, Beijing, April 2014, a Handling Session in the Study Room

In April 2014 I visited the Palace Museum in Beijing with a group of colleagues after the spring series of auctions in Hong Kong. April is a good month to visit Beijing, as the weather is mild and if one is fortunate, the magnolia trees and peonies are just starting to flower.

On this occasion, we were fortunate to be with some of our colleagues from Hong Kong, one of which had very good contacts with the curatorial staff at the Museum. This allowed us access to parts of the Palace that the general public are not able to visit, such as the Lodge of Fresh Fragrance, where the emperor Qianlong would hold imperial family banquets and on New Year's Day would accept congratulations from officials and would invite them to watch operas. (Fig 2. and 3.). It is now used as VIP reception rooms for the Museum.

However, the real highlight of the visit was the handling session that we were invited to attend in the study room. All the pieces that we handled were generally of the finest quality, but had sustained some damage, which made their handling less of a worrying exercise.

Fig 1. Side Entrance to the Palace Museum.

This week's article is a little unusual in that it is a written record of this handling session. By its very nature, handling pieces is a very visual and tactile experience and can be difficult to convey in words, but I will endeavour to give a sense of this and provide comparisons where applicable. With regard the dimensions of each piece, I will give rough approximations, so as to give the reader an idea of their size. With regard their dating, I will be starting with the most recent pieces and will work backward in time.

Fig 2. The opera stage at the Lodge of the Fresh Fragrance, Palace Museum.

Fig 3. The painted ceiling of the Lodge of the Fresh Fragrance.

A Yangcai Pink-Ground Sgraffiato Bottle Vase, Qianlong Mark and Period

In 2008 the National Palace Museum held the exhibition of *Huali cai ci Qianlong yangcai: Stunning Decorative Porcelains from the Ch'ienlung Reign.* 1. This was a revelatory exhibition of over 100 examples of these elaborately decorated wares. In the catalogue Liao Pao Show clearly defined the differences between Yangcai and Falancai. The former generally followed more European inspired designs and were generally produced in Jingdezhen under the direction of Tang Ying (1682-1756), the supervisor of the imperial kilns. The latter followed more Chinese designs and were enamelled in the Palace workshops in the Forbidden City.

With the Palace records, Liao Pao Show also accurately dated the wares in the catalogue and one similar example to this was dated to 1743. 2. (Fig 4.)

Fig 4. A Yangcai red ground gall-bladder vase, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 20.6cm high.

The shape of this vase is known as 'gall-bladder' (*danping)* and displays the *sgraffiato* technique, which is the incising of a floral arabesque design with a needle point through a layer of pink enamel that has been painted on to a white glazed surface. This work created an elaborate brocade ground for the Rococo inspired floral decoration.The C-scroll foliage and flowers were created by adding white enamel to the colours to allow for greater three dimensional shading.

These wares are known as 'adding flowers to brocade' (*jinshangtianhua*) and were manufactured from 1741, after the Qianlong Emperor had criticised the porcelain production in previous years. 3.

This vase is around 20.5cm high and unfortunately at the time I did not photograph the mark on the base. However, based on the examples in the National Palace Museum catalogue, this would have been painted in seal script with blue enamel on a turquoise ground.

A Falancai Ruby-Ground Famille Rose Bowl, Yongzheng Mark and Period

This bowl displays a particularly rare design of branches of flowering prunus on a ruby ground. In contrast to the last piece, this is a plain, unworked ground, which has a perfectly even application of enamel.

A similar, but slightly larger pair of bowls each with a red ground and the addition of bamboo are illustrated in the 2013 National Palace Museum exhibition catalogue *Porcelain with painted enamels of the Qing Yongzheng period (1723-1735)*. 4. (Fig 5.)

The petals of the flowers are created by leaving areas of the white-glazed ground exposed. It is possible that stencils may have been used to mask these areas prior to the enamel ground being painted. The pistils and stamens were then carefully picked out in yellow.

The same technique is used on the National Palace Museum example, as well as on a pair of cups in the Alan Chuang Collection (Fig 6.) and a cup that Christie's offered for sale in Hong Kong in November 2016. However in the latter example the petals are outlined in black. (Fig 7.)

The size of this bowl is approximately 11cm diameter.

Fig 5. One of a pair of Falancai red ground bowls, Yongzheng mark and period, National Palace Museum,Taipei 15.2cm diameter.

Fig 6. One of a pair of Falangcai ruby ground cups in the Alan Chuang Collection, Hong Kong, Yongzheng mark and period, 5.4cm diameter.

Fig 7. A Falancai ruby-ground prunus cup, Yongzheng mark and period. Christie's Hong Kong, 30 November 2016, 6.3cm diameter.

4.

A Large Copper-Red, Underglaze Blue and Enamelled 'Dragon' Fish Bowl, Kangxi Period.

A large illustration above has been given for this fish bowl to convey the sense of its scale, which is approximately 40cm in diameter and the dramatic qualities of the large copper-red dragon. It was potted in two sections (as can be viewed clearly in the image), which were then luted together in the centre. Despite this visible defect, the bowl is a sheer delight for the dynamism of the sinewy dragon as it crashes through the breaking waves to retrieve the flaming pearl.

Technically it is a clever combination of underglaze-blue, copper-red and the over-glazed green, black, yellow and aubergine coloured enamels. This would have required two firings, one at high temperature for the underglaze colours (around 1360'C) and a second, lower temperature firing for the overglaze enamels (up to 950'C).

A similar example to this can be seen in the Palace Museum Collection. (Fig 9.) Although smaller, (28.5cm in diameter) it successfully portrays the same scene, but interestingly delineates the breaking waves in greater detail with the green enamel. Fish bowls of this design are also painted in just copper-red and underglaze-blue as can be seen in the example from Christie' London. (Fig 8.) The blue is used just to pick out the eyes and for the double lines at the rim and above the foot. The bases of these fish bowls are usually unglazed.

Fig 8. Copper-red and underglaze blue 'dragon' fish bowl, Kangxi Period, Christie's London, 14 May 2013, 39.4cm diamter.

Fig 9. Copper-red, underglaze-blue and enamelled 'dragon' fish bowl, Kangxi Period, Palace Museum, 28.5cm diameter.

A Blue and White Jar, Xuande Mark and Period

This jar is really quite unusual in the design of the decoration. There are three horizontal bands, the central one depicts a large continuous leaf scroll, reserved in white on a blue ground. Above and below this there are bands with vertical rectangular panels of four dots arranged around a cross, on a blue hatched ground. As far as I am aware, there is no other blue and white design of this type on any other shape during or prior to the Xuande period and it is so different in conception to almost anything seen in Chinese ceramics. A possible reason for this is that these were made as chess (*weiqi*) jars and that the design relates to the board and the counters in which the game is played. This jar is around 17cm in diameter at its widest point.

There is a similar jar with a cover in the National Palace Musuem, which has a slightly deeper blue colour to the glaze.(Fig 10.) The cover has a high two-tiered knop and when seen from above, it forms the central point of a floral petalled design and where other geometrical elements of the design radiate out from. (Fig 10 A.)

The second comparative example was included in the 2014/2015 exhibition at the Hunan Provincial Museum: *Decoding the Royal Kilns: Imperial Porcelains of the Ming Dynasty* and had been discovered in Zhushan in Jingdezhen in 1993. (Fig 11.) This, like most of the exhibits, was pieced together from excavated fragments. In the same exhibition, there was also a similar shaped jar painted with two dragons (Fig 12 .), which was also decorated with the circular dots to the interior of the rim. There is apparently a third example in the Osaka Municipal Museum, but I have not seen this.

Fig 10. Covered jar with underglaze-blue decoration with leaf scrolls and diagonal checks, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 16.8cm diameter

Fig 10 A. Vertical view of cover.

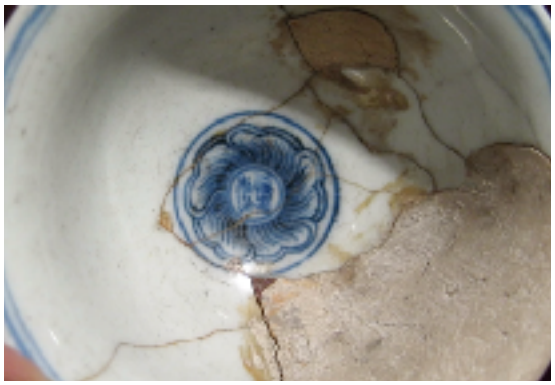
Fig 11. jar, collected by Jingdezhen Ceramics Archaeology Research Institute.

Fig 12. Dragon jar, collected by Jingdezhen Ceramics Archaeology Research Institute.

A Blue and White 'Press-Hand' Cup, Yongle Mark and Period

This finely potted cup is so named because of the way it fitted into the hand with its heavier lower body and flared rim. The exterior is panted with a band of continuous scrolling lotus, below a thin band of prunus flower heads and above a band of classic scroll at the foot.

The interior base is painted with a mallow flower and is inscribed to the centre with four characters: 'made in the Yongle reign' (*Yongle nian zhi*). Examples of Yongle period porcelain with reign marks are very rare and this design is one of the few that bears the four-characters denoting the period.



There is a monochrome *tianbai* (sweet white) bowl in the British Museum with a design of two *anhua* (secret) five claw dragons to the interior that surround a four-character Yongle mark written in seal script (Fig13). The British Museum also has an *anhua* decorated *tianbai* stem cup with a four-character Yongle mark that is placed to the interior within a flaming pearl, after which a five-claw dragon is chasing (Fig14).

There are two other examples of 'press-hand' cups in the Palace Museum Collection, which are both more successfully painted than this example. The blue colour is deeper and more consistent, which allows the lotus flowers more tonal variation and thus greater three dimensionality in their appearance. One of the cups is identical in design (Fig 15.) and the other differs in that it has a pair of lions in the interior base, rather than the mallow flower (Fig 16). The size of this cup is approximately 9.5cm in diameter.

Fig 13. Tianbai anhua dragon bowl, Yongle mark and period, British Museum.

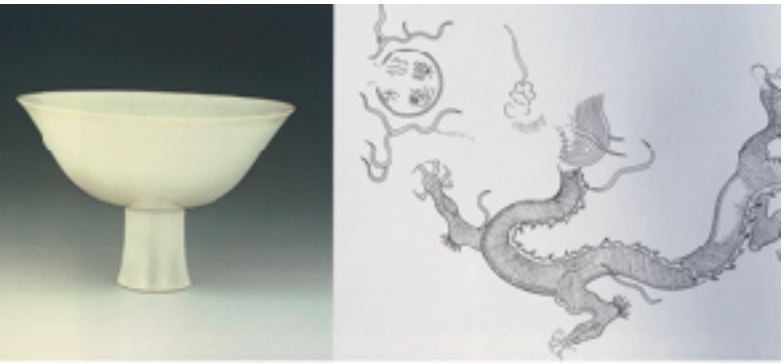


Fig 14. Tianbai anhua dragon stem cup, Yongle mark and period, British Museum.

Fig 15. Blue and white press-hand cup, Yongle mark and period, Palace Museum, Beijing.

Fig 16. Blue and white press-hand cup, Yongle mark and period, Palace Museum, Beijing.

A Qingbai Figure of Seated Guanyin, Yuan Dynasty

This figure was a real treat to handle as one so rarely gets to see early ceramic sculpture of this type.

Like all porcelain that followed later, this would have been made in Jiangxi province at kilns in and around present day Jingdezhen and was the first porcelain to be made. Qingbai or 'green white' denotes these white wares with a pale turquoise tint.

The figure is seated and would have most likely had a stand made for it. The face is quite long in proportion and has a peaceful countenance with the eyes gazing downward. The figure is wearing an elaborate necklace around his neck that covers the chest area and there is a similar arrangement hanging from the waist. The beaded style to this jewellery is very similar to beaded work that can be seen in vessels of the Yuan dynasty. (Fig 17.)

One of the finest Qingbai figures of Guanyin is in the Alan Chuang collection in Hong Kong and was offered at Sotheby's Hong Kong in November 1987 and at Sotheby's London in 2005. It is monumental in scale being 67cm high and the modelling of the form and the detailed work of the body jewellery is of the finest quality. Firing large scale figures like this was technically very unpredictable and the failure rate would have been high. Figures would often crack during the firing process, as can be seen in lower areas of the robe and to the reverse of the figure that we handled, despite it being smaller at around 45cm high.

Fig 17. A Qingbai stem cup, Yuan dynasty, Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, Schiller bequest, approx 10cm high.

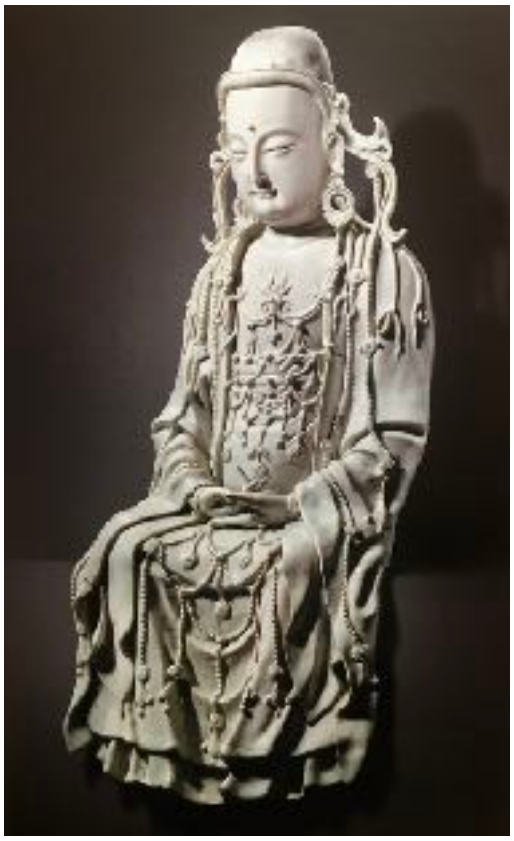


Fig 18. A Qingbai figure of Guanyin, Yuan dynasty, Alan Chuang Collection, sold at Sotheby's London, on 11 May, 2005, and Sotheby's Hong Kong on 24 November 1987, 67cm high.

A Guan Mallow Flower-Shaped Washer, Southern Song Dynasty

I have included this piece, despite the fact that it has been cut down in size. It would have originally have had extended sides, raising the upper surface for use as a brush washer on the scholar's table. At first glance it looks to be an alternative shape to known examples. However on close inspection, the foot rim is slightly uneven and has some shallow chips to some areas to its interior which would have occurred when it was reduced, most likely due to damage to its lower section.

A complete example can be seen in the National Palace Museum (Fig 19.) and the underside of this example reveals a foot rim that is dressed in a dark iron-brown glaze.

The reason for including this washer is mainly due to its successful combination of form, glaze and colour. The organic mallow form can also be seen in lacquer and metalwork of the period and it is well suited to the ceramic medium. Here it is covered with a thick pale turquoise glaze which thins to a beige colour at its edges. The glaze is slightly glossy and translucent, which is particularly pleasing from a tactile point of view when examining it closely. The glaze has the distinctive widely spaced crackles to the glaze, which is caused by the glaze shrinking at a slightly faster rate than the body during the firing.

The Guan (official) kilns were established in Hangzhou after the Song court moved south in 1127 due to the north being overrun by the Jurchen people who established the Jin dynasty (1115-1234). Kilns were established near the palace at Xiuneisi and later at Jiaotanxia.

Fig 19. Guan washer, Southern Song dynasty, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

In this article, I have highlighted seven items of the thirteen that we were fortunate enough to have handled on the day and I have illustrated the remaining six below.

As we were leaving the study room, we notice a number of cabinets lining the walls and in one, lying close to floor level, was one of the most incredibly rare examples of early 15th century porcelain: that is the monumental 74.8cm diameter blue and white Xuande period dragon dish. It is illustrated in volume 34 of The Complete Treasures of the Palace Museum. 5.

This dish is completely unique and it is so unusual to find one of such large size in this period. The failure rate of firing such large pieces would have prevented many like this being produced. In the centre of the dish, a five-claw dragon flies amongst numerous cloud scrolls in pursuit of the flaming pearl that just evades his grasp.

Large scale dragon dishes were made again towards the end of the 16th century in the Wanli period (1573-1620), where the dragon is depicted frontally. However, in comparison to its earlier incarnation, the dragon is somewhat static and awkward. (Fig 20.)

A unique and extremely large 'dragon' dish, Ming dynasty, Xuande period, 74.8cm diameter.

Fig 20. Large underglaze blue and yellow enamel dish, Ming Dynasty, Wanli Period, Percival David Collection, British Museum.

Other Pieces Handled in the Study Room

A Longquan celadon vase, *cong* Song dynasty, approx 30cm high.

A blue and white vase, *meiping*, Ming dynasty, Yongle period, approx 30cm high.

A blue and white circular basin, Ming dynasty, Yongle period, approx 26cm diameter.

A celadon ribbed bowl containing seven vases, Yongzheng seal mark and period, approximately 20cm diameter.

A Ru washer, Northern Song dynasty, approximately 14cm diameter.

A blue and white grape dish, Ming dynasty, Yongle period, approximately 38cm diameter.

Notes

1. National Palace Museum, *Huali cai ci: Qianlong yangcai/ Stunning Decorative Porcelains from the Ch'ienlung Reign,* Taipei, 2008.
2. Ibid, cat no. 42 and 43, p. 134-137.
3. Krahl, Regina, *Adding Flowers to Brocade,* Sotheby's Hong Kong catalogue essay, 03 April 2018, lot 3622.
4. National Palace Museum, *Porcelain with painted enamels of Qing Yongzheng Period (1723 - 1735),* February 2013, cat no, 008, p. 34.
5. Palace Museum, Beijing, *Complete Treasures of the Palace Museum,* Vol 34, Hong Kong, 2008, cat no. 132, p. 140.

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Fig 4. Liao Pao Show, *Huali cai ci: Qianlong yangcai/ Stunning* Decorative Porcelains from the Ch'ienlung *Reign*, Taipei, 2008, cat no 42, p 134.

Fig 5. Chen Kuo-Tung, Yu Pei-Chin, Wang Chu-Ping *Porcelain with painted enamels of Qing Yongzheng Period (1723 - 1735)*, February 2013, cat. no, 008, p. 34.

Fig 6. Thompson, Julian, The Alan Chuang Collection of Chinese Porcelain, Hong Kong, 2009, cat. no 106, p. 278.

Fig 7. Photograph © Christie's Hong Kong, 30 November 2016, lot 3218,

Fig 8. Photograph © Christie's London, 14 May 2013, lot 216.

Fig 9. Li Yi-hua, Kangxi Yongzheng Qianlong, Hong Kong, 1989, cat. no 26, p. 43.

Fig 10. Photograph © National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Fig 11. Photograph © Jingdezhen Ceramics Archaeology Research Institute.

Fig 12. Photograph © Jingdezhen Ceramics Archaeology Research Institute.

Fig 13. Harrison Hall, Jessica, *Ming* Ceramics in the British Museum, London, 2001, cat. no 3:4, p. 101.

Fig 14. *Ibid*, 2001, cat. no 3:1, p. 98.

Fig 15. Palace Museum, Beijing, Complete Treasures of the Palace Museum, Vol 34, Hong Kong, 2008, cat. no 78, p. 81.

Fig 16. Palace Museum, Beijing, Complete Treasures of the Palace Museum, Vol 34, Hong Kong, 2008, cat. no 79, p. 82.

Fig 17. Photograph © Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum.

Fig 18. Thompson, Julian, *op cit*, cat. no 1, p 32.

Fig 19. Photograph © National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Fig 20. Photograph © Percival David Collection, British Museum.

Fig 23. It was said that the last emperor and and empress, Puyi and Wanrong had their photograph taken in front of these two interlocking cypress after their wedding ceremony in November 1922. The interlocking cypress branches symbolise loyal love.

Fig 22. Display of Taihu and other rocks at the Palace Museum.