

素影浮瑩 · ELEGANCE IN RELIEF

景德鎮清末民初雕瓷

Carved Porcelain from Jingdezhen
of the 19th to Early 20th Centuries

Tony Miller and Humphrey Hui

苗學禮 許建勳

Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

香港中文大學文物館

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Director's foreword

*'For innovative hexagonal and square shapes,
Lobed and lotus forms,
They are modelled by freehand —
Never thrown on the potter's wheel.
Then carved, incised or moulded designs are added
But the joints and facets are unsightly!'*

The potter's craft and social customs of Jingdezhen were recorded in the form of lyrics by Gong Shi, who worked as a clerk at the Fouliang County Office during the Jiaqing period (1796–1820) for four years. He was a native of Nanchang, Jiangxi province. The lyrics he composed numbered a hundred, but only sixty 'Songs of Jingdezhen's potteries' were extant and published in the 3rd year of the Daoguang reign (1823). The one cited above, translated very literally, is a precise description of the technical process of producing a carved porcelain object. To this song Gong made a remark: 'The body of a piece of carved porcelain is made by joining slabs together. They are cut squarely from a lump of clay that has been wrapped around with a cloth and flattened by stamping.' Ceramics from Jingdezhen were either thrown on the potter's wheel or freehand modelled, forming two distinct streams of products. It is said in *Nanyao biji*, compiled in the Qianlong period (1736–1795), 'Human figures, birds and animals and all sorts of delicate articles require carving and scraping. There is meticulous division of labour and artisans are made responsible for preparing the clay, doing the carving, glazing, etc.' Among the twenty-three workshops of the Imperial Factory at Jingdezhen was one 'Carving Workshop'. Statistics of the Republic period recorded 240 households with a total of 891 potters and artisans working in the field of carved porcelain at Jingdezhen in 1937. They named their guild the Hexing She. In a word, carved porcelain enjoyed prosperity from the high Qing through the Republic period.

The potter's craft in Jingdezhen of the Jiangxi province had a long history. Common decorative techniques like openwork carving, hand modelling, appliqué as well as carving, incising and moulding had been used since the Song period (960–1279). Nonetheless, the Song taste was principally classical and carved porcelain pieces were far less popular when compared with monochromes. Blue and white wares emerged since the Yuan period (1271–1368) and porcelain with painted designs became the mainstream for the following centuries. The development of colour glazes and enamels, with a wide range of hues and palettes, reached their height in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) periods, attested by the refined polychromes of the time. As a result of the irreversible decline of the Qing sovereignty from the 19th century onwards, all kilns including the Imperial Factory experienced successive slumps. On the contrary, carved porcelain bloomed with objects imitating in porcelain of other material such as ivory, bamboo and stones, producing in quantity objects for the scholar's studio. With original designs and quality workmanship, potters made reputations for themselves and their studios, to name but a few, Chen Guozhi, Wang Bingrong and Li Yucheng. Jingdezhen potters were adept in the traditionally used methods and, on top of that, they introduced new decorative techniques, namely trailed slips, slipped out-lines, fill-in slips, slip drippings, joint-slabs, appliqués, appliqués

of moulded elements, inlays, appliqués of hand-modelled elements, scrapings, and also free-chains. In practice, several techniques were combined to achieve the desired result. Many carved porcelain pieces from the late 19th to early 20th centuries are definitely works of art.

In this exhibition *Elegance in Relief: Carved Porcelain from Jingdezhen of the 19th to Early 20th Centuries*, the Art Museum presents 168 pieces of carved porcelain. The exhibits, made in the period from the Qianlong reign (1736–1795) to the 1950's, are extremely diverse, comprising brushpots, inkstick stands, brush rests, paperweights, vermilion boxes, inkstones, brush washers, waterpots, vases, bottles, snuff bottles, lamps, incense holders, *ruyi* sceptres, arm rests, belt ornaments, table screens, plaques and many the like. Together they give a comprehensive overview of Jingdezhen carved porcelain that developed fully in the two centuries.

First and foremost, I wish to express my deep gratitude to Mr. and Mrs. Tony Miller. They first initiated the project and have been actively involved in the planning and staging of the exhibition. Their prompt act of entrusting very soon their collection to the Art Museum facilitated the research in the early stage and the subsequent compilation of the exhibition catalogue. Mr. Miller has a sound knowledge of carved porcelain and has contributed a scholarly article for the catalogue. He is also the main author of the catalogue entries. In addition, he has helped with the raising of funds for all the expenses related to the exhibition. (Names of all donors and sponsors are printed separately in this catalogue to mark our gratitude to their generosity.) We are greatly indebted to Mr. Humphrey K. F. Hui for his enthusiastic support to the Art Museum over the years. A part of the exhibits are selected from Humphrey's private collection and he wrote the remaining portion of the descriptive entries. In addition to the collections of Mr. and Mrs. Miller and of Mr. Hui, a small portion of the exhibits are selected from the permanent collection of the Art Museum and the rest are borrowed from private and public collections both locally and worldwide. I wish to record my thanks and appreciation to the prestigious museums, including the Baur Collection in Geneva, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, also in London, and the Shanghai Museum in shipping their treasures to us, or allowing us to use published images of their carved porcelain objects. Special thanks must be reserved for the many lenders who have entrusted their priceless pieces with us, including Mr. Anthony K. W. Cheung, Mr. Anthony J. Hardy, Le Petit Pavillon d'Elégance, Upland Meadow Lodge, No Way Studio, Fuyun Xuan, Helen and Peter Lin, Zhuyuetang and Cheng Xun Tang, all in Hong Kong; Mr. Raymond Lam and Mrs. Margaret Polak, both in the United States of America; Mr. and Mrs. S. E. Alleyne in Britain; and Mr. Denis S. K. Low in Singapore. Without their support and contribution this exhibition would never have been possible.

Peter Y. K. Lam

Director, Art Museum
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

前言

“六方四角樣新增，菱葉荷花各擅能，
不上車盤隨手製，雕鐫印合笑模棱。”

清中葉嘉慶年間江西南昌人龔鉞客浮梁鎮，當了四年鎮署幕友，期間為景德鎮製瓷作業和民間風俗，寫了《景德鎮陶歌》百首，後於道光三年癸未以六十首發表傳世。以上錄出的，便是其中的一首，描述琢器雕鐫，言簡意賅。龔氏於歌後自註云“此鑲雕印合之作，用布包泥，板拍成片，裁方黏合，各有機巧。”按景德鎮陶工製器分為圓、琢兩大類，圓器利用陶車拉坯成形，琢器則“不上車盤隨手製”。乾隆年間成稿的《南窯筆記》更在“琢器”之下有“雕削”條云：“凡人物、鳥獸各種玲瓏之類俱各雕削。工匠有淘泥、雕削、上釉等工。”故此盛清景德鎮御窯廠二十三作中也有“雕鑲作”一項。據民國時的景德鎮經濟統計，1937年從事雕削製瓷的工匠有240戶，工人總數為891人。當時的雕削同業行會組織名為“合興社”。可見自盛清至民國景德鎮瓷器雕削業的普及和盛行。

江西景德鎮有悠久的製瓷歷史，在陶瓷坯體上以鏤、捏、堆、刻、劃、印等技法裝飾，在宋代已經盛行。但是宋朝流行單色釉，以雅淡為風尚，不重雕琢。元代後期發展青花瓷，陶瓷的裝飾技法又以繪畫為主流，其後的彩瓷，更把釉彩裝飾推至高峰。清末十九世紀，國勢衰弱，官窯沒落，瓷業生產每況愈下。雕瓷就在這個時候發展，仿象牙、竹木、玉石雕刻，大量生產文房用品，在其他瓷器製品水平衰落之時，獨樹一幟，形成鮮明的陶藝風格。名家如陳國治、王炳榮、李裕成等輩出，他們充分利用景德鎮瓷泥的特性，所製器物，屢有佳作。清末民初景德鎮雕瓷除了繼承宋代以來的鏤、捏、堆、刻、劃、印等技法外，還創造了牽漿、堆漿出線、填漿、點漿、鑲接、堆貼、印貼、鑲嵌、捏塑、捏貼、修接、活鏈等新技法，很多時候多種技法綜合運用於一體，製造了不少藝術精品，流傳於世。

文物館舉辦“素影浮瑩—景德鎮清末民初雕瓷”瓷覽，展出雕瓷作品168項，年代自十八世紀乾隆朝至上世紀五十年代，種類包括筆筒、墨床、筆山、紙鎮、印章、蓋盒、墨硯、水洗、水盂、瓶、壺、鼻煙壺、燈、香薰、如意、臂攔、帶飾、硯屏、瓷板等，旨在展示景德鎮雕瓷工藝兩百年來的發展脈絡。

展覽的成功舉辦，首先應該感謝苗學禮、黃雅貞伉儷。展覽是苗先生最早倡議的，他們亦最先將珍藏寄存文物館以供研究編目。苗先生對雕瓷素有研究，親自撰寫學術專文和大部分的展品說明，又協助籌募展覽經費（贊助者芳名另專頁鳴謝，以誌不忘）。誦先芬室主人許建勳先生歷年支持文物館工作，不遺餘力，本展覽亦蒙借出藏品及編寫其餘的展品說明。展品除了苗、許兩家和文物館的藏品外，復蒙海內外公私收藏支持，惠借珍藏，公諸同好。借出藏品或允許藏品在此圖錄發表者包括瑞士日內瓦鮑氏東方藝術館，英國倫敦維多利亞艾伯特博物館、大維德中國藝術基金會，上海博物館，香港鍾棋偉先生、何安達先生、小雅精舍、草田山房、不為齋、浮雲軒、長青館、竹月堂、承訓堂，美國林黎明先生、馬寶樂夫人，英國程尚文伉儷，新加坡修敬齋等，文物館謹此致以衷心感謝。

香港中文大學文物館館長**林業強**

記於二零零五年國慶後一日

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Chronology of Chinese Dynasties

中國歷史年代簡表

Sui	隋	581-618
Tang	唐	618-907
Five Dynasties	五代	907-960
Liao	遼	916-1125
Northern Song	北宋	960-1127
Southern Song	南宋	1127-1279
Jin	金	1115-1234
Yuan	元	1271-1368
Ming	明	1368-1644
Qing	清	1644-1911
Shunzhi	順治	1644-1661
Kangxi	康熙	1662-1722
Yongzheng	雍正	1723-1735
Qianlong	乾隆	1736-1795
Jiaqing	嘉慶	1796-1820
Daoguang	道光	1821-1850
Xianfeng	咸豐	1851-1861
Tongzhi	同治	1862-1874
Guangxu	光緒	1875-1908
Xuantong	宣統	1909-1911
Republic of China	中華民國	1912-1949
People's Republic of China	中華人民共和國	1949-

BEHIND THE GOLDEN COCKEREL SCREEN

THE LATE QING AND EARLY REPUBLICAN MASTER CARVERS OF JINGDEZHEN AND THEIR ARTISTIC MILIEU

Tony Miller

Introduction

The yellow-glazed table screen of a cock and cockscomb (exhibit 149), which I have chosen for my starting point, is the only piece of carved porcelain in the Percival David Foundation Collection of Chinese Art, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. It is a superb example of that little known art form and is interesting from several different perspectives. First, from a purely artistic perspective, it is a beautifully naturalistic representation. Secondly, the rebus provided by the cock and cockscomb plant — ‘guanshang jiaguan’¹ [official crown upon crown] — places it firmly on the scholar’s table. Thirdly, unlike almost all porcelain previously produced at Jingdezhen, it carries a personal mark other than a reign mark. Lastly, there is an interesting story attached to its dating, which sparked first my curiosity, then my suspicion and finally forced me to re-evaluate much that I had already taken as authoritative. The journey it led me on has been a merry chase, full of puzzles and surprises. It is not yet over, but this catalogue and this paper are the journal of that adventure to date.

Although carved porcelain has a long and respectable history in China, the emergence of biscuit carved porcelain towards the end of the Qing dynasty marked a very new departure. It also marks the twining together of two independent strands. The first of these is the imitation in porcelain of other materials, such as bamboo and ivory, wood, lacquer and jade, one of many artistic innovations from the mid-Qing onwards. The second is the emergence of individual potters from the anonymity of the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen. The technical skills and artistry required to produce the imitative works then in demand by the palace in Beijing was clearly of an order not found among the copy artists of the production-line. By itself, that is not sufficient to explain the sudden flowering of a completely new style of delicately carved porcelain items for the scholar’s studio. Nevertheless, it certainly helped create one of the right conditions. For one of the others we must travel back to the preceding dynasty.

The late Ming saw a number of new developments in Chinese art. One in particular, the emergence of a literati class from the beginning of the Jiajing reign in the sixteenth century to the end of the dynasty in 1644, has attracted much scholarly interest. Form and function were equally important for these learned and discerning gentlemen, who took both pride and pleasure in equipping themselves with the finest of writing instruments and materials and decorating their studios with all manner of *objets d’art*. The fastidious tradition they began continued to fuel demand for the work of artists of all sorts for the next two hundred years. At some point, a small group of very skilled potters decided that what other artists could do in bamboo, jade, lacquer and ivory they could do equally well, if not better, in clay. Thus biscuit carved porcelain was born. This is their story.

I – The Pursuit of Illusion

“I once saw a bottle of his on which he had carved five bats flying up and down and fluttering about, just as they might appear in an album of paintings.”

Zhao Zhiqian²

Like the historian attempting to impose some pattern on the past, one is inevitably to some extent guessing when seeking to establish the origins of a new style. Absent a key figure or definable school, the endeavour is fraught with both difficulty and the danger of self-deception. Behind the Golden Cockerel Screen stretch several thousand years of

porcelain production, with generation after generation of both technical experimentation and artistic expression. The problem is not so much the absence of clues — there is a plethora scattered along the way — rather it is the number of false trails.

Dating is always difficult, never more so than when the pieces in question are neither mainstream nor large in number. Thus biscuit carved porcelain and the handful of potters known to have carved them have attracted little attention from the experts but a wide variety of dates, extending from the Wanli reign (1573–1620) of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) to the early days of the Republic. Several of the surviving pieces carry reign marks. As will be argued later, these are largely irrelevant because the pieces were not produced at the imperial kilns to meet orders emanating from the palace. Nor were they in any sense mass-produced to detailed specification. There is, however, a consistency of style about the group sufficient for us to be able to discern the existence of a relatively short-lived fashion.

Superficially, this vogue for biscuit carved porcelain, which we can now safely say began early in the nineteenth century, seems to represent an abrupt departure from what was fashionable before. Certainly, at one level, it was a sudden flowering, but at another level it also forms part of the unbroken thread of traditional design and technique carried forward, adapted and refined by each new generation of artists. Exactly what sparked this renewed burst of creativity must remain a mystery, but aesthetics aside, its significance lies in the apparent convergence of two separate strands of development: the first being the imitation of other materials in porcelain; the second the emergence of artists from the anonymity of the kilns.

Historical Development

Moulding, modelling, incising and carving of pottery and porcelain have, of course, a long history in China, and strictly speaking there is little technically new about the genre. Precursors abound. Sculpted tomb figures and other funerary objects spring immediately to mind,³ and there is ample early evidence of considerable technical versatility, from carving in the round, through open work and fretting, to the sculpting of applied appendages. Unfortunately, there has been little serious research in this area and the principal Chinese authorities tend to relegate carving to an ancillary role in the production process. Thus there are few if any records through which we can trace the development of techniques.

Only one previous exhibition has been devoted to the subject. It was at the Fung Ping Shan Museum, University of Hong Kong in 1978 and, in his brief but excellent catalogue foreword, Dr. Michael Lau surveyed and summarized what little had been written on the subject to that date.⁴ He went on to lament that ‘carved porcelain’ had never been clearly defined and offered his own definition to fill this void. He proposed that it should embrace “a specific genre of porcelain in which carving is the main decorative device” and suggested five broad classifications, as follows:

- relief carving or bas relief carving, the design rising above the ground;
- high relief or open work carving, part of the ground carved through, giving more gradations or greater depth in the design;
- carving in the round of figures and animals;
- carving with appliqué, the moulded motive appended to the vessel, the vessel itself sometimes having a carved background; and
- intaglio carving by a sharp point on the vessel.

That simple but useful classification provides a reasonable starting point for this brief historical survey of developments, even if our research suggests that it is capable of further refinement.

Neolithic burial items, like the tripod mentioned earlier, provide the easiest examples of carving in the round. Having said which, the terracotta army protecting *Qin Shihuangdi* at Mount Lishan were not wholly carved. Their torsos and limbs were coiled, details of clothing and armour were moulded and then applied, while their hands, feet and heads were moulded and then finished by hand for individuality. On a less grand scale, the simple figures of humans and animals of the Han period, together with the models of farms, granaries and watermills, carry the tradition forward to the large and graceful, moulded and glazed figures of lords and ladies, merchants and musicians, domestics and dancers, camels, horses, and other livestock of the Tang. Again the majority of these are moulded.

The earliest examples of carving on pottery vessels date from the Shang dynasties (*circa* 1600–1027 BCE). Perhaps the most famous intact example is the magnificent jar in the Freer Gallery, which demonstrates early mastery of appliqué, intaglio and carving in the round.⁵ It is decorated with bold zig-zag horizontal stripes, continuous thunder-pattern incision alternating with plain, and has carved animal masks for ears. Many similar fragments have been excavated from royal Shang tombs in Xiaotun, Anyang and scientific analysis of these not only confirms the dating, but interestingly also reveals that this so-called ‘white pottery’ has the same composition as modern day kaolin and was fired to about 1000°C. All that was missing at that time to produce true porcelain was the technology needed to raise firing temperatures a little bit more.

One point to note about the decoration of these earliest examples is that it follows closely the already stylized motifs of ancient bronzes. This is by no means accidental: the imitation was a conscious one. Pottery and later on porcelain were the ‘plastic’ of antiquity, used to reproduce quickly and cheaply for ordinary mortals the ritual vessels and daily utensils made from more precious materials for the use of the emperor and his entourage. This spirit of imitation, whether of form or decoration, continued to inspire potters through succeeding dynasties, and examples of incised and applied motifs extend through the Tang (618–907) to the Liao (916–1125) and the Song (960–1279).

During the latter dynasty, a degree of specialization is evident between the kilns in different areas, but the thread is not lost. The earlier production includes examples of carving and highlighting by incising, combing and slashing. However, with the change in firing technique from individual to stack-firing, moulding comes to the fore. Thus during the Northern Song (960–1127), quite intricate impressed decorations are found on the fine white ware from the Ding kilns of Hebei. The carving for these was done before firing and glazing, not on the pieces themselves, but in intaglio on reusable moulds.⁶ Similarly, at Yaozhou in Shaanxi province, both mould impressed and carved patterns are combined to beautiful effect with fine celadon glaze (Fig. 1).

When the dynasty moved its capital under pressure of raids from the north, skilled potters followed the court south. Thus in the Southern Song (1127–1279), *Nanding* [Southern Ding] ware was produced near Jingdezhen in Jiangxi, and the engraving of patterns on the biscuit before firing and glazing continued at the Longquan kilns in Zhejiang.⁷ One vase, dated to 1173, combines elaborate floral scrolls carved on the biscuit with pinch moulded animals on the shoulder and, in a foretaste of things to come much later, glazing on the interior of the vessel rather than the exterior (Fig. 2). In another particularly striking innovation, unglazed, moulded or carved panels can be found reserved in the body of some of the larger glazed pieces produced at the latter kilns.⁸

The bold ‘petal’ appliqué familiar from the Ding funerary urns of the Northern Song reappears in the Yuan (1271–1368) in a variety of guises, often on vessels whose forms betray the very different origins of the former dynasty.⁹ And, of course, it was during the Yuan, following Kublai Khan’s establishment in 1278 (even before the complete conquest of China) of the Fuliang Porcelain Bureau to manage and supervise the kilns, that the production of porcelain for imperial use began to be centralized at Jingdezhen in Jiangxi. Invention of true porcelain, combining stone with kaolin, gave this movement added impetus, not least because of the higher quality of material available there. This consolidation, completed under the Ming (1368–1644), brought all these separate threads together in an unprecedented fusion of talent and tradition.

It was, at least initially, a period of great experimentation, for example, with the use of dribbled white slip to produce under-glaze surface traceries, a technique which Zhu Yan terms ‘embossing’.¹⁰ This technique was taken one step further in a parallel development of the same period, with tracings or slender fillets of clay used to separate different colour glazes in the *fahua*, or *cloisonné* style.¹¹ The late Ming, particularly the Wanli period, saw considerable experimentation with openwork and *linglung*, fretwork, and a number of examples survive where this fiddly work is combined to good effect with moulded, applied or carved relief figures and floral decoration.¹² This group is particularly interesting because they apparently represent a conscious attempt to copy in porcelain an effect already achieved in other materials such as jade.

Not that all regional kilns ceased to operate; many continued, producing for non-imperial consumption. The potters at Dehua in Fujian flourished in the Ming on the back of a lively export trade and their potters pursued a splendid tradition of sculpted and later applied decoration.¹³ Some cross-fertilization of both styles and techniques between the principal kiln towns is also evident. Thus the sculpted lines and *tiehua*, appliqué, techniques of Dehua have their counterparts in the tea ware from Yixing in Jiangsu,¹⁴ and at least the appliqué element overflows onto the

decoration of Jingdezhen crackle-ware. A good example is a jar with archaic bronze design and in *ge*-type glaze belonging to the Yongzheng reign in the Palace Museum, Beijing.¹⁵ External influences are also likely to have stirred the brew. One expert of this period has suggested the intriguing possibility that overglaze slip decoration started in imitation of Middle Eastern work from the Kirman kilns.¹⁶

These then are some of the threads running through the tapestry of China's porcelain tradition, which tend towards even if they do not lead directly to the genre under discussion. As we shall see in a later chapter on dating, the trail never completely peters out, but there are points at which it becomes obscure. For now we will leave it that, notwithstanding previous claims to a much earlier birth, the biscuit carved porcelain of Jingdezhen seems to have emerged as a distinct style in its own right only in the Jiaqing (1796–1820) and Daoguang reigns (1821–1850) of the Qing. Prior to that date individual precursor examples dot the landscape, but nothing which one can clearly identify or honestly describe as the immediate forebear of this sudden flowering of a new fashion. Nevertheless, two developments first hinted at in the Wanli reign may have been more influential than others. One was the innovative use of perforation as an element of design, and the other was the challenge of imitating vessels made from other materials.

In his *Yinliu Zhai shuoci* [Discourse on Porcelain from the Studio where Drink Flows],¹⁷ Xu Zhiheng tells us that carved porcelain first became popular during the Qianlong period, driven no doubt in part by that Emperor's fascination with novelty. Certainly, from the mid-Qing onwards, fret-work, wholesale excision of large slabs from the main body,¹⁸ incision under turquoise glaze and extraordinarily intricate *linglong*, pierced work,¹⁹ seem to have become part of the newly fashionable menu of design elements. The latter had already earned the unaffectionate name 'devil's work', *guigong*, from the Wanli potters of Jingdezhen, who had protested at the Imperial order for their manufacture.²⁰ Reluctant or not, one consequence of this particular trend for the artists and craftsmen of the carving departments in the Imperial kilns was that they came to greater prominence and, over time, had to lift the level of their artistic and technical skills. Without this, the emergence of the best of them from obscurity to prominence simply could not have taken place.

Imitation, as we have seen, was nothing new. As early as the mid-eighth century, that great connoisseur of tea, Lu Yu (733–804), had compared Xing ware from Hebei to silver and classed it second only to the jade-like Yue ware from Zhejiang.²¹ This was no mere figure of speech. The unctuously thick pale glazes of the Ru kilns near Kaifeng, for example, strove for the look of 'mutton fat' jade, and the late Yuan and early Ming saw potters copying the forms of archaic ceremonial vessels with glazes to match. However, the challenge of imitating anything and everything appears to have been first taken up in a determined way during the reign of the Yongzheng emperor. It may at first have been merely whimsical, for example *faux bois* basins.²² Subsequently, however, and particularly under the Qianlong emperor, things became more serious and the potters' ambitions extended to other more challenging materials such as pudding-stone,²³ marble, turquoise and jade. At its most flamboyant, the vogue simulated the simultaneous inlay of several precious materials, as in the magnificent *tianqiuping* bearing a Yongzheng mark in the Collection of Au Bak Ling.²⁴

Writing in 1794, Zhu Yan records this recent imperial passion for imitation in the opening pages of his *Taoshuo*:

*"In fact, among all the works of art in carved gold, embossed silver, chiseled stone, lacquer, mother-of-pearl, bamboo and wood, gourd and shell, there is not one that is not now produced in porcelain, a perfect imitation of the original."*²⁵

He goes on to suggest, not without a tinge of sarcasm, that with these extraordinary technical advances, the exertions of the great masters of these other media have been rendered superfluous:

*"...work, as that executed in jade by Lu Tzu-kang, in gold by Li Ai-shan, in silver by Chu Pi-shan, in rhinoceros by Pao T'ien-ch'eng, in tin by Chao Liang-pi, in carnelian by Wang Hsiao-his, in copper by Chiang Pao-yun, in carved bamboo by P'u Chung-ch'ien, in mother-of-pearl by Chiang Ch'ien-li, and in Japanese lacquer by Yang Hsun, is merged in the one work of porcelain."*²⁶

Thereafter, he quickly returns to his main theme, recounting the development of porcelain up to the end of the Ming dynasty, and one senses that he does not quite approve of such modern frivolity.

The reference to cinnabar lacquer is not insignificant. Prompted, or possibly provoked by the new exploitation of

that medium's great plasticity, the potters mimicked a considerable variety of lacquer-ware. Extant examples range from simple covered bowls and trays to triumphant *trompe-l'oeil* vases. One of the more elegant examples is a lantern shaped *zun* vase in the Palace Museum, Beijing. It is in an unusual turquoise glaze, decorated with a dragon in clouds motif and bears the imperial Qianlong mark.²⁷

Writing nearly half a century earlier, Pere d'Entrecolles (1664–1741) is rather more generous than Zhu Yan in his tribute to the innovative approach of the potters of this period and the success of their imitation:

*"The texture of the ivory, shell, or bamboo is carefully indicated in the porcelain, and the surface colours are reproduced so as to bring out the tints of the variegated marble and pudding-stone, the mottled jade, the striped carnelian and agate, the veined walnut-wood, and the carved cinnabar lac, with such exactitude that it is necessary to handle the piece to convince one's-self that it is really made of porcelain. The aspect of gold and silver was given by enamels prepared from the metals themselves; the surface tints of copper and bronze, the rust of iron, and play of colours upon ancient patinated bronze-red in which the Chinese antiquarian takes so much delight, were produced by combinations of different glazes applied either with the brush or by sprinkling over the first ground colour."*²⁸

Given the paucity of carved pieces from the period now extant, the fashion may have been no more than a short-lived imperial fad, but it is significant for the purposes of this study because it carried over into imitation on a smaller scale in the form of nick-knacks for the scholar's studio, including especially snuff bottles.

If the technical skills required to craft biscuit carved porcelain were acquired in the kilns, the artistic inspiration came from elsewhere. And it is in the intricately carved figures and landscapes of bamboo brush holders that one can detect the most likely source of inspiration. The decoration of many of the earlier brushpots is consciously retro-Ming, depicting similar subjects, most common amongst them the literati life and its world of symbols: "Figures carved upon late Ming bamboo brushpots were large and conspicuous with attention given to facial expressions. The ideas behind these themes were comparatively simple showing men retreating from worldly matters and symbolic motifs such as old pine, cranes and deer. Such subject matter was more direct than those found in Qing dramas and myths. These high relief brushpots were usually decorated with a background of pine trees. The material was chosen so that the desired sculptural effect could be achieved easily and blank areas could be smoothed off, which was characteristic of the period."²⁹

At this point, it may be prudent to define more closely the type of porcelain, which is the focus of this study. First, at a general technical level, it is necessary to be more precise about what exactly is meant by 'biscuit carving'. Notwithstanding its original French connotation, 'biscuit' is used to describe any ceramic piece that has been fired without glaze. Thus unglazed biscuit carved porcelain is only ever fired once, the carving and sculpting being executed after the clay has dried to the consistency of hard leather, but before it is fired. In the case of glazed pieces, the carving is still done before firing, but a second firing will be carried out after the glaze has been applied.

These distinctions are somewhat clearer from the traditional Chinese terminology. Thus *diaoqi* is used as a generic for carved porcelain, and *sutai* is used to distinguish the totally unglazed variety (i.e. biscuit), whereas *fanci* is used specifically to describe pieces which are carved on the biscuit but glazed only on the inside, hence 'inside out porcelain'. In a variation on this last theme, there is a small but quite attractive group of desk items, bearing Jiaqing and Daoguang reign marks, which are glazed one colour on the outside in imitation, for example, of bamboo, but glazed pure white on the inside (exhibit 6).³⁰ No specific term has been coined to describe this group. The term *binggan ci*, quite literally 'biscuit porcelain', is a relatively recent term, used indiscriminately for both glazed and un-glazed varieties, and appears to be no more than a translation of the English term back into Chinese. In further elaborating and refining the five broad classifications set out earlier, it is necessary to note two distinctive features of biscuit carved porcelain.

The first is that the new genre began as conscious imitation of other materials. It is clear from the jargon of the kilns that the artists themselves had the same clear conception of differences in technique as their counterparts working in bamboo, ivory and lacquer. "Bamboo and ivory brushpots were quite different in style. Ivory examples were created using negative relief methods while bamboo ones often used high relief carving which had a more sculptural effect."³¹ Consistent with the striving after verisimilitude in imitation of such work, the biscuit carvers of Jingdezhen adopted and adapted the same repertoire of techniques, in each case selecting the technique most appropriate to the material being imitated. Thus many of the early biscuit brushpots follow the not quite symmetrical line of the

bamboo with a joint-ridge or bulge at the base and careful stippling of the rim to enhance the imitative effect (exhibit 4). Others simulate the negative relief of ivory carving (exhibit 23), and are glazed light yellow overall, or are carved and glazed white on green to match the contours and colours of a nephritic jade original (exhibit 48).

In short, every possible technique of sculpting and carving can be found in the genre and, as it developed, in some cases more than one technique might be employed in the same piece. Appliqué, *tiehua*, is found alongside relief carving, *diaohua*; the applied decoration being worked in finer detail once attached to the main body. Daubing, *duihua*, is used to give additional body to a piece which has already been given considerable depth through perforation, *loukong*. On some of the finest pieces, a technique known as *tidi*, literally 'bone scraping' was used to pare away slivers of surface material, in a manner not dissimilar to that used in *liuqing* bamboo work, so as to leave a delicately light relief image. The skill displayed in this latter work is quite extraordinary, the best pieces showing no visible evidence of the smoothing of the surrounding ground. As the great, late-Qing carver of wood and ivory, Zhou Yi, is quoted as saying:

*"The skill of carving is but forty per cent of my art; the other sixty lies in polishing, which is more difficult than carving."*³²

This leads to the second distinction required and that is between the glazed³³ and unglazed varieties of biscuit carved porcelain. Lan P'u noted in his *Jingdezhen taolu* that certain clays carve well but glaze poorly. The best clay for carving is a natural white firing clay.³⁴ That technical point aside, the austere contrast of pure white against dark wood furniture provides a very attractive visual effect. It will also be apparent that the application of even the thinnest glaze tends to blur the detail of the most finely executed sculpting, whereas the absence of glaze offers a pleasant, slightly abrasive, tactile experience.³⁵

This leads in turn to a separate albeit highly speculative explanation for the origins of the unglazed variety. Since both glazed and unglazed varieties were produced, personal taste clearly enters the equation, and it may be that the unglazed pieces represent no more than a fad within a fashion. It may be precisely because of the outline softening effect of glazing noted above that a few of the more adventurous artists began to experiment with unglazed pieces for their more delicate work. However, since these are almost all of a very high quality and production of the far more numerous glazed pieces brackets them in time, the possibility of silent symbolic protest by the early nineteenth century literati against declining imperial power and taste cannot be entirely discounted. As with the early Ming, whose motifs the genre nostalgically reflects, these were troubled times. Whatever the case, it is here among the exquisite paraphernalia of the scholar official's studio and the clutter of his desk that biscuit carved porcelain came into its own.

II – The Cultivation of Refined Taste

"What is difficult for people of this world to achieve is 'qu'. There is 'qu' in the colours in the mountains, the taste of water, the light in flowers, and beauty in women, but even the most eloquent cannot begin to describe what it is. Only those who respond with their hearts can know it."

Yuan Hongdao³⁶

The untrained western eye looks at the cock and cockscomb (exhibit 149) and sees a charming farmyard scene. It is not his fault that the occidental observer misses the point. He is as blind to the layers of cultural history behind the screen as the unread oriental would be to the mythology informing the Renaissance statuary in Florence's Piazza della Signoria. The Chinese eye, viewing the screen through his own cultural prism, recognizes it as the gift of a well-wisher to an aspiring scholar official. The coded message of the rebus is absorbed almost without thought: the words for the cock's comb and the cockscomb plant both punning with the word for an 'official', or his cap of office, thus redoubled and conveying the desire that promotion should follow on promotion. On the face of the screen a simple message 'Guan shang jia guan'; behind it layer on layer of cultural association, symbolism and social behaviour; a centuries old system of government, staffed by an intellectual elite, selected by rigorous empire-wide examination.

The ideal of the scholar who places his wisdom at the service of the emperor has its roots in Confucius' writings. At its heart lies the acceptance that, while the emperor may carry the mantle of heaven and therefore must be obeyed,

he has no monopoly of wisdom and it is thus incumbent upon the learned to make their talents available to him. The moral obligation was given a more formal structure with the introduction of the civil service examination, documentary evidence for which dates back to 156 BCE.³⁷ Deliberately elitist, this meritocratic system embedded in Chinese culture the role of the scholar official: the learned man who is a servant of the state, the administrator who is both institutional memory, and proponent and protector of cultural heritage.

Over the centuries, the examination system was progressively extended and refined, sometimes falling into disrepute during the decline of an old dynasty, or disuse on the emergence of a new one, but always ultimately revived. Its virtues were that it sought out the best brains from across the length and breadth of the empire, that its common classical syllabus engendered homogenous, albeit conservative, official values and out-look, and that it was open to all regardless of birth. At different times an element of preference was given to the families of established officials, and a loose regional quota system helped to ensure broad representation, but no one was excluded. Even if *baiyi zaixiang*, or 'white-clothed prime ministers' from humble backgrounds were the exception rather than the rule, there was still a remarkable degree of social mobility. Whereas power resided with a hereditary aristocracy from the Han to the Sui dynasty, by the end of the Tang it had shifted irrevocably into the offices of an elite hierarchical bureaucracy, hand-picked by the Emperor from amongst the best and brightest in the land.

Getting one's foot on the first rung of the ladder was widely recognized as the key step on the way to social success and political prominence. Preliminary tests at district towns, or *xian*, qualified candidates to compete in examinations held two years out of three at the prefectural city, or *fu*, level. Success in these brought with it privileges for the graduate, such as exemption from forced labour service and freedom from corporal punishment, in addition to enormous prestige for the family and the prospect of future glory and prosperity. Celebrations when local village boy made good were thus a serious affair.

While award of the lowest principal degree, *xiucai*, or 'fine talent', secured admission to the ranks of the literati, further progress of real talent was subject to ruthless weeding out through two further levels of examination in the classics. Only one out every two hundred candidates survived the next test, the triennial *qiuwei*, autumn exams at the provincial level, and received the title *juren*, or 'recommended man'. The latter were then eligible to proceed to Beijing to compete in the annual *chunwei*, spring exams, and if successful, to become one of the two or three hundred *jinshi*, or 'presented man', who would be summoned in due course to the palace for tests presided over by the Emperor himself, followed by a decision as to ranking and appointment to a particular post.

Postings and promotion thereafter depended not just on performance, but on a continuing process of examination, under the auspices, significantly, of the Ministry of Rites rather than the Ministry of Personnel. Over time each stage of the process became associated with its own symbolism and the incorporation of such symbols in gifts gives the lie to either the wish implicit in the presents, or the occasion on which they were presented.

Unwritten in any contractual sense, but accepted by both parties was the right of the scholar official to surrender his official position and withdraw to follow scholarly pursuits. At times such self-imposed exile might reflect no more than the dissatisfaction of an individual official with the policies of the day; at others it would reflect a more general unease with the direction of political events. There are numerous examples of the former — the great Sung statesman, Sima Guang (1019–1086) retired to his Luoyang estate after a bitter court dispute and there wrote his famous histories — but the first example of the latter occurred as early as the third century CE, when the Han empire began to fragment. The classic examples of the eremitic tradition date, however, from the decline of the Ming, when men of serious ability and all the right official qualifications elected not to serve the Emperor of the day, choosing instead to pursue art and learning for its own sake.

It is tempting to see such behaviour as no more than bureaucratic boredom of the sort described by Yuan Hongdao in a letter to his friend Qiu Zhangru:

*"As a magistrate I have to perform many indescribably ugly acts. Roughly speaking, I am a slave to superior officers, a female entertainer (ji) to visitors, an accountant when managing the public funds, an old village matron when dealing with the people. In just one day, I am warm and cold, male and female, and all the unpleasantness that exists in this world is heaped upon this magistrate. How painful and punishing!"*³⁸

And not a few men of ability exerted themselves in the careful search for provincial sinecures, which would both keep them away from the rigours and intrigues of the capital, and afford the opportunity for pursuit of the literati ideal: seclusion, serenity and the simple pleasures of life. However, their deliberate cultivation of refined taste was more than mere escapism from the mediocrity and venality of the contemporary court. True, it was a political statement, but in retrospect it was also an artistic movement, separate from the centrally inspired orthodoxy of the court; separate, more personal, more individual and therefore more alive.

The Accoutrements of the Scholar

The literati's passionate concern about the decoration of their studios pre-dates the Ming by nearly half a millennium. Compiled in 986 under the influence of the Confucian philosophy that predominated among the Song Dynasty (960–1279) intelligentsia, Su Yijian's *Wenfang sipu* is one of the earliest handbooks for the aspiring scholar. It sets out in four separate volumes all that he should know about the 'four treasures' of the studio: brush, paper, ink and ink stone.³⁹ And it is during the Song that jade items for the scholar's desk first make their appearance. Similarly, the earliest porcelain brushpot form is an imperial Song example made of celadon, although, as Simon Kwan has pointed out, brushpots did not immediately take-off as a product and it is rare to find one dating from before Jiajing (1522–1566).⁴⁰ As far as is known the Imperial Ming kilns never produced any brushpots at all.⁴¹

Fashions obviously changed with the times, and the dictates of fashion became both more varied and more detailed over time. Eight centuries after Su Yijian's first modest effort, Tang Bingjun's mid-Qing handbook for scholars stretched to a full eight volumes!⁴² Nevertheless there is a consistency about the furnishing and accoutrements of the scholar's studio, which reflects both the unchanging demands of their art - the 'four friends' of the scholar remained *qin*, *qi*, *shu*, *hua*, or music, chess, books and painting – as well as their conscious conservatism.

Hence for music: the *qin* and the flute. For calligraphy and painting: brushes, paper and ink; brushpot and brush rest or rack; wrist rest, scroll weights and paper weights; ink mortar and ink rest; brush washer and water dropper; seal ink dish and personal seals. For comfort, convenience and contemplation: chess sets, hat stands; wine flasks and beakers, teapots and teacups; flower vases, jars and planters; a decorative rock or two; plaques for the walls; screens both for floor and table; braziers for incense, pomanders for fragrant blossoms; spittoons for spitting and snuff bottles for snorting; fans for relieving the heat of the day, hand-warmers the chill of the night; to say nothing of tables, chairs, stools and the like. Favourite items would often be engraved with a style or studio name, for example, 'Precious Collection of the Cherished Time Library' (exhibit 50), or be embellished with an apposite verse.⁴³

Every conceivable material came to be used for all of this bric-a-brac, each to his own personal preference, but all with an emphasis on combining form and function in the most aesthetically satisfying manner possible. And it is here, in the development of a unique aesthetic tradition that is found the great contribution of the literati. It is a tradition of two almost paradoxical polarities: simplicity and intricacy; macrocosm and microcosm; vast landscapes suggested through a few fluid strokes of the brush and minute worlds created in the intricate carving of a kernel.

Pingdan tianzhen, literally 'plain and naive', or more elegantly 'unstudied simplicity' was what the calligraphist and painter must seek to achieve, practicing until the brush and ink became an unconscious extension of the inspired mind. The minimalist lines of paintings by Dong Qichang (1555–1636) and Li Rihua (1565–1635) exemplify the ideal and set the standard to which future generations would aspire, though they themselves looked back to the masters of the Northern Song (960–1127). Dong Qichang in particular admired the scholar artist Su Shi (Dongpo 1037–1101) and wrote:

*"Dongpo commented on calligraphy in his poetry: 'tianzhen lanman is my teacher.' This is indeed the most important line of all."*⁴⁴

At the other extreme can be found refined miniature craftsmanship of the sort recorded by Li Rihua in this passage:

"Wang Shuyuan from Yu Shan has very special skills. He can carve a peach stone so meticulously that each detail can be discerned. One day Chen Liangqing and Tu Yongming visited my new residence at Chunbo and presented me with a peach stone carving of a boat. The boat is only eight fen long (less than 2.5 centimetres). The mid-section is a cabin furnished with four hinged windows that can be opened or closed. When the windows are opened, one can