

Hot in Europe and America: Export Art Works from the Qing Dynasty China

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Located on the coast of the South China Sea, Guangdong is blessed with many bays and sounds, straits and good harbors. From the Han Dynasty onwards, Guangdong has been an important hub of maritime trade and transportation linking China and overseas countries. As the global trade routes were constantly expanded in the Ming and Qing period, Chinese intellectual thinking, culture, science and technology, arts and crafts were steadily introduced to Europe and America. The promulgation of the imperial decree that allowed only one port open to foreign trade across China in the 22nd year of the reign of Emperor Ch'ien-lung (or Kien-long, Qianlong), made the Thirteen Factories (also known as the Thirteen Hong and the Canton Factories) in Canton (Guangzhou) the sole place to engage in the sea trade authorized by the Qing government. The advantageous geographic location and special policy made it possible for Canton to monopolize the sea trade in China for almost a century, serving as the centre for foreign trade as well as a production and transit base for export art works.

Paintings for export originated and flourished in the vicinity of the Thirteen Factories (today's Cultural Park area) in the 18th and 19th centuries. They are paintings done by the Cantonese artists, sold to the foreigners in China, featuring oriental conditions and customs, employing both the Western techniques and style for the purpose of catering to the aesthetic fad of "Chinoiserie" prevalent in the then Western countries. This painting, entitled "A Panoramic View of the Canton Port" (Fig. 1), and painted by Youqua in oil on canvas around 1845, 200 x 88 cm, portrays an extensive landscape of the northern bank of the Pearl River from the Shameen Sandbar (or **Samin Island**, Shamian Island), the Thirteen Factories business district, the Dutch Folly Fort (or the Haizhu Fort) in the west to the Batteries near Dashatou in the east. Youqua, a well-known export painting master in Canton who was active from 1840 to 1870, had his studios in both Guangzhou and Hong Kong. The address of his

Guangzhou studio, called “I Hsing”, was at No. 34, Old China Street, in the Thirteen Factories business district. The painting, though huge in size, yet with careful composition and uniformity in style, records in an accurate and realistic manner, before the invention of photography, the exceptionally prosperous scene of the Canton trade, featuring a forest of sails and clippers on the Pearl River. It can be called a hand-painted photo of Canton in the Qing Dynasty or a different version of the famous “Riverside Scene at the Qingming Festival” on the Pearl River.

The production of the silverware for export also reached its zenith in Canton in the Qing Dynasty. Shops for making silverware products for export were mostly concentrated in the New China Street and Old China Street in the vicinity of the Canton Factories and Flower Land (Huadi) on the Honan Island. Those recorded in historical documents include: CUT, at No. 8 on the New China Street; KHC, at the juncture of the New China Street and Honan Guild Street; LC, on the Honan Guild Street; Pao Ying, on the New China Street; WS, on the Old China Street; S.S. or Sunshing, on the New China Street, etc. As the Cantonese silver smiths were noted for their excellent craftsmanship and high efficiency, and as their products were sold at a low price, they won the hearts of Westerners who have long had a tradition of using and collecting silverware products. Westerners often ordered their silverware products through the co-hongs or they went directly to the shops for them. This silver sugar container in the Georgian style (Fig. 2), manufactured by S.S. around 1820, is 90% silver, 13 cm in height, with “SS90” inscribed in intaglio at the bottom. Sunshing, active from 1790 to 1830, was a well-known silversmith shop in Canton. The sugar container is composed of three parts: the inner container, the outer container, and the cover. The inner container is plated in gold without any florid pattern whereas around the border of the outer container there is a serial inscription of the character “回” in intaglio. On the two flanks of the container are ingeniously welded a pair of handles in string pattern. The closely integrated cover and the container, employing simple yet smooth lines, display a superb skill of forgery at the time.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the fans made in Canton sold like hot cakes in Europe and America. Court ladies in elegant evening dresses vied with each other to

hold in their hands a small and exquisite fan overflowing with the oriental appeal. It actually became a fashion. The fans specially made for export are distinctly different from the traditional Chinese ones in that they are brightly coloured, beautifully decorated, and using a variety of materials. According to records, in 1822, there are more than 5,000 stores in the vicinity of the Thirteen Factories dealing in export goods, about 250,000 artisans are specially engaged in the production and manufacturing of arts and crafts for export. These products come from different branches such as the lacquer-ware, silverware, china and porcelain, textile, painting and sculpture. These artisans are all more or less involved at the same time in the making of fans. Therefore, it can be said that the export fans made in Canton are refined art works that embody a plethora of meticulous techniques. This coloured folding fan, featuring a flower garden and human figures (Fig. 3), is 27 cm long and 51 cm in width. The handle of the fan, exquisitely carved, is made of three materials, namely, ivory, hawksbill turtle shell, and sandal wood. The leaf of the fan is painted in gouache, with strong and bright colours, and fringed with traditional Chinese auspicious patterns. The painting features a flower garden and human figures (as many as 50 people). The faces of the human figures are covered with ivory whereas their clothes are pasted with embroidered brocade. The fan of this style, known as the mandarin fan, or popularly called 100-person-fan, represents the main style of export fans in the late 19th century.

Guangzhou boasts a long history of ivory carving with its exquisite craftsmanship. Since the establishment of the “Canton trade” system in the Qing Dynasty, Canton has become the most important centre for ivory trade and ivory carving in China. John Barrow (1764-1848), secretary to Lord George McCartney (1737-1806), special envoy dispatched by King George III on his China embassy, wrote in his *Travels in China* (1804) that “It seems to me that the carvings of ivory made in Canton represent the peak of beauty and perfection.” This pierced ivory tiered lunchbox (Fig. 4), 38.5 cm in height, is composed of a cover, two tiers of compartments, a base and a handle. In order to bring out the best of their workmanship, the artisans have made full use of a variety of ivory carving techniques such as piercing, openwork carving, relief

carving, deep carving and assemblage. Piercing, in particular, is a very complicated artistic technique. The artisans have to slice the ivory first into paper-thin sheets before piercing on them the decorative patterns, with some detailed parts as thin as hair. The cover of the box resembles the official hat in the Qing Dynasty, with a button in the centre. The button is round carved into the shape of a pomegranate. From the cover top, which serves as the central point, there radiate eight flowery frames which hold together the ivory sheets pierced with ornamental patterns. All the frames are decorated with curling grass and nipple designs. On the different facades of the base are pierced Western-styled curling grass and passion flower patterns. The deep carvings on the handle, featuring flowers, fruits, trees, and a group of immortals offering their best wishes to the Jade Emperor on his birthday, are even more gorgeous and lifelike in spite of their miniature sizes. The carvings of the lunchbox reflect fluent, lucid, skilful, and succinct knife work. Carved designs as thin as floss are embodiments of delicate workmanship. Pierced ivory lunchboxes from the Qing Dynasty are rarely seen in the world. A similar lunchbox fetched RMB1,540,000 yuan at the fall auction in Beijing in 2006. Another lunchbox is in the collection of the Palace Museum in Taipei.

China is home to the lacquer ware. Lacquer products are found in the Hemudu cultural ruins that flourished over 6,000 years ago. The furniture pieces sold to the European countries in the 18th century are mainly lacquered. They range from big items such as cupboards, tables, chairs, screens to small ones such as fans, sewing boxes and tool boxes, painted mostly in black lacquer and gold. The wooden bodies of most of the furniture pieces are made in the countries of the buyers before they are shipped all the way to Canton. They are shipped back to the places where they have been ordered after the Cantonese lacquer workers coat and paint them with lacquer and other materials. The elegantly painted and gorgeously decorated furniture pieces not only sell like hot cakes in the European markets, but also exert a lasting impact on the decorative arts in Europe. This black lacquered covered gaming chip box (Fig. 5), with human figures painted in gold, is 37 cm long, 31 cm in width and 13.3 cm in height. The octagonal rectangular wooden box, lacquered and painted, is decorated

with three-clawed dragon paws for its legs. The fringes of the box and cover are ornamented with cloud and dragon, flower and grass designs. The main body is painted with a garden and human figures. Inside the outer box, there are nine smaller covered boxes, each with some lacquered trays, shell-carved gaming chips, two-coloured ivory dice box, with elaborate and exquisite designs.

Silk goods, which are traditional Chinese export products, have long been appreciated overseas. In the ancient Roman empire, silk products from China used to fetch the same price as gold did. In the 18th century, an artistic style known as the Rococo began to gain popularity in Europe. Its basic characteristics are the exuberant applications of undulating leafy patterns, C-scrolls, S-curves, and shell-like curves to bring out a delicate, exquisite, beautiful and graceful style. Chinese silks, delicate and graceful in themselves, have brought new inspirations for the formation of the Rococo artistic style. During the reign of King Louis XIV in France, men and ladies at the court wore clothes decorated with embroideries, frills and/or butterfly ties. Ladies in high society wore high heeled shoes, the upper parts of which are made of materials such as the Chinese silk or brocade, on which are elaborately embroidered auspicious Chinese mythical animals such as the kylins, dragons or phoenixes. Some upper-class ladies, for the purpose of showing off, even wore Chinese embroidered dresses, Chinese embroidered scarves or capes, with Chinese embroidered handkerchiefs in their pockets, as if they were elegant ladies from the influential families in traditional China. It is recorded that in the mid- and latter parts of the 18th century, capes exported from China are highly fashionable in Europe and America, who import more than 80,000 of them, mostly in white and bright colors. The imports by France alone account for a quarter of the share. This ivory silk embroidered cape in winding stem pattern (Fig. 6), featuring white peony designs, is a 190 cm long square. It is embroidered in winding stem pattern, using white ivory floss, and fringed with tassels. The main compositions are four delicately embroidered peonies in full blossom, placed symmetrically in four corners of the cape.

Canton enamel is a short term for Canton painted enamel which refers to the painted and heated enamel pieces made by the artisans in Canton, using the white

porcelain pieces produced in the Town of Jingde, China. Manufactured to meet the aesthetic values of the Westerners, they are mostly for export. The painted enamel art works are the crystallization of Sino-West cultural exchanges as they possess both the characteristics of the traditional Chinese art of colour painting and the artistic essence from the European countries and America. From the 16th to the 18th centuries, nobles and upper class people in the European countries and America took great pride in having a set of tableware decorated with their coats of arms or crests, as they serve as a symbol of authority and glory. Armorial porcelain can be divided into several categories according to their themes. There are, for instance, ceramics featuring in their prominent parts coats of arms or heraldic designs of celebrities, of capital cities, companies, and even army units. According to records, during the 18th century, China exported 600,000 armorial porcelain pieces to the European markets, and as many as 300 European families ordered armorial porcelain products from China. This Canton painted enamel armorial jar with cover (Fig 7), rhombus in shape, is 7.5 cm in height and 55 cm in diameter. The whole jar, coupled with an oval knob, is decorated with a delicate but simple European style flower design. The lower middle part of the cover is engraved with a shield-shaped coat of arms, with the letters “HUSNM” on it. The crest part of coat of arms is ornamented with a sea-bound barquentine, the main part is composed of five colours: red, green, yellow, blue and white. The upper part is decorated with a cross pattern, and the lower part an anchor, guarded by two lions, each holding a sceptre. The motto on the ribbon is “HUSNM”, in which “H” stands for the initial of the buyer, “US” stands for the country of the buyer, “NM” stands for the type of insurance. Therefore, it can be assumed that that piece is a ceramic product made in Canton, ordered by the Lloyd Business Corporation in the United States.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Chinese silk, porcelain, tea and a dazzling line of unimaginably beautiful arts and crafts were steadily exported to the European countries and the United States, creating an upsurge of fashion known as “Chinoiserie” in the high society in those countries. The 18th century is an important period of development for the Rococo artistic style, which pursues an artistic concept of exquisiteness, delicateness, and elegance. “Chinoiserie” shares much in common

with the Rococo art in that they both emphasize details, exquisiteness, and elegance. It can thus be said that the Rococo artistic style provided the foundation for the increasing popularity of “Chinoiserie” and the introduction of “Chinoiserie” in turn promoted the diversification and prosperity of the Rococo art. They constituted an extraordinary flower in the history of art in the process when the Chinese art works encountered their European counterparts and made progress with them side by side in the same period of history.

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