

An enamel revolution: China and the world

Rose pinks, delicate mauves, primrose yellows, cerulean blues — all used to paint exquisite flowers, psychedelic butterflies and astonishing dragons! This revolution in colour use was driven by the cutting-edge technical innovation of painted enamel. The technique evolved dynamically through exchanges between China and Europe.

The painted enamel technique first arrived in China in the late 1600s, when Catholic missionaries presented enamelled objects as diplomatic gifts. Chinese craftspeople refined the technique at the imperial court and the port city of Canton (modern-day Guangzhou). They created a hybrid, highly sought-after luxury product for European and other Asian markets.

Artistic exchange and the trade of luxury goods between China, Europe, and West and South Asia dates back centuries. From the early 1700s into the 1900s, the transfer and adaptation of painted enamels from Europe marked a major development in Chinese art. Chinese artisans adapted a technology originally developed in Europe. They imported ingredients from Europe and mixed them with ground glass. This created opaque enamels that could be blended to make many more shades, transforming the palette of art objects across half the globe.

Continuing the legacy of creative exchange, this display was developed in partnership with the Art Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Making painted enamel objects on copper

STEP 1: Prepare the body by pressing or hammering a sheet of copper into the required shape. Smooth and clean the surfaces.

STEP 2: Coat the body with a base layer of enamel, usually white. The white enamel is made opaque (non-transparent) when mixed with arsenic.

STEP 3: Fuse the base enamel to the surface of the object in a muffle kiln, where an inner chamber (the ‘muffle’) protects the delicate enamel from direct contact with the fire.

STEP 4: Sketch the design using a dark-coloured enamel. The vessel might need to be passed to artists specialising in different types of decoration.

STEP 5: Make the coloured enamels by mixing ground glass with metal oxides, such as cobalt for blue, and blend into a paste using water or oil. Paint the coloured enamels over the base enamel and build up in layers.

STEP 6: Fire the vessel again to fuse the enamels onto the surface in a thin glassy layer. The lower temperature of the muffle kiln prevents any loss of colour.

***West to East: Painted enamel arrives in China**

Painted enamel on metal developed in northern Europe from the 1300s. Limoges in France emerged as a leading centre. By the mid-1600s, production shifted from large religious panels to small secular objects like this popular style of two-handled bowl. Portable enamelled objects like this were offered as gifts to Chinese emperors from the late 1600s. A grisaille (monochrome) image of Cupid riding a lion is signed '•I•L•' by Jacques Laudin, whose family dominated production in Limoges during this period. Chinese artisans later adopted the European grisaille technique to copy European engravings onto porcelain for Chinese and export markets.

1. Two-handled bowl

Jacques Laudin I (about 1627–1695)

Limoges, 1650–1695

Copper, painted enamel, gold

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Frank McClean, 1904, M.51-1904

Painted enamel in France

The technique of applying enamel pigments onto copper and firing them to create luminous, durable images was perfected in Limoges in the 1500s. Jean Court contributed dynamically to this thriving tradition. The religious objects made by his workshop, such as this plate, were renowned for their vibrant blue, green and russet colours. By the 1600s and 1700s, enamellers working in Paris specialised in detailed miniature painting on luxury items such as watch cases and snuff boxes made for a fashionable elite.

2. Plate, with a biblical scene depicting the Triumph of Joseph

Jehan or Jean Court, called Vigier I (died 1592) and Jean Court, called Vigier II (about 1575–1631/5)

Limoges, about 1575–1600

Copper, painted enamel, gold

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Louis Colville Gray Clarke, 1960, received 1961, M.114-1961

3. Pocket watch, with a painted enamel dial depicting the Embarkation of Theagenes and Chariclea

Baltazar Martinot (1636–1714); painted enamel unsigned

Paris, about 1650

Gold alloys, silver, steel, blued steel, brass, glass, painted enamel on gold

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Frank Gray Smart, 1913, M/P.9 & A-1913

Painted enamel in Germany and England

Nuremberg in Germany became a hub for painted enamel in the 1400s, with early works designed for religious use. As tastes changed in the 1600s and 1700s, pastoral figures, portraits and ornamental motifs became more popular with Europeans. This German-made snuff box

and English Bilston combined snuff box-cane handle represent cheaper versions of luxury items produced locally to serve a larger market.

4. Snuff box depicting a shepherdess and pastoral lovers

Germany (possibly Berlin or Dresden), about 1769

Copper, painted enamel, gold

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Given by P.C. Manuk & Miss C.D. Coles through the National Art-Collections Fund, 1948, M.14-1948

5. Combined snuff box-cane handle, with miniatures

Bilston (Staffordshire), England, about 1750–1775

Copper, painted enamel, gold

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Louis Colville Gray Clarke, 1960, received 1961, M.101-1961

***Experimenting with painted enamel in China**

Silver makes an excellent base for enamel. It withstands repeated firings, enhances the brightness of colours, and expands at a similar rate to enamel glass, reducing the risk of cracking. The imperial court of Emperor Kangxi (reigned 1662–1722) encouraged Chinese artisans to test painted enamel on silver, along with less intrinsically valuable materials including copper and glass. Painted enamels on silver are rare because the precious metal was often melted down and used as currency, so artisans had limited opportunity to employ it decoratively.

1. Shell-shaped snuff box with floral design of lilies, roses and forget-me-nots

China, 1750–1800

Silver, painted enamel

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Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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Gift of Chengxuntang

藏品編號 2018.0010

Scallop of snuff

The outside of this snuff box uses a popular design: the grooves of a European scallop shell overlaid with a floral arrangement on copper. Inside, a yellow gourd, roses, hollyhocks and butterflies form an animated composition. The shell motif was central to European design during the mid-1700s and appeared frequently on Chinese export porcelains.

2. Shell-shaped snuff box with floral design of lilies, roses and forget-me-nots

China, 1770–1800

Copper, painted enamel

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藏品編號 2022.0101

Grand glasswork

European glass reached China before the arrival of the German missionary Kilian Stumpf (1655–1720), who helped establish the imperial glass workshop in 1696. Adapting painted enamel decoration to glass posed a major technical challenge, requiring artisans to fuse enamel onto the surface without melting the rest of the glass. These snuff bottles, bearing the mark Guyue Xuan (Ancient Moon Pavilion), show off the intricate and delicate decorative effects that could be achieved through this innovative technique.

3. Snuff bottle with landscape and figures

China, 1736–1795

Glass, painted enamel

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Reginald Radcliffe Cory, 1936, O.101 & A-1936

4. Snuff bottle with two painted quails symbolising peace

China, 1736–1795

Glass, painted enamel

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Reginald Radcliffe Cory, 1936, O.215 & A-1936



Base of snuff bottle showing Ancient Moon Pavilion mark

Copper bottomed

Since the late 1500s, artists have favoured copper as a base for painted enamel because it is relatively affordable, durable and able to withstand repeated firings. This copper tableware from the late 1700s features peonies against an iron-red background. Similar designs had also appeared on porcelain during the reign of Emperor Yongzheng (1723–1735). It's possible makers worked from the same reference designs when creating imperial objects in both enamel and porcelain.

5. Plate with peony designs

China, 1770–1800

Copper, painted enamel

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藏品編號 2023.0070

6. Large plate with peony designs

China, 1770–1800

Copper, painted enamel

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7. Bowl with peony designs

China, 1770–1800

Copper, painted enamel

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Peonies on porcelain

Vessels made of porcelain had to be fired and glazed before coloured enamels could be added to their surfaces. Bold iron-red, green and blue coloured enamels reflect Emperor Yongzheng's preferred palette. A mark on the base indicates that the bowl was made by order of the Emperor by artisans at the imperial kilns in Jingdezhen.

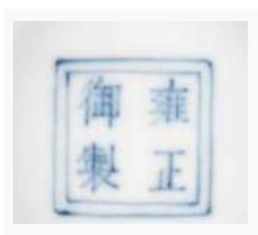
8. Bowl decorated with peonies and chrysanthemums

China, 1723–1735

Porcelain, painted enamel

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Gabor Cossa, 1991, C.15-1991



Mark on base of bowl

***Colour innovation: Pink and mix**

Chinese artisans refined European painted enamel technology during the 1720s. They learned how to mix pigments so colour could be blended, considerably expanding the available colour range. New greens were created, yet artists rarely chose these variants as backgrounds for painted enamel decoration, instead preferring colours like white, sapphire blue or yellow. The choice of green enamel here likely reflects a broader cultural interest in naturalism. Artisans crafted pieces inspired by local scenery and flora and fauna, especially from the Lingnan region of southern China around Guangdong.

1. Plate with flower, fruit, and butterfly designs in the shape of a lotus leaf

China, 1770–1830

Copper, painted enamel

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A thousand colours for a thousand flowers

Famille rose (pink family) refers to a style of enamel decoration named after its dominant pink colour. This new palette of mixable opaque enamels was developed in China through assimilation of European technology during the 1720s. Pink is conspicuous in the bowl's millefleurs (one thousand flowers) pattern, which Chinese artisans imitated in imperial workshops during Emperor Kangxi's reign (1662–1722). The pattern was later renamed 'Ten Thousand Flowers Blooming with Good Wishes' to give it a meaning associated with good fortune for Chinese audiences. The plate's many-petalled flowers show off how colour could now be varied in tone.

2. Bowl with floral decoration

China, 1736–1795

Porcelain, painted enamel

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Henry Scipio Reitlinger, 1950; transferred from the Reitlinger Trust, 1991, C.682-1991

3. Plate decorated with three large peonies

China, 1736–1795

Porcelain, painted enamel

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Henry Scipio Reitlinger, 1950; transferred from the Reitlinger Trust, 1991, C.685-1991

Constrained colour

This dish shows the limited range of enamel colours available before Chinese artisans developed a wider palette in the 1720s. It uses largely transparent, mineral-based enamel

pigments, especially green, developing earlier Ming dynasty five-colour wares (wucan). The colours are separated by bold outlines rather than blended because the pigments could not yet be mixed. This style became known as famille verte (green family).

4. Saucer-shaped dish with lady in a garden

China, 1662–1722

Porcelain, painted enamel

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Reginald Radcliffe Cory, 1936, OC.12-1936

Lotus libation

These cups with stem-shaped handles attached through holes in the base reference the bitong, an ancient drinking vessel in the form of a lotus leaf. Qing artisans demonstrate their ingenuity by adapting the earlier form and exchanging lotus leaves for lotus flowers. Their painting of the overlapping petals highlights the new pink enamel colours and the tonal gradations that were now possible.

5. Pair of drinking cups in the form of lotus flowers

China, 1770–1830

Copper, painted enamel

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Reinterpreting relief

Basse-taille (low-cut) was a European metalworking technique in which patterns were engraved at different depths before translucent coloured enamel was applied to the recesses. Here, Chinese artisans used silver rather than the usual copper base. Canton craftsmen combined basse-taille with painted enamel to create colourful, tactile objects for the imperial court and European export markets.

6. Enamel jar with ice-plum pattern

China, 1750–1800

Silver, basse-taille enamel, painted enamel

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藏品編號 2023.0064

***Colour innovation: Silver foil**

This impressive copper vase is one of a pair designed to stand on either side of a doorway. To make a vessel like this, artisans first carved into the copper in low relief using a technique called basse-taille (French for 'low-cut'). They then added a reflective layer of silver foil

between the engraved copper base and the enamel surface to enhance the object's luminosity and colour.

1. One of a pair of large vases with scenes of family life

China, 1850–1900

Copper, basse-taille enamel, painted enamel

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藏品編號 2017.0011

Glistening goblet

Chinese artisans modelled this square-seated, bell-shaped cup on the European 'Medici vase' design produced by the Sèvres porcelain factory during the early 1700s. The form itself was inspired by a Roman marble vase in the Medici collections. Engraved floral motifs use the basse-taille technique, silver foil shimmering through the navy-blue enamel background and overlaid with sapphire-blue enamel.

2. Enamel cup on a square seat

China, 1770–1830

Copper, basse-taille enamel, painted enamel, silver foil, gold

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藏品編號 2018.0013

***Classical Chinese design: Beaker vases**

These beaker vases take their shape from the ancient bronze gu (see the nearby example), used to hold wine during religious ceremonies. Although inspired by these earlier wine vessels, the function of beaker vases evolved over time. From the 1630s, such vases were used for decorative flower arrangements that were especially popular in European interiors.

1. Pair of beaker vases with interlocking flower and fruit designs

China, 1770–1830

Copper, painted enamel

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Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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藏品編號 2018.0148

Going back to gu

This ancient bronze wine container, known as a gu, has a distinctive shape. Such vessels were important in early Chinese religious and court life. People used them to offer ritual wine to ancestors and deities. The abstract animal masks, or taotie, decorating the surface are a standard feature of ancient bronzes like this.

2. Wine vessel (Gu)

China, 1600–1046 BCE

Cast bronze

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by E. Maurice B. Ingram, 1941, O.2-1941

Reinterpreting the beaker shape

Chinese artisans were masters at adapting traditional forms for new markets. These beaker vases reinterpret much earlier forms with subtle variations of shape, introducing vibrant colours and intricate surface decoration. Both surfaces are richly embellished with stylised floral scrolls and lotus blossoms. The porcelain vase with red background also incorporates a band of geometric ‘meander’, or maze-like, motifs around its middle, a design that first appeared on bronzes as far back as the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BCE).

3. Beaker vase with lotus blossoms and meander motif

China, 1662–1722

Porcelain, painted enamel

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Henry Scipio Reitlinger, 1950, transferred from the Reitlinger Trust, 1991, C.656-1991

4. Beaker vase with interlocking lotus sprays and banana leaf designs

China, 1770–1800

Copper, painted enamel

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藏品編號 2023.0029

*Classical Chinese design: Repeating the curve

By the early 1700s, Chinese craftsmen were producing enormous objects for display in palaces and Buddhist temples. The shape and character of this vase is inspired by a type of ancient bronze wine container called a zun. Zun shapes vary, with ancient examples sometimes taking the form of animals, including elephants. Xiàng (elephant) sounds like xiáng (lucky), so elephants came to symbolise prosperity and stability. The elephant-head handles on this vase reference these early animal shapes. By the Qing dynasty, the zun’s original purpose had been forgotten and vessels like this one were mainly decorative.

1. Elephant-handled zun vase with flowers, fruits and insects

China, 1770–1830

Copper, painted enamel

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藏品編號 2024.0144

Classic shape for waste

These small jars, known as zha dou (spittoons), have been used for centuries in China to collect table waste such as tea dregs and food scraps. In Europe, where they were used when chewing tobacco, they were known as cuspidors, derived from the Portuguese word for ‘one who spits’. The globular body and trumpet-shaped neck of these vessels can be traced to earlier metal examples from the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Though functional, imperial court zha dou were often made from expensive materials like jade.

2. Pair of spittoons (zha dou) with landscapes and Europeans in framed panels

China, 1770–1800

Copper, painted enamel

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Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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藏品編號 2021.0076

3. Pair of spittoons (zha dou)

China, 1736–1795

Jade, nephrite

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Cecil E. Byas, 1938, O.19 A & B-1938

Classical container

The bulging shape of this bronze wine container (fang hu) evolved from earlier rounded forms. It would have been used in ritual offerings to ancestors and deities. The name fang, meaning ‘square’ or ‘four-sided’, highlights this change. Abstract animal masks, or taotie, hold movable ring-shaped handles on either side.

4. Wine vessel (fang hu)

China, 400–300 BCE

Cast bronze

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Rosemary Righter, 2026, M.8-2026

Bogus baluster

This vase draws inspiration from ancient bronze prototypes like the nearby fang hu vessel. It adapts the bulging form into a flattened, more rectangular shape. The vase was made during the later Republic period (1911–1949), although it appears older. The porcelain body is painted in the famille rose (pink family) enamels characteristic of an earlier period, and it even bears a false mark of Emperor Qianlong (reigned 1736–1795).

5. Rectangular baluster vase

China, 1911–1949

Porcelain, painted enamel

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Henry Scipio Reitlinger, 1950, transferred from the Reitlinger Trust, 1991, C.679A-1991

The global market: East to West

‘I have bought some china here (which was brought by the last East India ships that came in) of a very particular sort; its greatest merit is being entirely new... a service for tea and chocolate, with a basin and ewer. They are of metal, enamelled inside and out with china of all colours.’

British Ambassador Philip Dormer Stanhope to Henrietta Howard, The Hague, 1728

This letter captures the sense of excitement felt by Europeans encountering imported Chinese enamelled metalware for the first time. With its thriving export industry, the city of Canton (modern-day Guangzhou) served as China’s principal trading port to Europe, housing 13 separate Hongs or warehouses, one for each European trading partner. These were the only locations in China where trading could legally take place during a season that ran from October to February.

Artisans created a wide range of enamelled porcelain and metalware in workshops. They often worked from foreign examples, and exported items not just to Europe but also to countries along the same trade routes, such as India and Siam (modern-day Thailand).

*Come dine with me: Fashionable fusion

By the 1700s, Chinese art and design had become a source of fascination across Europe. Chinese craftsmen adapted objects for export that catered to a European-imagined Chinese aesthetic. Large quantities of tableware were commissioned by wealthy clients in Europe. Here, European elements are superimposed onto Chinese lidded bowls which were likely used for serving soup in Europe. The bowls depict figures from ancient Roman mythology, including the courtship of Vertumnus and Pomona. This image has been traced to a 1732 engraving by French artist Edmé Jaurat reproducing a painting by his brother, Étienne.

1. Pair of lidded bowls and saucers with figures from mythology in framed panels

China, 1750

Copper, painted enamel

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藏品編號 2023.0057

Packing a punch

This bowl is painted with Chinese figures in vibrant famille-rose (pink family) enamels. It sits within an ornate gilt-bronze mount, probably custom-made for it in France. The pedestal foot and angular handles reflect European neoclassical taste, while its fine casting gives it extra prestige. The hybridity of this piece was typical of Canton exports.

2. Mounted punch bowl with figures

China, 1736–1795

Porcelain, painted enamel, bronze and gold (mount)

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Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

沐文堂惠贈

Gift of Muwen Tang

藏品編號 2015.0001

Souper swirls

This bowl, probably made for serving soup at European dining tables, combines swirl patterns and floral motifs along with distinctive S-shaped handles. The handles were inspired by earlier painted enamel metal cups produced in Limoges, France. The handle design was first adapted for Chinese export porcelain to Europe, before being reproduced on metal objects also made in China destined for export back to Europe.

3. Covered bowl with S-shaped handles

China, 1700–1750

Copper, painted enamel

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Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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藏品編號 2020.0025

***Come dine with me: Morning and evening**

The ‘ice-plum’ pattern is a traditional Chinese motif featuring blossoming plum branches set against a crackle-patterned background of thawing winter ice. It symbolises endurance, renewal and the coming of spring. Commissioned sets of tableware specially suited to European tastes were known as *Chine de commande*. These objects were made in shapes based on European models or decorated with European subjects or coats of arms. Here, Chinese artisans applied a distinctly Chinese motif to a European breakfast set popular in France, including a covered butter dish and egg cups with saucers.

1. Breakfast set with ice-plum pattern

China, 1770–1830

Copper, painted enamel

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藏品編號 2021.0071

Dragon dazzler

Adorned with traditional Chinese decorative motifs and designed to impress, this elaborate candlestick holder was made for the European market. The open lotus flower shape at the top collected dripping wax, while three moulded dragon-shaped legs held up the stand. The newly developed softer colours complete the decoration, enabling blending and shading of the enamels.

2. Candlestick in the form of three dragons supporting a lotus

China, 1750–1800

Copper, painted enamel

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藏品編號 2023.0083

*Come dine with me: Keeping things hot

This soup tureen was created as an extravagant centrepiece for a European dining table, using the goose's long neck as its lid handle. There was no tradition in China of using tureens to serve soup, so the base is actually too shallow to be very useful. It was probably made from a drawing or model brought to Canton by European merchants to guide local potters. Fine detail is given to individual feathers, and the edges of each wing are defined by flashes of gold.

1. Tureen in the shape of a goose

China, 1736–1795

Porcelain, painted enamel, gold

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Cecil E. Byas, 1938, OC.71.2 & A-1938

Special commission

This cistern, used for serving hot liquids, may have been brought to Europe and decorated there. An almost identical example was owned by William Fitzhugh (1757–1803), an East India Company agent based in Canton. This company was established to trade with South Asia and later China, sometimes controlling the region through military force. One of the vignettes reproduces an engraving of West Gate, Canterbury, by British artist Samuel Middiman (1750–1831).

2. Table cistern decorated in a European style

China, 1736–1795

Porcelain, painted enamel

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Dr Charles Lucas, 1939, OC.7-1939

***Canton Enamel for Asia: India and West Asia**

Painted enamel wares were produced in Canton for export to places located on the trade routes to Europe, including India. They often reproduced designs from foreign prototypes, drawings and prints unfamiliar to Chinese artisans. This ewer combines Chinese decorative motifs, including the lotus and banana leaves on the base and neck. Its shape, handle and oval foot are inspired by Islamic brassware. It probably formed part of a hand-washing set that would have included matching basins. Such vessels were widely used in Iran and India for washing before meals or prayer.

1. Ewer with floral patterns

China, 1750–1800

Copper, painted enamel

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Box set

The design of this container is inspired by traditional South Asian paan dan (paan holders). Chewing paan, an aromatic mix of betel leaf, areca nut, lime and spices, was a popular court custom, especially in India. Paan dans were often ornate and made of brass, copper or silver. Decorative boxes like this octagonal one may have reached other cultures through gift-giving and diplomacy.

2. Octagonal plate and box with floral patterns in framed panels

China, 1770–1830

Copper, painted enamel

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Mixing it up

This bowl blends Chinese motifs such as interlocking lotus sprays with curved ogees, or arches, and teardrop shapes popular in South and West Asia. The flowering trees inside the ogees are based on a decorative motif popular in Safavid Iran, Ottoman Turkey and Mughal India. This piece was probably made by Chinese artisans for the Indian market.

3. Openwork bowl with floral patterns

China, 1770–1830

Copper, painted enamel

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藏品編號 2023.0004

Musk melon

Melon-shaped containers probably originated in Japan in the 1500s, where artisans produced black lacquer boxes with gold decoration and a metal buckle for export to the Netherlands. Indian craftsmen later adapted the form in metal, and Qing artisans did so in gold lacquer. This painted enamel example was made for export to India, where elites of the Mughal court used such boxes to store musk, believed to protect against sickness and poison.

4. Melon-shaped box with floral designs

China, 1750–1800

Copper, painted enamel

香港中文大學文物館藏

Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

莊貴侖先生惠贈向姚進莊教授和許曉東教授致敬

Gift of Mr Quincy Chuang Kwei Lun in honour of Prof. Josh Yiu and Prof. Xu Xiaodong

藏品編號 2023.0084

*Canton enamel for Asia: At home and away

This hot pot would have been used for communal dining. It is decorated using a particular collection of Chinese motifs that suggest it was made for the domestic market. Scenes of daily life are painted onto the four sides: a boatman, an elderly man crossing a bridge, a boy sweeping and a farmer with a hoe. They are combined with symbols of good fortune. These include interlocking wan characters, a traditional symbol of eternity and prosperity, as well as bats for luck, kui phoenixes for harmony, and lotus flowers for purity.

1. Hot pot with landscapes in framed panels on brocade backgrounds

China, 1770–1830

Copper, painted enamel

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藏品編號 2023.0063

Thai style, made in China

Benjarong porcelain is a richly decorated Thai ceramic with multicoloured painted enamel designs. The name ‘benjarong’ comes from Sanskrit-derived Thai words meaning ‘five colours’.

These are traditionally white, black, red, yellow and green, although additional colours are also often used. Benjarong ware developed in Siam (modern-day Thailand), particularly during the Ayutthaya period (1300s–1700s). Because Siam didn't have the kiln technology to create fine porcelain, the royal court commissioned Chinese artisans at the imperial kilns in Jingdezhen (the porcelain capital of China) to reproduce designs provided by Thai artists.

2. Benjarong bowl

China, 1800–1900

Porcelain, painted enamel

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Given by Prof. David McMullen, 2008, C.14-2008

3. Benjarong bowl

China, 1800–1900

Porcelain, painted enamel

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Given by Ivor Evans, 1928, C.16-1928

Made for sharing

Sweetmeat dishes such as this one were used to serve sugary treats like candied fruits. Popular across East and West Asia as well as in Europe, the luxury status of sugar made them objects of prestige. The teardrop shape of the dishes imitates the Persian boteh, or Paisley motif, which was introduced to China earlier through trade and appears on both export and domestic pieces.

4. Sweetmeat set with flower, butterfly and scholars' rock designs

China, 1750–1800

Copper, painted enamel

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Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

鍾棋偉先生惠贈以紀念許曉東教授

Gift of Mr Anthony K. W. Cheung in memory of Prof. Xu Xiaodong

藏品編號 2024.0138

***From snuff box to snuff bottle: Taking shape**

In China from the Qing dynasty onwards, elite men and women habitually inhaled powdered tobacco, or snuff. They used snuff bottles, usually accompanied by snuff saucers (or dishes), sometimes crafted to create matching sets. Saucers provided a surface for crushing small lumps of snuff. They offered a hygienic and refined way to take small pinches, rather than using the back of the hand. This example is shaped like a grape leaf, its yellowed tip suggesting frost damage. The central vein was deliberately left unpainted to make it stand out, the surface further enlivened with flowers and a long-horned beetle.

1. Leaf-shaped snuff saucer with flower and long-horned beetle design

China, 1750

Copper, painted enamel

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藏品編號 2023.0066

A pinch of snuff

After 1492, Spain and Portugal started importing tobacco from the Americas. It was initially valued for its medicinal properties. In the 1600s and 1700s, inhaling powdered tobacco – snuff – became the height of fashion for European nobles. Snuff-taking was introduced to the Chinese court by European missionaries, becoming popular among the elite during the 1700s and 1800s.

2. Dr Rumney's Brown Snuff

Wilsons & Co. (Sharrow) Ltd, Sheffield, Yorkshire, manufacturing snuff since 1740

Powdered tobacco

Saucer with style

This snuff saucer takes the shape of a four-lobed begonia flower, a traditional Chinese motif associated with femininity and romance that was popular at the Qing court. A coating of white enamel provides a luminous background for the poppies painted on the front. The reverse features four interlocking floral sprays and the imperial mark of Emperor Qianlong (reigned 1736–1795).

3. Four-lobed snuff saucer with poppy designs

China, 1750

Copper, painted enamel

香港中文大學文物館藏

Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

莊貴侖先生惠贈向姚進莊教授和許曉東教授致敬

Gift of Mr Quincy Chuang Kwei Lun in honour of Prof. Josh Yiu and Prof. Xu Xiaodong

藏品編號 2023.0065



Base of saucer showing floral design and imperial mark

Boxes of delight

Snuff-taking had become a fashionable habit among European elites by the 1600s and 1700s. Ornate enamelled snuff boxes signalled wealth and status. At Bilston in England, cheaper versions were made for a local market. This oval one features a painted enamel portrait that may have been copied from an engraving. Chinese artisans adapted European designs, producing both boxes and, more commonly, bottles. Inside the lid of this small round box, the Chinese enamel painter has included a European-style figure.

4. Snuff box decorated with a female portrait and flower sprigs

Bilston (Staffordshire), England, 1770–1800

Copper, painted enamel, metal, gold

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Louis Colville Gray Clarke, 1960, received 1961, M.91-1961

5. Snuff box decorated with scenes of children being schooled

China, 1750–1800

Porcelain, painted enamel, metal

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藏品編號 2023.0041

Hanging around

Imperial archives record that snuff bottles were kept in pouches and hung at the waist. Here the pouch and bottle are combined. With its flattened, rounded body, short, narrow neck and small domed stopper, the shape of the bottle deliberately recalls a pouch. Loops at the neck show it could be worn as a richly decorated jewel, with the dragons' pale colours standing in stark contrast to the dark background.

6. Pouch-shaped snuff bottle with two dragons

China, 1723–1735

Copper, painted enamel

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藏品編號 2023.0027

*From snuff box to snuff bottle: Copper, porcelain and glass

This perfume bottle has a gilt-metal rim mount and a removable stopper attached by a chain. Such a design ensured the perfume was well preserved, and its shape was later adapted for

Chinese snuff bottles. Bottles were a more reliable way to store snuff in China's humid climate. European-style boxes could allow the powder to become damp.

1. Perfume bottle

Bilston (Staffordshire), England, 1750–1800

Copper, painted enamel, metal, gold

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Given by Mrs W. D. Dickson, 1948, M.4-1949

Copper showstoppers

Chinese snuff bottles were made for both domestic and export markets in a variety of materials, including enamelled copper, porcelain, jade and glass. Forms ranged from square and rectangular to oval and bombé (spherical). Decoration also varied widely and could include coats of arms, flowers or animals from Chinese mythology. Many bottles contained a tiny spoon attached to the stopper from which the snuff was snorted.

2. Snuff bottle with design of European figures in a landscape

China, 1760–1880

Copper, painted enamel; stopper with integral spoon of ivory

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Charles Brinsley Marlay, 1912, MAR.O.263 & A-1912

3. Snuff bottle with design of pink and green dragons

China, 1800–1900

Copper, painted enamel

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Lady Jenkinson, 1961, O.30 & A-1961

S'nuff for two

Porcelain was the material most commonly used for Chinese snuff bottles. In Canton, enamel artisans decorated porcelain from the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen, as well as copper wares. Porcelain's versatility allowed craftsmen to create forms with raised decoration. On the circular bottle, these include squirrels symbolising fertility and a lattice of traditional square-holed coins representing prosperity. The double bottle pairs imagery on one side with text on the other, reproducing the imperial poem of Qianlong, which describes 'spring rain' and 'red blossom'.

4. Snuff bottle, double bottle form

China, 1736–1795

Porcelain, painted enamel

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Reginald Radcliffe Cory, 1936, O.222 & A & B-1936

5. Snuff bottle with design of European figures

China, 1770–1820

Porcelain, painted enamel, gold

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge
Bequeathed by Reginald Radcliffe Cory, 1936, O.162-1936

Classy glass

The base of this glass snuff bottle bears the mark Guyue Xuan (Ancient Moon Pavilion), associated with a hall in the imperial palace. However, scholars have recently challenged the assumption that it was made in a workshop at the imperial court. Instead, objects bearing this mark were probably produced in a private Peking (modern-day Beijing) glass workshop and simply made to look royal.

6. Snuff bottle with flowers and birds

China, 1800–1900

Glass, painted enamel

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Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

北山堂惠贈

Gift of Bei Shan Tang

藏品編號 1998.0009

***Ritual refreshment**

Tea drinking had a long history in China before it was introduced to Europe through Portuguese trade in the 1500s. Chinese-made tea wares for European markets became important markers of wealth, taste and social status. Once part of a tea service, this copper-enamel teapot combines a Chinese shape with a blend of Chinese and European decorative elements. A woman, wearing the high ‘fontange’ hairstyle fashionable in Europe during the early 1700s, sits within a distinctively Chinese landscape.

1. Teapot with indented corners and Europeans in framed panels

China, 1700–1730

Copper, painted enamel

香港中文大學文物館藏

Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

隱名氏惠贈

Gift of Anonymous Donor

藏品編號 2023.0003

Put the kettle on

Tea-drinkers used kettles, such as this example with its stand and heater, to add hot water to teapots. This one depicts the story of a secret love affair between a young scholar and the daughter of a high-ranking Tang court official. Chinese craftsmen modelled kettles on English

silver prototypes made around 1720 and produced them for export throughout the century. Kettles and heaters were highly sought after – on 7 October 1766, directors of the Dutch East India Company in Amsterdam ordered 100 from Chinese workshops.

2. Kettle with Europeans in landscapes

China, 1700–1730

Copper, painted enamel

香港中文大學文物館藏

Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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Gift of Mr Quincy Chuang Kwei Lun in honour of Prof. Josh Yiu and Prof. Xu Xiaodong

藏品編號 2023.0055

3. Kettle, heater and stand depicting the Romance of the Western Chamber

China, 1770–1800

Copper, painted enamel

香港中文大學文物館藏

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Squaring up

Square forms in cup design are rare in Chinese ceramics but appear more often in Canton export enamels. Such sets were likely inspired by Ottoman metal coffee cups and saucers. A 1645 Dutch East India Company record notes that drinking from such cups was ‘nowadays a habit among the Turks’. During the 1600s, drinking strong Turkish coffee spread to Europe. Similar in size to modern espresso cups, small single-handled cups became popular in Britain and France.

4. Rectangular cup with indented corners, depicting Europeans in framed panels

China, 1700–1730

Copper, painted enamel

香港中文大學文物館藏

Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

承訓堂惠贈

Gift of Chengxuntang

藏品編號 2018.0009

5. Rectangular saucer with indented corners, depicting Europeans in a framed panel

China, 1700–1800

Copper, painted enamel

香港中文大學文物館藏

Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

承訓堂惠贈

Gift of Chengxuntang

藏品編號 2018.0008

Timeless tray

Tea drinking became popular across Europe as a fashionable social ritual. The ownership of a special tray for the teapot, cups and tea caddy, from which hostesses would serve tea, became an important symbol of prestige among the upper classes. This rectangular example depicts Taoism's Eight Immortals, personifications of prosperity and longevity.

6. Tray decorated with the Eight Immortals

China, 1750

Copper, painted enamel

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藏品編號 2019.0046

*At teatime: Caddies, cups and teapots

The double-headed eagle wearing a crown was the emblem of the Romanov dynasty in imperial Russia, added to silks and gold and silver wares produced in the Kremlin workshops during the 1600s. It is therefore possible that canisters like these, for storing tea, were made in China for the Russian market. Other possible destinations further afield included Spanish colonies in Mexico, the Philippines and Macau. Missionaries of the Order of Saint Augustine controlled these areas and had been permitted to use the crowned double-headed eagle from the Habsburg coat of arms as a symbol of authority during the 1600s.

1. Two tea caddies with a double-headed eagle design

China, 1770–1800

Copper, painted enamel

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Tea for two

Small cups, typically five to eight centimetres high, were used in Europe for tea, coffee or hot chocolate and appear frequently in paintings of social gatherings. They were usually paired with deep saucers like these, reflecting a custom of drinking from the saucer rather than the cup. As most Chinese export cups lacked handles, hot liquids were poured into saucers to cool. The practice persisted among the upper classes even after cups with handles were introduced.

2. Cup and saucer with floral designs in framed panels

China, 1700–1730

Copper, painted enamel

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3. Cup and saucer with floral designs in framed panels on brocade backgrounds

China, 1700–1730

Copper, painted enamel

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藏品編號 2023.0122

Patterned porcelain

This porcelain teapot features three leaf-shaped panels depicting cockerels standing in front of peonies. The pairing symbolised good fortune in Chinese culture, expressing wishes for success and prosperity. Repeating geometric designs, or ‘diaper’ patterning, decorate the background and lid. The cup and accompanying deep saucer, which was used for cooling hot drinks, combine diaper patterning with a central grouping of symbolic flowers. The peony and the fo shou, meaning ‘Buddha’s hand’, a distinctive finger-like citrus fruit, represent good fortune.

4. Teapot with diaper patterning

China, 1723–1735

Porcelain, painted enamel

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Leonard Daneham Cunliffe, 1938, OC.45 & A-1938

5. Teacup and saucer with diaper patterning

China, 1723–1735

Porcelain, painted enamel, gold

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Alfred Valentine Valentine-Richards, 1933, C.47 & A-1933

Theatrical teapots

Mandarin ducks and lotuses were common motifs in Chinese culture but were not usually represented in three dimensions. Here they have been adapted as teapots for export to Europe, perhaps intended for decorative display rather than practical use. Both demonstrate the vibrant colour, naturalistic detail and sculptural forms characteristic of painted enamelware shipped

from Canton during this period. Wildly colourful and whimsical pieces like these would have been conversation pieces in European homes that signalled taste, refinement and an awareness of the wider world.

6. Teapot in the form of a mandarin duck

China, 1736–1795

Porcelain, painted enamel

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Cecil E. Byas, 1938, OC.70.1 & A-1938

7. Teapot and stand in the form of lotus flower and leaf

China, 1736–1795

Porcelain, painted enamel

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Charles Brinsley Marlay, 1912, MAR.C.99 & A & B-1912

Costly casket

Tea caskets typically contained several smaller canisters for storing the valuable commodities of the tea ritual: usually sugar and both green and black teas. Internal partitions or ridges kept the canisters secure. The holes visible at the front and back of the container indicate where hinges would have been attached, along with a lock to safeguard these expensive and highly prized goods.

8. Tea casket with floral sprays in framed panels on brocade backgrounds

China, 1750

Copper, painted enamel

香港中文大學文物館藏

Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

鍾棋偉先生惠贈

Gift of Mr Anthony K. W. Cheung

藏品編號 2018.0125

***Coats of Arms**

Wealthy European families sometimes ordered goods from China decorated with their own coats of arms. These luxury objects commemorated changes in status or important events. Dinner, tea and toilet services emblazoned with a family's coat of arms became the ultimate status symbol among European aristocrats. This plate bears the arms of Cardinal Silvio Valenti Gonzaga (1690–1756), a prominent art collector from the ruling family of Mantua. It was created to celebrate his appointment as cardinal in 1738. The plate's symmetrical geometric design reflects European styles, but the dog-like lion reveals Chinese artisans' unfamiliarity with European heraldry.

1. Canton painted enamel armorial plate decorated with birds and peonies

China, about 1738

Copper, painted enamel

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Portrait of Cardinal Silvio Valenti Gonzaga, Pierre Subleyras (1699-1749), about 1745, oil on canvas, Galleria Cini, Rome, PC 402

Mug of magnitude

This large cylindrical mug is decorated with the conjoined arms of the English Bisse and Beele families, possibly marking an alliance. Chinese artisans often copied coats of arms from bookplates provided by their European clients. Other surviving plates and dishes bearing the same armorial design indicate that this mug was probably part of a larger dinner service.

2. Armorial porcelain mug

China, 1736–1795

Porcelain, painted enamel, gold

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Given by Mrs James Bedford, 1911, C.5-1911

Superior service

William Lethieullier of Beckenham, Kent, was a prominent Huguenot merchant. Following his marriage to his second wife, Mary Salkeld, on 9 July 1719, he commissioned this dish from Chinese workshops as part of a dinner service decorated with their coats of arms. The design combines the Lethieullier arms, featuring three parrots' heads and a parrot crest, with the silver fretwork on green of the Salkeld family of Cumberland.

3. Armorial dish

China, 1723–1735

Porcelain, painted enamel, gold

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Given by Jane Sandeman, 2009, C.13-2009

***Design examples**

Enamelled copperwares such as these often look very similar to Chinese porcelain (examples to the right). Both were enamelled in Canton during the same period, possibly even within the same workshops. However, copper presented greater technical challenges because it conducts heat more easily. During firing, copper expands and contracts more than porcelain, increasing the risk of damage to the enamelled surface. Another difference is the base. Porcelain dishes with ruby-coloured backs are typically undecorated. Copper examples often feature a central motif, such as fruits or flowers, adding another decorative element to the vessel.

1. Pair of Canton enamel plates

China, 1723–1735

Copper, painted enamel, gold

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Bequeathed by Cecil E. Byas, 1938, OC.74 A & B-1938

Porcelain pairing

Between 1730 and 1750, many enamellers' workshops relocated from Jingdezhen to the walled port city of Canton. To meet growing demand, blank or partially decorated porcelains were often sent from Jingdezhen to Canton for painting. Porcelain enamel decorators probably shared designs and motifs with copper-enamel artisans, including the recurring 'mother with children' theme. This can be seen on both these porcelain examples and the copper-enamel plates nearby.

2. Canton enamel plate

China, 1723–1735

Porcelain, painted enamel, gold

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Given by Reginald Radcliffe Cory, 1927, C.5-1927

3. Canton enamel plate

China, 1723–1735

Porcelain, painted enamel, gold

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Given by Reginald Radcliffe Cory, 1927, C.6-1927

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