

Imperial Connoisseurship: The Personal Delights of the Emperor

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By Marian Ang | Apr 4, 2023

Ahead of *In His Majesty's Palm: Exquisite Imperial Porcelain from the Alan Chuang Collection*, we take a look at the stories behind some of the smallest and rarest Chinese works of art.

Palm-sized objects made for the Emperor and the Imperial court showed the private side of the men who sat on the dragon throne. Whilst imperial household objects, robes and diplomatic gifts were commonly decorated with dragons and other grand symbols of majestic power, these small objects bore the imprints of personal tastes and dreams.

Often delicately potted, exactly shaped and carefully finished, the imperial potters endeavoured to create something distinctly different especially for the imperial household. Designed to be handled and examined at close quarters in private by the most educated and cultivated eyes in the kingdom, there was no room for error. With their sublime imagery and poetry, they offered intimate moments of pleasure amidst the grueling imperial schedule packed with courtly audiences with his advisers, ministers and envoys, ceremonial meetings and administrative affairs that kept the Emperor busy from dawn to dusk.

Compared to other formats of Chinese painting, such as hanging scrolls or hand scrolls, which required the assistance of servants to handle the work, or other Chinese works of art which were created for display, these exquisitely painted objects of beauty were designed to be interacted with – to be held in the palm of the hand, to be appreciated by touch as well as sight. They are a welcome reminder of the men behind the imperial myths.

Objects of Devotion: A Yongzheng Doucai 'Chicken Cup'



A fine and exquisite doucai 'chicken' cup, Mark and period of Yongzheng. | Estimate 6,000,000-8,000,000 HKD

Chicken cups were first created during the Chenghua Emperor's reign. Some scholars believe that it was an act of devotion for his mother, a woman who appreciated small objects and valued simple design, whilst others believe it was an act of devotion to the Chenghua Emperor's favourite concubine Wan, who was born in the same year of his mother and raised him since he was a child. Intended as wine vessels, their charming scenes of small chickens feeding in a garden conveys a core Chinese tenet: that nurturing the young is essential to continuing the family line. At first glance unassuming and modest, these palm-sized cups were intended for individual appreciation and handling rather than for display. A connoisseur's glance and touch were required to appreciate the full magnificence of their craftsmanship. The extremely fine, tactile white paste of late Chenghua wares lent it an unmatched sensuous feel over Jingdezhen porcelains of any other period, whilst its refined body and glaze recipes produced a clear and distinctive soft sheen. Painted in a free and uncontrived manner, the Chenghua chicken cup brought an unprecedented softness and elegance to Chinese ceramics.

Praised by Ming and Qing emperors and other discerning literati collectors, Chenghua 'chicken cups' acquired a legendary aura and became cherished as the pinnacle of fine Chinese porcelain. They inspired many homages, for example this exquisitely painted Yongzheng cup, which closely follows the shape of the famous Chenghua originals but was painted with a free interpretation of the 15th-century design.

Objects of Meditation: A Kangxi *Famille-Verte* 'Floating Petal' Cup



A fine and extremely rare famille-verte 'floating petal' cup,
Mark and period of Kangxi | Estimate 2,000,000-3,000,000
HKD

Only 8.3 cm in diameter, this cup was exquisitely painted with four delicate petals floating in the water. The theme of fallen flowers on flowing water (*luohua liushui*) is one of the most vivid images in Chinese poetry, and is evocative of the transience of beauty and youth. The great Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai (701-762), a wanderer, writer of romantic poetry and expert swordsman who was influenced by Taoist philosophy, wrote:

*You ask why I dwell in the green hills.
Smiling. I reply not, heart in peace.
When fallen flowers are borne away by the flowing water,
Methinks I am elsewhere than in the world of men.*

– Li Po, *Dialogue in the Mountains*

The “fallen flowers on flowing water” theme is known to have existed as early as the Tianshun period (1457-65) of the Ming dynasty. By the Chenghua period silk brocade with this design had become a popular dress material for court ladies, and through its popularity, the design came into the repertoire of Chenghua *doucai* porcelain.

The fine and thinly potted body emulates that of the famed Cheunghua ‘chicken’ cups, with the smooth tactile glaze and skillful application of green enamel and iron-red gradated washes. Characteristic of imperial porcelain made under the directorship of Superintendent Lang Tingji between 1705 and 1712, the design was undoubtedly intended to pay homage to the Chenghua reign. Demonstrating ideological and cultural continuities between the Qing dynasty and its predecessors, it also celebrated the artistic developments achieved at Jingdezhen in the early Qing dynasty.

Objects of Delight: A Set of Twelve Kangxi *Famille-Verte* ‘Month’ Cups



A fine and exceedingly rare set of twelve famille-verte ‘month’ cups, Marks and period of Kangxi | Estimate 60,000,000-80,000,000 HKD

Month cups depicting seasonal flowering plants and accompanied on the reverse by two-line Tang poetry appraising the values associated with these flowers are a classic design of the Kangxi period. Appreciated as some of the finest imperial Qing porcelain ware, some sources say these cups were probably used in imperial court events such as flower viewings or banquets, matching with the corresponding month.

Slight variations in size, colour, writing styles and marks between individual cups and different months suggest that such cups may not have been produced as sets of twelve, but instead issued consecutively as the year evolved, to be assembled at the end. Therefore, complete sets of month cups are exceedingly rare, with only a handful of sets existing outside of museum collections. To acquire a complete set of twelve ‘month’ cups is an ambitious mission, sometimes undertaken over decades, which only a few private collectors have ever completed with success. The best matched and the finest in terms of quality and condition in private hands, this pristine set of twelve ‘month’ cups was perhaps the first complete set to be recorded in the market when it was published by Edward T. Chow and Helen D. Ling in 1950. Assembled by Chow, it later entered the esteemed collections of Paul and Helen Bernat and T.T. Tsui, before being acquired by Alan Chuang.

About the Author

Marian Ang is a Hong Kong-based art writer and researcher, and a regular Sotheby's contributor.