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# From European Colour Pigments to Chinoiserie Images: Painted Enamel Ware and the Hybridization of Arts in the 18th Century Qing Court

*Bing Zhao*

Promoting the universality of techniques of the arts and sciences was the subtle, sophisticated approach used by European missionaries to impress and seduce the Chinese society and to obtain the favour of its various players, such as the emperor, courtiers, and provincial mandarins. This strategy was employed by European missionaries from the moment they arrived in China in the 16th century, whatever their country of origin or religious order. Since 1574, all missions to the 'East Indies' were overseen by the Portuguese archdiocese of Goa, making it the key hub of trade between China and Europe. In 1685 Louis XIV, king of France (r. 1643–1715), sent a group of French Jesuits to China with the objective to set up a French mission in the Manchu empire. Arriving in Beijing in 1688, these French Jesuits worked with stern determination to emancipate themselves from the patronage of the Portuguese Jesuits. To this end, their main strategy was to impress the superiority of the French arts and luxury industry upon the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662–1722) and the imperial family. In 1693, the Kangxi emperor granted the French Jesuits the right to found their own house, called Beitang, which became the first Christian church built within the imperial city. This church was strategically located, due to its proximity to the royal residences. In 1695 the Kangxi emperor placed in the French house Kilian Stumpf (1655–1720), a German Jesuit skilled in glassmaking.

A year later, an imperial glass workshop under the supervision of Stumpf was built in the Beitang's new annexe, giving the parish a second role as a centre of knowledge and enamel production. It may have been in the Beitang glass workshop that European-influenced enamelling techniques were developed. In fact, recent chemical-physical analyses have revealed that the opacification of Chinese cloisonné and painted enamels produced during the Kangxi period was achieved by adding arsenic to lead, a standard technique used by European glassmakers since the 17th century and previously unknown in China (see Philippe Colomban's article in this issue).

For his sixtieth birthday in 1716, the Kangxi emperor received from Canton a box of European colours for the production of enamels at court. This unusual gift is deeply meaningful. The Kangxi emperor was known for his curiosity for European science and for clocks, of which he had more than 2,000 in his personal collection. The Manchu monarch was not satisfied with simply enjoying the flattering and enticing goods from overseas; he was also interested in the materials and technical processes involved in their manufacture. In addition to European colour pigments, blocks of enamel and glass, oil of toluene, and tools were brought to the Kangxi court for the production of painted enamel, which took place in various imperial workshops: the French church Beitang, the Palace of Military



Fig. 1 Two piriform ewers and basin with Qianlong reign mark China; Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–95) Gold core, cloisonné, painted enamel, gilding, coral, turquoise, lapis lazuli; ewers h. 38 cm, basin h. 13 cm x d. 41 cm Chinese Museum, Château de Fontainebleau, France Image (c) RMN-Grand Palais (Château de Fontainebleau) / Gérard Blot

Prowess and the Palace of Mental Cultivation in the Forbidden City, and the summer palace of Jerol, in Chengde, located 256 kilometres from the capital. The emperor's taste for experimentation seems to have been contagious, for at least two of his sons also had enamel workshops in their own palaces within the Forbidden City in the early 18th century.

In 1684 Belgian Philippe Couplet (1623–93) arrived at Versailles in France with a request from the Kangxi emperor for French Jesuits with skills in art and science; Couplet visited the workshop of Louis Hubin (1628–1703), the ordinary enameller of the French king Louis XIV. Respectively in 1697 and in 1700, Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730) and Jean de Fontaney (1643–1710), two French Jesuits both sent back to France by the Kangxi emperor, presented Louis XIV with repeated imperial requests to send French skill enamellers to China.

The French glassmakers and enamellers who were sent to China in the early 18th century do not seem to have met the emperor's expectations, notably including Jean-Baptiste Gravereau (1690–1762) who worked at the court from 1719 to 1721. Meanwhile, competition emerged between French and Italian missionaries (from different orders) residing in China, the latter having identified the court's appreciation for the works of Parisian enamellers as the key to the favour given the French at the Chinese court. Matteo Ripa (1682–1746), a missionary of the papal

Propaganda Fide who arrived in 1710, and Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766), a Jesuit from Milan who arrived in 1715, actively collaborated with the artisans of the imperial enamel workshop. Later, in 1740, the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–95) appointed Gabriel Léonard de Broussard (1703–58) and Pierre Nicolas Le Chéron d'Incarville (1706–57) to head the glass workshop of the Yuanmingyuan. The tensions were thus rising again, even though none of them had worked on the production of enamel wares.

In 1721, the Kangxi emperor offered a series of Chinese painted enamel objects to the governor of Macao, the king of Portugal, and the tsar of Russia. None of these gifts have survived or, at least, have been identified as of today. However, the few dozen enamelled pieces produced during the Kangxi reign that survive are characterized by a certain ambivalence: while they use some European techniques and pigments, the shapes and main decorative repertoire of the finished products are resolutely Chinese in style. This is undoubtedly linked to the status of these objects as material expressions of Sino-Manchu imperial power, particularly in the context of diplomatic exchanges with the European courts. The message these objects were meant to convey was expressed by the Kangxi emperor himself on the occasion of these gifts: to let Europe know that his court was capable of producing very beautiful and sophisticated objects of a quality





Fig. 2 Detail view of a lobed cartouche on an ewer, showing a lady in the chinoiserie style  
China; Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–95)  
Cloisonné, painted enamel  
Chinese Museum, Château de Fontainebleau (F 1467 C.2 Aiguière)  
Image (c) RMN-Grand Palais (Château de Fontainebleau) / Gérard Blot

and technique equivalent or even superior to those produced in Europe. The appropriation of European painted-enamel techniques in the early 18th century was not a simple issue of technical advancement but rather a critical step in a larger cultural strategy to legitimize the Kangxi emperor's aspirations to be a universal monarch.

The different geopolitical context of the reign of the emperor Yongzheng (1723–35) brought forth a Sinicized appropriation of European painted-enamel techniques in the various imperial workshops, which can be illustrated by the successful local production of colours that were previously imported. On the enamelled wares produced during this period, Chinese style is almost ubiquitous, with a few rare exceptions of imitations that mirrored the gradual increase in European imports from the 1730s onwards. Nevertheless, until the mid-18th century, the volume of European imports remained very small compared to the demand. Unlike the movement of Asian goods brought to Europe, it is difficult to accurately measure the quantity of trade going from west to east in the 18th century. European goods do not appear in the official shipping manifests of the East India companies and are occasionally found in 'chest' inventories that were drawn up on board when a member of the crew died. Once in the port of

Canton, they were probably intended to be offered as gifts to gain favour with officers of the customs administration or to be sold in private dealings, directly to Chinese mandarins and merchants.

The fact that the majority of European goods imported into China were small objects is directly related to the private nature of trade with the Chinese markets. Among the European goods imported into China, there are about thirty varieties of enamelled objects. The most common are: scientific instruments (telescopes, binoculars, sundials, etc.), clocks, watches, music boxes, small boxes, medallions, automatons, snuffboxes, buttons for clothes, mirrors, knives, forks, crockery and utensils for hot drinks, and religious objects. These objects were made with ingenuity and finesse by European enamellers, jewellers, and other luxury artisans. This particular taste, no doubt quietly encouraged by European and Chinese merchants, attests to the impact in Asia of the exotic European culture of appearance, which sparked a consumer economy and a luxury industry, based on portable precious objects, that emerged first in France and then spread to other European countries.

From the middle of the 18th century, global trade between Europe and Asia intensified. The quality and quantity of European goods at the Qing court (1644–1911) was increasing, thanks to various acquisition strategies in which both Chinese and European merchants and administrations were involved. The arriving objects functioned as silent ambassadors of the European style and affected the imperial craftsmen's work. Given to the craftsmen to perform different tasks—for instance, to restore, to imitate, or to draw their designs on paper to record them as models—the objects were passed from workshop to workshop, from the court to the provinces. More interestingly, the Chinese court was especially fond of and intrigued by objects with European painted enamel. For example, European painted-enamel medallions, whether decorated with a figural image

or floral pattern, were reused for the production of daily objects and furniture like bottles, dishes, boxes, and mirrors or as decorative accessories like belts, jewellery sets, or hairpieces.

Among various forms of Euromania observable at the Qing court, which were the direct effect of the global commercial euphoria during the second half of the 18th century, the return of chinoiserie at the court offers one of the most fascinating phenomena. I will demonstrate this with two groups of objects. The first group consists of luxurious ewers made of solid gold, inlaid with precious stones and coral, further enhanced by elaborate dragon sculptures at the handle and spout, and sumptuously combined with the intricate and painstaking execution of cloisonné work and painted enamel (Fig. 1).

These ewers are characterized by the main painted-enamel cartouches, on two sides, which are Chinese and European hybrids in both style and

technique. The technical hybridization is reflected in the use of European cobalt pigment and the pointillist technique of painting, as demonstrated by the chemical-physical analysis performed on a few pieces kept at the Château de Fontainebleau (discussed in Philippe Colomban's article, in this issue). In the scenes of ladies and boys in domestic garden settings, such as one shown in Figure 2, several details, notably the volume and folds of a woman's belt, as well as the gesture of her hand touching her hair, suggest a connection with how Chinese women were represented in European art of the time. This particular iconography of chinoiserie is also visible on a glass snuff bottle with painted enamel bearing the imperial mark of Qianlong. The object is decorated with two images of Chinese women in a chinoiserie style, one with her hand on a wide belt and the other touching a straw hat, and two images of typical European landscapes (Fig. 3).

Similar chinoiserie can be found in Canton's copper and porcelain enamels produced for European markets. The available evidence points to Canton as one of the main channels that introduced the fashion for chinoiserie at the Qianlong court.



Fig. 3 Snuff bottle with figural images in chinoiserie style and European landscapes  
China; Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–95)  
Glass, painted enamel; h. 7 cm  
National Palace Museum, Taipei (Guci 017629)





Fig. 4 Piriform ewer with scene of a lady and boy in European style  
China; Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–95)  
Gold core, cloisonné, painted enamel; h. 18.8 cm  
Palace Museum, Beijing (Gu 11461)

In this first group of exceptional items, three shapes are recorded: four pieces of the piriform shape, two pieces of the cylindrical *duomu* shape, and one piece of the combined square-piriform shape. Three of the four piriform ewers are almost identical in shape, decoration, and dimensions (height 38 cm). Two of them are kept at the museum of the Château de Fontainebleau that holds the collection of Napoleon III and the empress Eugenie, while the third example is part of the collection of the Palace Museum in Beijing. The piriform ewer shape with a long narrow neck and round belly was likely inspired by Central Asian silver ewers, probably originating from Bactria, a Central Asian region that spans modern Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. First brought to China in the 7th century during the Tang dynasty (618–907), this shape enjoyed a revival

during the Yuan dynasty (1272–1368), in the second half of the 14th century, when it was added to the Chinese imperial visual culture and continued to be produced in various materials until the 19th century.

In the Islamic world, this shape, often paired with a basin, was found in the metalwork of Khorasan in northern Iran at the end of the 12th century. The ewer-and-basin set was subsequently introduced into Europe as an everyday toiletry luxury item and is included in Canton's repertoire of enamels

Fig. 5 *Duomu*-shape ewer  
China; Qing dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–95)  
Gold core, cloisonné, painted enamel, gilding, coral, turquoise, lapis lazuli; h. 29 cm  
Image courtesy of Sotheby's



Fig. 6 Detail view of *Celebrating Empress Dowager Chongqing's Eightieth Birthday*  
By Yao Wenhan (act. 1740s–70s), Zhou Ben (act. 1760s–70s), and Yi Lantai (act. 1748–86); 1771–72  
Ink and colour on silk  
The Palace Museum, Beijing (Gu 6541)

on porcelain and copper for the European and Islamic markets. The pair of ewers and the single basin currently kept at the Chinese Museum of the Château de Fontainebleau reveal the indirect influence of the 'Western seas' commands issued by the Chinese court via Canton. The term 'Western seas' must be understood in a broad geographical sense, associating in a single concept Europe and the Muslim world, especially India. In fact, from the 16th century onwards, Europeans took over the regional Southeast Asian trading networks (mainly maritime) that had long been shaped by multipartner interactions. The impact of these complex cultural, visual, and material exchanges is evident in another piriform ewer, this one smaller in size (Fig. 4). The same kind of scene, described as 'lady and child', can be found here on the central painted enamel medallions but in a totally European style. The patterns and colours of the cloisonné enamel work used for the ground reflect the Mughal influence.


The *duomu* cylindrical shape refers to a type of Tibetan vessel, made of wood with metal bands,


used for storing butter and for making the traditional buttered tea for Tibetan Buddhist ceremonies. One of these rare masterpieces, kept in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, is decorated with a painted enamel plaque representing Chinese women in chinoiserie style. Manufactured in precious materials and in a subtle combination of Chinese, Tibetan, and European cultures, these imperial vessels stand out as symbols of extraordinary sophistication, opulence, and luxury (Fig. 5). One ewer in a piriform shape and with chinoiserie decoration (height 38 cm), kept in the Palace Museum in Beijing, seems to be part of the furnishings of the Yongshougong (the Palace of Eternal Longevity) in the Forbidden City, a palace reserved for high-ranking women of the Qing court. A similar ewer is represented on the offering table on the scroll celebrating the dowager empress Chongqing's sixtieth birthday in 1773 (Fig. 6). All these clues indicate that these elaborately decorated vessels were not used in official rituals at the Qing court but rather were reserved for the use of the members of the imperial family.

The second group of objects consists of two copper-body painted-enamel jarlets housed in the National Palace Museum in Taipei. Both items share the same stylistic, dimensional, and technical characteristics. The only difference is their imperial mark, one bearing 'made in Kangxi reign' (Kangxi ) and the other bearing 'made in Qianlong reign' (Qianlong ) (Fig. 7). They were most probably produced at the same time, from 1760 through 1780. From a visual standpoint, they are clearly of chinoiserie style: the four central cartouches are outlined by rococo-style floral scrolls and depict landscapes. The flourish pattern and colour palette can be compared with Indian-produced textiles with composite Asian and European floral scrolls. During the 27-29 October 2021 conference of the program "The Circulation of Enameled Objects between France and China (mid 17<sup>th</sup>-mid 19<sup>th</sup> century): Technological, Cultural, and Diplomatic Interactions (2016-2021)", Yang Yong, the curator of the Department of Art Objects at the Palace Museum in Beijing, suggested that the jarlet bearing the Qianlong reign mark might have been manufactured in France during the same period as a teapot bearing the signature of the French enamellist Joseph Coteau (1740–1812). The latter teapot was made in France between 1775 and 1784, but decorated in a Chinese style following the model sent from Canton (see the article by Wang He in this issue). Before the hypothesis of a French-made jarlet can be confirmed by chemical-physical analysis and future archival research, it is interesting to note that both the iconography and the colour palette provide yet more visual evidence of the return of chinoiserie to the Qing court under the Qianlong emperor.

The two cases of chinoiserie respectively observable on imperial-workshop productions and on presumably French-made items impressively illustrate a remarkable similarity and exceptional connectivity between the French and Chinese courts during the period from 1760 to 1780. This was intimately linked to the individual initiative of Henri Bertin (1720–92), the state minister of King Louis XV. As a result of the 1763 dissolution of the French Jesuit mission in Beijing, Bertin actively promoted a strongly state-sponsored strategy of exchanges with China, towards which administrative, scientific,



Fig. 7 Jarlet with chinoiserie decoration in a rococo-style cartouche China;  dynasty, Qianlong period (1736–95), c. 1770–1780  
Copper core, painted enamel; h. 10.8 cm x d. 16.8 cm  
National Palace Museum, Taipei (Gufa 459)

religious, and commercial networks converged.  long time, the excessiveness, flashiness, and virtuosity of Qing courtly art was attributed to Manchu taste. In fact, Manchu taste can be seen as the apex of the gradually developing hybridity of imperial arts and techniques amid the global and regional exchanges of the 18th century. During this period, objects, styles and techniques originated from various foreign cultures—like the Japanese, Tibetan, and Mughal and European—enriched the material culture of the Qing court; Euromania was another aspect of this circumstance. In this context, the exchanges of enamelling techniques, ingredients, objects, and artisans represent a token, small but extremely interesting and instructive, of a period of exchanges and mutual influences which took by storm the entire Eurasian cultural area.

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