REVIEWS


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This book, The Glass of China, edited by Emily Byrne Curtis, with essays by Ricardo Joppert, Ma Wenkuan and Daphne Lange Rosenzweig, will be of interest to all those desiring to gain a deeper insight into the subject of glass in pre-modern China, especially glass of the Qing dynasty. It supplies a range of information about the characteristics of the development of glass in China from the Warring States (475-221 BC) to the Qing dynasty (1644-1911).

The first to the fifth parts are devoted to glass before the Qing dynasty. In the first part, ‘Form and Ritual in Chinese Glass’, Daphne Lange Rosenzweig suggests that links between Daoism and glass could be a fertile area for investigation, since glass so suitably expresses some of the underlying principles of Daoist philosophy. However, in the view of this reviewer, the author does not offer sufficient evidence to indicate such links. In fact, in Chinese ritual, people paid attention to the role of sacrificial vessels rather than their material composition. Therefore, sacrificial vessels could be made from bronze, ceramic or glass.

In the third part, ‘Glass Properties as Metaphors for Wisdom in China’, based on historical texts, Ricardo Joppert states that western glassmaking technology had been learned by the Chinese as early as the Qin dynasty. However, archaeological finds prove that the Chinese learned western glassmaking technology even earlier, during the Warring States period.

In the fifth part, ‘Poem of the Glass Bowl’, the author, Emily Byrne Curtis maintains that archaeological finds suggest that Roman glass vessels were imported by sea, which agrees with the evidence found in ancient writings. This claim is not entirely accurate. Glass vessels, products of the Eastern Mediterranean, have been found in the tomb of Feng Sufu 冯素弗 in Beipiao 北票 county, Liaoning province, as have four glass bowls with

1 Li Yaobo 黎瑶渤, “Liaoning Beipiaoxian Xiguanyingzi Beiyao Feng Sufu mu” 辽宁县北票县西官营子北燕冯素弗墓 (Beiyao Tomb of Feng Sufu in Xiguanyingzi, Beipiao County, Liaoning), Wenwu 文物 (Relics) No. 3, 1973, p. 6.
applied decoration, unearthed from the cemetery of the Feng clan in Jingxian 靖县, Hebei province.  

An Jiayao assigns the origin of these glass products to Roman workshops in the Mediterranean, and remarks that they most probably found their way over-land to north China.

In the remaining parts of the book, on the basis of a study of archival materials in China as well as missionary letters and documents, the author Emily Byrne Curtis describes some important characteristics of glass manufacture in the Qing dynasty. European glassware given by missionaries as gifts was greatly appreciated by the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662-1722), and may have prompted him to set up an Imperial Glass Workshop with the help of the missionaries at Canchikou 螞池口 (the location of a Christian church in Beijing). From then on, Jesuits played an important role in glass-making in the Imperial Glass Workshop, which was well stocked with talented Chinese artisans, who carried out carving and grinding work. Records indicate that during Kangxi’s reign the workshop produced enamel glass, aventurine glass, overlay or case glass and monochromatic glass.

As for enamel glass, Joseph de Moriac de Mailla, S. J. 冯秉正, sent a letter to Paris which included a reminder for the list of colours “needed for the enamel; which will be used for the painting”, and a plea for them to be sent as soon as possible. This makes it clear that at this time the workshop was dependent on foreign sources for the supply of enamel colours, and that techniques for making painted enamel ware in China were still to be perfected.

Aventurine glass (called jingxing 金星 by the Chinese) was a specialty of Venetian artisans and was introduced into the Imperial Workshop by missionaries.

Palace records indicate that two Guangzhou artisans, Cheng Xianggui 程向貴 and Zhou Jun 周俊 worked in the glassworks for at least seven years (1709-1715). Cheng is said to have made a set of twelve cups with floral pattern, having a colour described as “the blue of the sky after rain” (yuguo tianqian 雨過天晴), which were offered to the court in the forty-eighth year of Kangxi (1709). Zhou, in the fifty-fourth year (1715), fired a plain set of glass cups also in the “blue of the sky after rain”. It is well-known that originally “the blue of the sky after rain” describes a kind of porcelain glaze colour of the Song dynasty. Obviously, the Chinese artisans in the Imperial Workshop in the Kangxi period used this technology in glass manufacture.

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Based on Zhao Zhiqian’s 赵之谦 treatise on glass, it is known that glass overlays in diverse forms and motifs had already been made during Kangxi’s reign. Overlay or cased glass consists of two or more layers of different colours, with the outer layer usually carved on a wheel to reveal the lower or inside layer. Since the Song Dynasty (960-1279), it had been widespread in China to carve lacquer ware with diverse colour paint layers. This Chinese traditional technique found a new outlet with the introduction of overlay or cased glass.

An additional small point, there is a mistake on page 62. A glass brush washer is called shuixi 水洗, not cheng 咸. A brush washer serves for washing writing brushes, while cheng 咸 denoted a small container of water kept to hand for adding water when rubbing ink on an ink stone.

On the basis of the written materials available, it is reasonable to assume that obviously much glassware exhibited foreign characteristics during Kangxi’s reign, due to many techniques coming from Europe.

In the Yongzheng reign (1723-1735), with regard to enamel glass, the workshop was operating with native personnel only, yet remained totally dependent on foreign sources for the supply of enamel colours. Prince Yi presented nine newly made enamels in colours such as soft white, yellow-brown and muted yellow, and ordered that “the [foreign] colour material stored in the workshop should be used as samples; when the glass is being made, use these as standards”, and ordered Song Qige 宋七格 to go to the workshop and make three hundred jin 斤 of each colour. Afterwards, the palace sent some of the enamel colours created in the workshop to the superintendent of the Imperial porcelain factory at Jingdezhen 景德镇, and Chinese painted enamel porcelain progressed to a new level of excellence.

In 1724, Yongzheng directed the glass workshop to inscribe reign marks on its products. This regulation continued to be followed by his successors. In 1728, he established a glass workshop (bolizuo 玻璃作) as part of the Liusuo 六所 at the imperial gardens of Yuanming Yuan 圆明园. Meanwhile, the atelier established at Canchikou in 1696 does not seem to have stopped production because of this new workshop. With regard to the debate over bolizuo 玻璃作 and bolichang 玻璃厂, Emily Byrne Curtis agrees with Peter Lam that bolizuo was used to denote the glass workshop at the Yuanming Yuan, and bolichang referred to the original atelier at Canchikou. Some Chinese scholars consider that Yongzheng moved the imperial workshop (bolichang 玻璃厂) into the Yuanming Yuan, then called it bolizuo 玻璃作.

When compared to the glass of the Kangxi period with its foreign characteristics, the Yongzheng examples exhibit traditional Chinese patterns and aesthetics. Yongzheng craftsmen may not have added anything new to glassmaking techniques, but they paved the way for glassmaking to reach a zenith during Qianlong’s reign, and set a standard for their successors to follow.
During the reign of the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-1795), especially from the fifth to the twenty-fourth years, glassmaking thrived. At this time, d’Incarville worked at the Imperial Workshop, striving to produce various types of glass. He sent a series of letters to his sister and asked her to direct his brother d’Epreville to obtain the secrets of the glass works from the good lady Massoet. D’Incarville concluded his letter of 6 October 1742 by asking his sister if she could find from the glassworks in Rouen how to make aventurine. It indicates that the Imperial glassworks still needed the help of missionaries. After d’Incarville’s death in 1757, and Brossard’s in 1758, glassmaking at the Imperial Workshop entered a period of decline. There were no longer any missionaries at court who were skilled in the techniques of glassblowing.

That said, glassware of a wide range of shapes and a dazzling variety and combination of colours with obvious Chinese characteristics were made during Qianlong’s reign, with enamelled glassware especially noted for its refinement.

While glassmaking declined in the Imperial Workshop, the techniques were learnt by Chinese artisans and spread to Guangdong and Zibo. For instance, throughout the eighteenth century, tribute items of Guangzhou glassware were sent to Beijing on a fairly regular basis.

In short, the author of this book draws on the archival materials in China and the letters and the documents of the missionaries carefully and offers an important study of the glass of the Qing dynasty, highlighting some of the special characteristics of glass development during this period.