THE BLEMA AND H. ARNOLD STEINBERG COLLECTION OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE ART

The history of Chinese art spans more than 5,000 years and covers an array of materials. However, of all the materials used by Chinese artists and artisans over the millennia, clay was the most versatile. Ceramics were being crafted in China as early as the Neolithic period. Innovation and experimentation thereafter led to the development of ceramic technologies with new types of kilns and glazes, making these ceramics the most appreciated and desired of objects not only in China, but also around the world.

Many of these ceramics were transported along the Silk Road, a network of trade routes connecting China with Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe. The eastern point of the overland Silk Road was Chang'an (present-day Xi'an in northwestern China). It was the most cosmopolitan city in the world during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), with foreign merchants, horses and camel caravans beginning or ending their Silk Road journeys there. During this time, Chinese ceramic production flourished and was influenced by exotic designs from Persia and Central Asia.

Vestiges of the Silk Road are most noticeable in Chinese ceramics made as funerary wares that reflected the daily lives and status of the deceased. These wares were made specifically for placement in tombs. A pair of Tang dynasty terracotta horses in the Steinberg Collection (cat. no. 28) is a rare example of finely moulded and modelled steeds with movable saddles. These horses embody the spirit of the times, both in their fine craftsmanship and in capturing the essence of Silk Road cultural exchanges.

Alongside Silk Road merchants were Buddhist monks making the journey between India and China. Their influence in China was profound, both spiritually and artistically. In particular, Buddhist iconography from Gandhara (present-day Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan) inspired Central Asian and Chinese Buddhist art. This style is often referred to as Greco-Roman Buddhist art, due to its strong ties to classical sculpture as a result of Alexander the Great's conquest of the Gandharan region. A sublime example of a terracotta Gandharan Buddha in a gesture of discourse sets the tone for the collection as a whole (cat. no. 29), emanating wisdom, patience, and otherworldly beauty.

Of all the dynasties in China's long history, the Song (960–1279) is always associated with beauty. Song women were portrayed as delicate

figures and the arts reflected the elegance of the period. During this time, kilns were spread across the country, accounting for 75% of all kilns established throughout Chinese history.[1]

Ceramics from this era are refined, with subtle-toned glazes. Song wares were revered in classical Chinese literature and were said to resemble jade, silver, snow or ice. The collection includes three such examples.

The pear-shaped green glazed *yaozhou* vase (cat. no. 1), the pair of icy blue-toned *qingbai* lobed saucers with a touch of crackle glaze (cat. no. 2), and the pair of snow white *dingyao* saucers (cat. no. 3), are testimony to their poetic praise.

During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), and in particular during the reign of the emperors Yongzheng (1722–35) and Qianlong (1735–96), the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen in Jiangxi Province reached their apogee. Although these kilns were active during the earlier Song and subsequent Yuan (1279–1368) and Ming dynasties (1368–1644), the Qing emperors took a personal interest in overseeing production from the Jingdezhen kilns, demanding innovation and high quality.

Beyond being decorative and utilitarian, the court found political, diplomatic and ceremonial uses for ceramics.[2] In addition, the demand from domestic and export markets for ceramic objects was huge, rendering the output at Jingdezhen and satellite kilns staggering.

Amidst the annual commission of thousands of ceramics produced at the Jingdezhen kilns for the Qing court, a renewed fascination with Chinese antiquities and Song ceramics arose. This in turn led to the creation of Song-inspired glazes for new shapes and designs. Even ancient bronze vessels from the Shang period (16th–11th century BCE) were refashioned in clay and covered with glazes imitating their metal patina. A fine example in the collection of this type of archaism is the tea-dust glaze *gu* vessel (cat. no. 25).

The impetus for starting the collection was the Steinbergs' visit to the National Palace Museum in Taipei, which houses the world's finest collection of imperial Chinese ceramics. Subsequent visits to the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, as well as The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, followed by an in-depth trip to China, led to a deeper understanding and appreciation of ceramics and works of art.

The simplicity and elegance of the monochrome wares that garnered the affection of collectors and connoisseurs in the past also resonated with the Steinbergs. In particular, the minimalist lines and intense colours of

the monochrome glazes complemented their taste for modern and contemporary art.

Over the course of 15 years, they assembled a collection of 25 monochromes from the Song and Qing dynasties. Each piece was rigorously researched and tenderly selected, taking into consideration beauty, condition and authenticity.

The reign marks found on the Qing monochromes (cat. no. 11) indicate the reign during which each object was made and that it was "official ware" destined for the imperial court.[3] Over time, imperial pieces found their way to the art market and into the collections of connoisseurs and museums, thereby enhancing their provenance. The Steinberg Collection is fortunate to include porcelains with Qing reign marks, many of which came from esteemed sources, including the Sir Joseph Hotung, Sir Anthony T. Hall, Goldschlager, Hellner and Falk collections, to name a few.

Along the way, a 17th-century *huanghuali* table (cat. no. 26) and a Qing dynasty *huanghuali* brush pot (cat. no. 27) with inscribed calligraphy were acquired. *Huanghuali* was a rare wood reserved for high-quality furniture and works of art. Both the table and brush pot were objects that a literatus living during the Qing would have had in his home. The table may have originally displayed monochrome wares and the brush pot would have contained an assortment of brushes for calligraphy and ink painting.

Viewed individually or in various combinations, all the pieces in the collection are true works of art, their pure forms and innate beauty inspiring and elevating the spirit of everyone who has the opportunity to admire them.

France Pepper
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The Blema and H. Arnold Steinberg Collection of Traditional Chinese Art

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[1] He Li, *Chinese Ceramics: A New Comprehensive Survey from the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco* (New York: Rizzoli, 1996), 133.
[2] Ibid., 266.
[3] Rosemary E. Scott, *For The Imperial Court: Qing Porcelain from the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art* (New York: The American Federation of Arts, 1997), 23.