

Director's Foreword

*'For innovative hexagonal and square shapes,
Lobed and lotus forms,
They are modelled by freehand –
Never thrown on the potter's wheel.
Then carved, incised or moulded designs are added
But the joints and facets are unsightly!'*

The potter's craft and social customs of Jingdezhen were recorded in the form of lyrics by Gong Shi, who worked as a clerk at the Fouliang County Office during the Jiaqing period (1796-1820) for four years. He was a native of Nanchang, Jiangxi province. The lyrics he composed numbered a hundred, but only sixty 'Songs of Jingdezhen's potteries' were extant and published in the 3rd year of the Daoguang reign (1823). The one cited above, translated very literally, is a precise description of the technical process of producing a carved porcelain object. To this song Gong made a remark: 'The body of a piece of carved porcelain is made by joining slabs together. They are cut squarely from a lump of clay that has been wrapped around with a cloth and flattened by stamping.' Ceramics from Jingdezhen were either thrown on the potter's wheel or freehand modelled, forming two distinct streams of products. It is said in *Nanyao biji*, compiled in the Qianlong period (1736-1795), 'Human figures, birds and animals and all sorts of delicate articles require carving and scraping. There is meticulous division of labour and artisans are made responsible for preparing the clay, doing the carving, glazing, etc.' Among the twenty-three workshops of the Imperial Factory at Jingdezhen was one 'Carving Workshop'. Statistics of the Republic period recorded 240 households with a total of 891 potters and artisans working in the field of carved porcelain at Jingdezhen in 1937. They named their guild the Hexing She. In a word, carved porcelain enjoyed prosperity from the high Qing through the Republic period.

The potter's craft in Jingdezhen of the Jiangxi province had a long history. Common **decorative** techniques like openwork carving, hand modelling, appliqué as well as carving, incising and moulding had been used since the Song period (960-1279). Nonetheless, the Song taste was principally classical and carved porcelain pieces were far less popular when compared with monochromes. Blue and white wares emerged since the Yuan period (1271-1368) and porcelain with painted designs became the mainstream for the following centuries. The development of colour glazes and enamels, with a wide range of hues and palettes,

reached their height in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) periods, attested by the refined polychromes of the time. As a result of the irreversible decline of the Qing sovereignty from the 19th century onwards, all kilns including the Imperial Factory experienced successive slumps. On the contrary, carved porcelain bloomed with objects imitating in porcelain of other material such as ivory, bamboo and stones, producing in quantity objects for the scholar's studio. With original designs and quality workmanship, potters made reputations for themselves and their studios, to name but a few, Chen Guozhi, Wang Bingrong and Li Yucheng. Jingdezhen potters were adept in the traditionally used methods and, on top of that, they introduced new decorative techniques, namely trailed slips, slipped out-lines, fill-in slips, slip drippings, joint-slabs, appliqués, appliqués of moulded elements, inlays, appliqués of hand-modelled elements, scrapings, and also free-chains. In practice, several techniques were combined to achieve the desired result. Many carved porcelain pieces from the late 19th to early 20th centuries are definitely works of art.

In this exhibition *Elegance in Relief: Carved Porcelain from Jingdezhen of the 19th to Early 20th Centuries*, the Art Museum presents 166 pieces of carved porcelain. The exhibits, made in the period from the Qianlong reign (1736-1795) to the 1950's, are extremely diverse, comprising brushpots, inkstick stands, brush rests, paperweights, vermilion boxes, inkstones, brush washers, waterpots, vases, bottles, snuff bottles, lamps, incense holders, *ruyi* sceptres, arm rests, belt ornaments, table screens, plaques and many the like. Together they give a comprehensive overview of Jingdezhen carved porcelain that developed fully in the two centuries.

First and foremost, I wish to express my deep gratitude to Mr. and Mrs. Tony Miller. They first initiated the project and have been actively involved in the planning and staging of the exhibition. Their prompt act of entrusting very soon their collection to the Art Museum facilitated the research in the early stage and the subsequent compilation of the exhibition catalogue. Mr. Miller has a sound knowledge of carved porcelain and has contributed a scholarly article for the catalogue. He is also the main author of the catalogue entries. In addition, he has helped with the raising of funds for all the expenses related to the exhibition. (Names of all donors and sponsors are printed separately in this catalogue to mark our gratitude to their generosity.) We are greatly indebted to Mr. Humphrey K. F. Hui for his enthusiastic support to the Art Museum over the years. A part of the exhibits are selected from Humphrey's private collection and he wrote the remaining portion of the descriptive entries. In addition to the collections of Mr. and Mrs. Miller and of Mr. Hui, a small portion of the exhibits are selected from the permanent collection of

the Art Museum and the rest are borrowed from private and public collections both locally and worldwide. I wish to record my thanks and appreciation to the prestigious museums, including the Baur Collections in Geneva, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, also in London, and the Shanghai Museum in shipping their treasures to us, or allowing us to use published images of their carved porcelain objects. Special thanks must be reserved for the many lenders who have entrusted their priceless pieces with us, including Mr. Anthony K. W. Cheung, Mr. [Anthony J. Hardy](#), [Le petit pavillon d'élégance](#), Upland Meadow Lodge, No Way Studio, Fuyun Xuan, Helen and Peter Lin, Zhuyuetang and Cheng Xun Tang, all in Hong Kong; Mr. Raymond Lam and Mrs. Margaret Polak, both in the United States of America; Mr. and Mrs. S. E. Alleyne in Britain; and Mr. Denis S. K. Low in Singapore. Without their support and contribution this exhibition would never have been possible.

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