

## **Art and Imitation in China**

### **OCS Exhibition 13 October to 17 December 2006**

#### **The Outline of the Exhibition**

The main objective of this exhibition is to explore “imitation” in its many forms. Confucianism, both philosophically and politically, dominated Chinese society from the Zhou Dynasty (1100-256BC). This was to have important consequences in Chinese art over the next 2,500 years. Paying tribute to the past became a recurring theme in later periods of history. This was the most important foundation for imitation in Chinese art.

Imitation in the form of copying from other cultures appears early on from the later Han dynasty onwards when the Silk Road came under Chinese control. Buddhism first took root in China around the 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD. From then on, the process of adapting and borrowing from western cultures grew apace. Sassanian, Roman and Indian influences were to permeate both religious and secular arts. Aristocratic fashion and lifestyle played as much a role in the dictation of tastes as religious devotion. This reached an early apex in the Tang Dynasty (618-907AD).

In the second millennium of the Christian era, other foreign influences incorporated into Chinese aesthetics include Tibetan, Islamic and eventually, European forms and designs. Some of these movements were politically motivated, as in the case of Tibetan Buddhism where the emperors assiduously cultivated the high Lamas of Tibetan Buddhism and adopted the religion from the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) onwards.

By the time the European Jesuit priests became established at court as advisors to the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1662-1722), it was their knowledge of science and European aesthetics, rather than their religion, that he and the two following emperors exploited to produce novel and appealing works of art. The imperial fascination with fashionable European aesthetics ultimately affected sculpture, ceramics, metalwork and eventually, painting and architecture.

From the Song Dynasty (960-1279) onwards, the steady growth in diplomatic and trade relations with the countries of the Near East and Southeast Asia was to affect Chinese decorative arts in its motifs and forms as well. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Europe became an important trading partner, further diversifying the repertory of art works produced for export.

During the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), Archaism as a conscious movement became the cultural byword during the reign of the Emperor Huizong. This is often seen as a neo-Confucian campaign, instigated variously by artistic, religious and political motives. It was also an important moment in the history of Chinese archaeology, when the methodical study of early civilization became a discipline among the literati, led by the emperor himself. The fashion for reproducing the jades and bronzes of antiquity was a direct result of this intense interest.

Archaism in a more complex form, that of adapting shapes and designs from one medium to another, (for example, archaic jade forms now in ceramics or gold and silver in lacquer), became a challenge for Chinese craftsmen. This form of imitation of other media became particularly successful in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) as technological advances were made, and ever more challenging tasks were undertaken by enamellers and painters to produce *trompe l'oeil* as well as other effects on metalwork, ceramics and paintings.

Important tomes on the connoisseurship of Chinese paintings and antiquities appear from the Song Dynasty, and by the Yuan and Ming dynasties, collecting great relics of the past became a highly regarded hobby. Imitation in the form of forgery assumes historical importance especially in the Ming (1368-1643) and Qing dynasties with the burgeoning of the mercantile and official classes who aspired to great collections.

The last area of imitation to be explored in the exhibition relates to Contemporary Chinese art works, which in their more avant-garde forms refer constantly to Post-War art of Europe and the United States in idiom; but their most cogent messages address current Chinese issues. This form of imitation differs markedly from earlier forms of transcultural influences as art and politics are entwined for the first time, not at the instigation of Imperial or aristocratic patrons, but the artists themselves, in response to the rapid changes in the society and politics of their time.

### **Layout of the Exhibition**

At this early stage, before the final selection of works for the exhibition, the proposed layout of the sections in the exhibition is at best, academic, but is useful as a preliminary framework, which will be subject to revision in the light of the objects submitted.

1. The Confucian Ideal ( Early Jade and Bronzes)
2. Transcultural Influences
  - A. Religion and Politics (Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism and Islamic influences)  
e.g. a Gandharan Buddha and a related Chinese example; an Islamic copper basin and an early Ming blue and white related shape
  - B. Novelty and Elitism (foreign influences from early gold and silver in the post Han and Six Dynasties through to the Qing Dynasty)  
e.g. Near Eastern gold or silver and a Tang Dynasty related example; an 18<sup>th</sup> Century enamel box and a related Chinese example
  - C. Made in China (export art from Islamic to Western markets)  
e.g. Ceramic kendis made for export to Southeast Asia and Near Eastern markets
3. Archaism  
e.g. a Ming ge ware dish or washer imitating a Song example
4. Intra-Media Exchange (copying forms made originally in other media)  
e.g. a Song lacquer dish imitating a silver example
5. The Art of the Forger (a survey of the art of the forger to about 1930)
6. Art and Politics in Contemporary China.

### **Exhibits**

Works of art in all media from all periods relevant to the scenarios outlined above will be considered.

Depending on the availability of suitable works, the sections of the layout may change or modify towards a more meaningful illustration of the themes involved.