

Sensuous Surfaces

The Decorative Object in Early Modern China

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Introduction

Chinese decoration is among the most familiar of our contemporary exoticisms, oscillating between the rarefied and the tawdry: the 'Ming vase' and plastic Chinatown crockery. Although for much of the Western general public it has no real history – every example signifies 'China' – in fact the basic templates of Chinese decoration as it has penetrated the Western visual environment were a product of the period discussed in this book, *circa* 1570–1840. The long Western familiarity with Chinese decorative arts derives from the fact that during most of this period of almost three centuries, until around 1800, China was a dominant force in the global import–export trade for luxury handicrafts. Chinese decorative objects became an increasingly important part of the Western visual environment in the early seventeenth century, arriving as imported

Frontispiece: Illustration to *Jin ping mei* (*Prunus in a Golden Vase*): unidentified artist, *Jingji, Ximen's Son-in-Law, Flirts with Golden Lotus at the Time of the Lantern Festival*, Qing dynasty, late seventeenth century, album leaf, ink and colour on silk, 38.7 x 31.1 cm. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri.

Through an opening between two partition walls (one not shown) joined by a textile hanging, we see the rear section of a particularly deep main hall. The partition frame has a surface of gold-speckled lacquer. The centrally placed screen with its remounted album leaves and fans frames a free-standing display: an incense table bearing incense accoutrements that is lit by a standing lamp. The hanging lantern in the front section of the hall (see illus. 224) would have been matched by a second on the left, out of the frame.

luxuries and souvenirs, to be transformed later into antiques. In the eighteenth century the presence of decoration in the West was further expanded by the fanciful evocations of China known as chinoiserie, to this day a staple of interior decoration, and by the absorption of certain Chinese decorative ideas into European decorative arts.

What China exported, however, was often rather different from the decorative arts that were produced for use in late Ming (*circa* 1570–1644) and early to mid-Qing (1644–*circa* 1840) China itself, and it is the latter, domestic production that is the focus of this book. To be sure, a proportion of export products were indistinguishable from items that circulated within China, especially prior to the eighteenth century, and it cannot be denied that the whole range of ‘export-category’ decorative objects exported to the West, Japan, South and South-East Asia, and the Islamic world shared many of the same forms and surface treatments as domestic production. Still, without making any essentializing claim for the existence of a ‘Chinese taste’, it is fair to say that the field of inner-directed decoration, though overlapping with that of its outer-directed counterparts, differed overall. Parts I and II of this book will argue that individual objects made for consumers on Chinese soil conformed to evolving conventions governing the topographic configuration and sheer physical presence of surface. These conventions, transposed to the alternative context of export production, developed in directions that will not be explored here. Instead, Part III will show that, in Ming–Qing China, conventions of the individual object surface were tightly linked to a parallel set of unspoken rules of interior decoration governing the combination of object surfaces. Neither set of conventions can be fully understood without reference to the other.

Luxury decoration covered a vast range of artefacts and practices, but my interest is specifically in what the great seventeenth-century playwright, novelist and taste-maker Li Yu – an especially acute commentator with whom the reader will soon become familiar – called *wanhao zhi wu*, ‘pleasurable things’, whose original physical context was the elite residential interior.¹ Li Yu’s concept of ‘pleasurable things’ corresponds approximately to the modern Western notion of secular decorative arts, encompassing all the individual elements of interior decoration. Our topic is thus located in a space between the human body and the building where decoration, otherwise subordinated to human gesture or to architectural structure, constituted its own ephemeral environment by placing objects on display, even as they were used.

This tightly defined focus, so necessary to a coherent exploration of the role of surface in decoration, comes at the price of several otherwise regrettable exclusions. In the first place, the idea of ‘pleasurable things’ excludes the entirety of ritual decoration, whose inclusion would have

necessitated a larger and conceptually more capacious book. Buddhist and Daoist ceremonies could be sumptuous, from the robes of the clergy to the textile hangings and coverings that decorated temples. The decoration of formal palace halls was equally impressive, and, like religious decoration, was produced by the same artisans responsible for residential interiors.² Not surprisingly, many of the same conventions governing the configuration and materiality of surface were operative in both ritual and secular decoration. But there were also clear differences. Some had to do with the functions that objects had to fulfill and thus the physical forms and formats that they took: altars, for example, required a different shape of textile covering from reception hall tables. Other differences pertained to surface designs. In religious decoration the patternistic images tended to have a symbolic meaning that suited the ritual context; Buddhist textiles, for example, often employed lotus imagery in reference to *The Lotus Sutra* as the central text of Mahayanist Buddhism. In secular decoration, on the other hand, patterned surfaces made use of images that can be broadly described as auspicious, evoking prosperity, happiness, fertility and so on. Ritual decoration is excluded here in full awareness of the important role that ritual played in residential interiors. As numerous illustrations and paintings document, these spaces were regularly turned over to ritual use, on the occasions of festivals, marriages, deaths and sacrifices to ancestors. All these occasions led to a suspension of the normal rules of secular decoration, and led to the temporary creation of sacralized, temple-like spaces in the home. Had the subject of this book been the residential interior in all its aspects, such decorative transformations of residential space would have held an important place in the discussion.³

Moreover, even the narrower realm of secular residential decoration will receive only partial coverage here. With portable objects as the book's main subject, neither the decorative genres associated with the human bodies that moved through the rooms nor the decoration of the architectural envelope will come into the discussion except peripherally, despite their intrinsic interest. In the former direction, I shall pass over both clothes and body furniture (including fans, jewellery, toggles and snuff bottles). In the latter direction, I shall have little to say about the permanent decorative treatments of windows, doors, balustrades, pillars, ceilings and floors in their own right, referencing them only where they throw light on portable objects. The same considerations of coherence and focus lie behind the further omission of those forms of secular decoration associated with reading and writing that were not placed on display – the decorative elements of illustrated books, for example, or the sumptuous letter papers used for elegant correspondence. By focusing narrowly on the secular display objects associated with the residential interior, the

discussion loses in range but in exchange it gains in scope. The wager is that not only the approach but also many of the conclusions reached below about this area of Chinese decoration can, with appropriate modifications, be extended to all the other areas that I have left out.

A word also needs to be said about the place of antiques in this book. In residential interiors, early modern objects would often have been displayed in combination with antiques. As a general rule, the wealthier the owner the more likely antiques were to be part of interior decoration. It would be highly artificial, therefore, to attempt in Part III to reconstruct the principles underlying the overall landscapes of residential interiors without making any reference to the antiques that, by definition, are excluded from the discussion of the surfaces of early modern objects in Part II. Moreover, it would be difficult to do, since authors often chose to introduce general conventions of display through discussions of antiques, these being particularly prestigious objects. To the extent that this is a book about 'early modern' practices of decoration, however, and not about collecting, and given that it starts from the 'early modern' decorative object, little will be said here about antiques *per se*. Although their surfaces differed to some extent from those of modern objects, they would have been seen in much the same terms. Nor should it be forgotten that a significant proportion of the objects accepted as antiques in China from the late Ming onwards were in fact forgeries of recent manufacture that owed their appearance largely to the rules of 'modern' decoration. Antiques did, on the other hand, make one specific contribution to the surface configurations of the residential interior that we will have to take into account. The patina of age – the visible transformation of surface by use and damage – introduced a special kind of temporality into the room. The natural patina of found objects like rocks was much admired, but antiques brought patina into line with cultural history. Archaic vessels, excavated at various times, had long been collected. Their surfaces bore the traces both of contact with the earth while they were buried, and of the treatments of waxing and lacquering to which they had been subjected by previous owners. As the Jesuit Matteo Ricci noted of the Chinese collecting of archaic bronze vessels: 'they desire them with a certain particular corrosion'.⁴ The wide range of effects led connoisseurs to attempt rankings of beauty and desirability whose only relevance was to contemporary taste.⁵ By the seventeenth century the ranks of archaic bronzes had been expanded by the archaistic bronzes that had been produced since the Tang dynasty, and also by the bombé incense burners of the seventeenth century, which, thanks to their evocation of products of the imperial workshops of the fifteenth century, had their own prestige. The criterion of patina was also extended to other antique objects, among which carved objects in organic materials were the most important.

We live today in a world where the decorative arts have been replaced by design. The modern concept of design emerged as a by-product of mechanization; mechanization produced the designer, who took over responsibility for conception and execution from the artisan whom machines were increasingly making redundant. Design, as we use the term today (interior design, product design), is work that designers do. It has the specific characteristic that in its fully achieved form – the object that has been put into production – execution has been subordinated to conception. Mechanization, of course, was a very late development in the history of industrial production, initiated in late eighteenth-century Europe and then generalized in the nineteenth century. The industrial production of decorative objects had a long history, in China as elsewhere, and prior to mechanization was based on the division of artisanal labour. Although in an industrial setting execution was separated from conception, both were in the hands of artisans. In China, this held true for almost two thousand years, from the first industrial workshops under the Western Han dynasty until the seventeenth century. Even when the Ming dynasty court called on its resident artists to produce designs for porcelain vessels, the artists were not designers in the modern sense; rather, they were being drafted into the industrial process as high-level artisans. In the first half of the eighteenth century, however, a series of remarkable men were given responsibility for the production of decorative objects for the Qing court. These individuals took the control of artisanal production to such an extreme that they came close to being designers in the modern sense, despite the absence of mechanization. The difference in their situation, though, is that they pursued control in the interest, not of economic efficiency but of luxury, novelty and precision for their own sake as a demonstration of imperial power. In the end, even Qing court decoration was not design as we understand it today, and the concept is even less relevant to the other 99 per cent of luxury decoration produced between 1570 and 1840, whether industrially produced multiples or single-producer singletons. In all those artisanal artefacts, conception and execution were indissociably linked.

For these reasons scholars generally privilege other terms over design in describing Ming–Qing luxury objects. The most important of these are ‘decoration’, ‘decorative arts’ and ‘ornament’. These terms, evoking as they do a pre-mechanized world, take on certain negative connotations when used in the context of modern life. Originally invoked by art historians to serve a homogenizing modernist characterization of a world supposedly still dominated by tradition rather than innovation, they sit uneasily outside that context. ‘Decoration’ is today a pejorative term: ‘ornament’ has connotations of uselessness, and though modern design objects are sometimes included in the ‘decorative arts’, this categorization succeeds only in

tainting them with a vaguely irrelevant non-fine art status. For a pre-mechanized society like pre-1840 China, on the other hand, the three terms have seemed to be appropriate. In that historical context, decoration has been interpreted as a way of introducing visual pleasure into social life while at the same time advertising status and power. The decorative arts have been taken to embody the decorative function through their aestheticization of functional objects. And ornament has been seen as the means by which the aestheticization was achieved. Several generations of scholars have constructed a rich and detailed history of Ming and Qing dynasty luxury objects using this frame of reference. At the same time, the concept of design has not been excluded; it has simply been given a narrower meaning. Scholars speak of designs in graphic form that artisans translated into material terms, and also call the graphic organization of surface decoration its design. More expansively, it is common to speak of the design of a Ming–Qing artisanal object in the sense of the conception that guided its execution. These various usages acknowledge the fact that certain aspects of decorative practice in pre-mechanized contexts anticipated and prepared the pre-eminent role of design (in the modern sense) in a mechanized and now digitized world.

The conceptual landscape just sketched out has guided the formation of an essential specialist literature concerned with dating, identification, technique, symbolism and taste. Since this book will draw shamelessly on its achievements, I hope it will not seem churlish to point out that this great scholarly effort has also distorted the picture of Ming–Qing luxury objects by its imposition of modern Western assumptions about decoration. Remarkably – but perfectly logically – the specialist literature has downplayed, not to say overlooked, the single most obvious characteristic of a luxury object as decoration, the very characteristic that determined its success or failure – its topography of sensuous surface. Surface, I shall argue, is the crucial blind spot of current thinking about Ming–Qing (and in fact all non-modern) luxury objects. It is logical that this should be the case, given that specialist scholarship has – with notable exceptions – largely turned away from the experience of the decorative object, preferring to treat the object as a material fact awaiting ordering and interpretation.⁶ For my part, I have taken it as axiomatic that the experiential possibilities of decorative objects with which their makers by necessity were centrally concerned should also be of central concern to us. I believe it necessary to revise our conceptual landscape around the description of surface, and to remap the possibilities of luxury objects accordingly. This is the purpose of this short book. As such, it certainly does not set out to invalidate the many gains of knowledge that have been made over the last century or so, but it does aspire to recontextualize the information that has been accumulated.

The basic thesis of the book can be summarized in a few sentences. The sensuous surfaces of luxury objects simultaneously embody metaphoric and affective potential; this potential actualizes itself through our pleasurable experience of the objects. In this sense, the objects can be said to have the capacity for *thinking* materially, as long as we bear in mind that the kind of thinking they do is quite unlike the thinking of the human beings who created them and needs other human beings as beholders in order for it to occur. Luxury objects *think with us* materially in order to create the pleasure in the beholder that will allow them to fulfil their most fundamental function as decoration. This function, I submit, is to connect us visually and physically to the world around us, to weave us into our environment, in ways that banish the arbitrary and create a sense of meaningful order. While all art mediates our relation to the world, in the process necessarily establishing a ground of connectivity such as I have just described, decoration has the particular characteristic of identifying the entirety of its mediation with connectivity, eschewing the possibilities of critical distance associated with other modes of art-making. Indeed, all the many societal functions associated with decoration depend for their fulfilment on the object doing just this. In its elaborated form below, this argument aspires to modify the reader's awareness of his or her sensory experience of decoration. Since consciousness feeds back into sensory experience, my wager is that the argument, if followed closely enough, will lead the reader to experience decorative objects differently. A shift in the consciousness of response is not a small thing, nor is its significance simply phenomenological. It has implications that extend into every aspect of art's imbrication in larger social processes and ecologies, so that the very meaning of decoration shifts with the 'new eyes' that one brings to it.

This book is concerned, therefore, with basic characteristics of decoration as one of the most pervasive presences of art in the lives of human beings. A case-study approach seems to me more useful for this purpose than a comparative discussion involving decoration in other historical and cultural contexts as well. The latter approach, championed in important studies by Ernst Gombrich (*The Sense of Order*, 1979) and Oleg Grabar (*The Mediation of Ornament*, 1992), has the disadvantage of directing the analysis towards the identification of general 'laws' that do not account for the historical and cultural specificity of any single decorative object. From my point of view, these studies, though I admire and have learned from them, attempt both too much and too little. I have chosen, therefore, to focus my argument tightly on luxury decoration in China from around 1570 to 1840 – the *longue-durée* period extending across the dynastic boundary between Ming and Qing that is referred to in the title as early modern. For the sake of convenience I shall also often refer to the period as Ming–Qing (to be

understood here in the 'short' sense of late Ming to mid-Qing). Although questions of diachronics do not play a large role in the argument, I should note that to describe China of this period as early 'modern is to point out – since it needs pointing out – that its current modernity has a prehistory within China's borders and that there has never been a moment in history when the West had a monopoly on modernity. It should not be taken to imply that China *circa* 1570–1840 was *only* early modern, however, nor that the alternative term 'Ming–Qing' is nothing more than neutrally descriptive. The temporality of the period was complex, indeed disjunctive, and its full understanding requires not only the separate frames of modernity and dynastic time but also that of belatedness – the awareness of a prior cultural history that carried a special authority in China.⁷

Part I, 'The Decorative Object', sets the scene, introducing the luxury context of production and consumption, before laying out in more detail my thesis that decorative objects think with us across the pleasures associated with the metaphoric and affective potential of sensuous surface. Part II, 'The Surfacescape's Resources', identifies the major formal resources of surface treatment on which individual objects drew, each resource possessing its own metaphoric and affective field of possibility. Part III, 'From Surfacescapes to Objectscapes', traces out the various ways in which the surfaces of individual objects came together to create the overall object landscape of residential interiors. Concerned as it is with an almost three-century-long period, the book aims principally to reconstruct the deep structural, epistemic framework of continuity within which the decorative arts evolved, though historical distinctions will be made repeatedly. By the end of Part III, the reader should have acquired a basic understanding of the unwritten rules that made secular luxury decoration a loose, always evolving, but coherent system, one that was an important part of the cultural capital of both the Chinese and Manchu elites. The book closes with a final chapter that tackles a question that shadows the entire discussion – what kind of psychic and somatic transaction occurs when one takes pleasure in decoration? This necessary coda completes my theoretical argument in favour of an experiential approach to decoration. The book as a whole aspires to be a general, systematic toolkit for experiencing – if only to a limited degree – Ming–Qing decorative surfaces as they were meant to be experienced. Given that it is a short book, I have had to eschew lengthy exegeses of specific objects.

About a third of the illustrations reproduce paintings or woodblock prints in which decorative objects can be seen in use; I have also included numerous illustrations of objects on whose surfaces decorative objects are depicted. These varied representations of objects provide a context for individual artefacts and at the same time inform us of the qualities of

attention that Ming–Qing beholders brought to decoration. They also expand enormously the number of objects that the reader can consult; figure references indicate the relevance of particular illustrations elsewhere in the text, but curious readers will be able to make further connections of their own between text and image. The pictorial depictions of objects help to offset, too, the relatively large number of Jingdezhen porcelains among the illustrations of individual Ming–Qing artefacts. For these single-object illustrations, I have also eschewed an egalitarian selection of object forms, largely because it seemed useful, in a book on surfaces, to see how one basic object form could be given very different surface treatments. Vases, bowls and cups, teapots and wine pots, brush holders and incense burners are the forms that the reader will encounter most often. I have taken the same approach to materials, where clay, hardwood, bamboo, lacquer, silk, hardstones (including jade) and copper alloys receive the greatest attention.

One may become an art historian for any number of reasons, but I am surely not the only one for whom art's many pleasures provided a fundamental motivation. What a shock it was, therefore, to discover, at the very beginning of a long apprenticeship, that art history as an academic discipline discouraged the discussion of pleasure! Thirty years and several countries later, I cannot say that I have noticed any significant change. Pleasure, as I have slowly come to understand, is another blind spot – in this case of modern art history's system of knowledge. Only by bracketing pleasure can art history inscribe art within the network of binaries – subject–object, centre–periphery, genuine–fake, among others – that continue to define the modern discipline. It is impossible to account for the role of pleasure in art without undoing these binaries, so it is entirely logical that pleasure should become a subject itself at a moment when the epistemology of art history as a discipline is, finally, being radically reconsidered. Given that nowhere in the landscape of artistic practice is pleasure a more important consideration than in decoration, this book may have a contribution to make to the current rethinking of art history as one of the great modern scholarly projects in the humanities. On a personal level, however, it is an overdue attempt to integrate the pleasure I take in art with my participation in writing its history.



1, 2 Unidentified court artists, *Twelve Beauties at Leisure Painted for Prince Yinzen, the Future Yongzheng Emperor*, Qing dynasty, Kangxi period, between 1709 and 1723. One of a set of twelve screen paintings, ink and colour on silk, 184 x 98 cm. The Palace Museum, Beijing.

With Chinese-style clothes and coiffure that make her into a decorative surfacescape in her own right, a strikingly self-possessed palace lady sits on a cloisonné enamelled stool provided with its own cushion. She holds in her right hand a gauze fan with a pattern of plum blossom on cracked ice, and in her left a peach-bloom-glazed porcelain cup, probably for tea. The black and gold lacquer bookshelves follow a Japanese-inspired fashion of the early eighteenth century.



motif. The *meiren* in her innumerable guises is also an on-going source of pleasure, whose capacity to please the beholder necessarily invoked the skills of self-presentation and self-affirmation of real-life women.²⁵ An image of agency as much as of objecthood, the *meiren* functioned as a metaphor for the decorative object itself as pleasure source. That this agency was important to decorative artisans and artists is visible in the fact that the *meiren* does not passively await the beholder's gaze; she is active, as reader, as writer, as interlocutor, as connoisseur, as pleasure-taker, as a subject in the process of contemplation, of thinking. Socially, of course, the motif indirectly alludes to the important role played by women in interior decoration as both purchasers and arrangers of objects, but its importance for the argument I have been developing in this book is rather different. For, in its formal function the *meiren* motif not only metaphorizes the agency of the object, its capacity for thinking-with; it also serves to focalize the pleasure-taking attention of the beholder, female or male, and thus to thematize the connective visual attention that decoration solicits.

In luxury decoration, ideology – as the purposeful waste associated with power, profit and desire – coexisted with connective thinking. Yet, although decoration's connective thinking gave form to power, including the power of men over women, it was not simply at power's service. Pleasure, mediating differently from desire the relation between waste and thought, ensured that decoration escaped the limits of its ideological content and frame. Pleasure involved the beholder in erotic possibilities of self-realization and connectedness that dissolved the internal and external boundaries of the social. The resonance of individual surfacescapes with the bodyscapes of living creatures (including human beings) on the one hand (illus. 229), and larger landscapes, whether part of the built or the natural environment, on the other, satisfied the individual, psychophysical need for differentiation against a ground of integration. Seeing decoration as a residue of waste, we may find ourselves fascinated by the social interests that decoration served in Ming and Qing China. But it is the connective and erotic dimension of decoration that transcends its historical and cultural moment, allowing the objects to continue to think with us today – on condition, of course, that we are ready to think with them.

References

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Li Yu, 'On Manufacture', in *Xianqing ouji* (reprinted Beijing, 1998), p. 451.
- 2 See Zhu Jiajin, *Ming Qing shinei chinshe* (Beijing, 2004).
- 3 For a discussion, *ibid.*, pp. 28–33.
- 4 Cited in Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Urbana and Chicago, 1991), p. 94.
- 5 See, for example, the ranking of bronze patinas in Zhang Biwen, 'Qing bi cang', in *Meishu congshu, chubian*, VIII (repr. Taiwan, 1963), p. 191.
- 6 Among the most noteworthy exceptions are the excellent writings of Nancy Berliner, Sarah Handler and Robert Mowry, cited in the Bibliography, on which I shall often draw below.
- 7 For detailed discussion of these questions of diachronics, see Jonathan Hay, 'Toward a Disjunctive Diachronics of Chinese Art History', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, XL (Autumn 2001), pp. 101–11; and Hay, 'The Diachronics of Early Qing Visual and Material Culture', in *The Qing Formation in World-Historical Time*, ed. Lynn Struve (Cambridge, MA, 2004), pp. 303–34.

1 DECORATION AS LUXURY

- 1 See also chapter Thirteen for an account of changing fashions in tableware in the Shanghai area during the seventeenth century.
- 2 Li Yu, 'Wine Utensils', in *Xianqing ouji* (reprinted Beijing, 1998), pp. 466–7.
- 3 David Tod Roy, trans., *The Plum in the Golden Vase; or, Chin P'ing Mei*, vol. 1: *The Gathering* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, 1993), p. 30.
- 4 *Ibid.*, chapter 71. Clement Egerton, *The Golden Lotus: A Translation from the Chinese Original, of the Novel Chin P'ing Mei* [1939], 4 vols (London, 1972), vol. III, p. 291.
- 5 Zhang Han, 'Baigong ji', in *Song chuang mengyu* (Beijing, 1985).
- 6 *Prunus in a Golden Vase* makes repeated mention of the gifting of modern objects: incense burners, a marble table screen, beds, etc. See also note 14.
- 7 In diary entries from 1617, Li Rihua (*Weishuixuan riji*, Shanghai, 1996, p. 92) records his commission of porcelains copying early Ming models from a literati ceramicist. Numerous commissioned objects are discussed in Ming Wilson, *Rare Marks on Chinese Ceramics*, exh. cat., Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art / Victoria and Albert Museum (London, 1998).
- 8 Su Tianjun, 'Beijing xijiao Xiaoxitian Qingdai musang fajue jianbao', *Wenwu* (1963), no. 1, pp. 50–55.
- 9 The regulations are to be found in the Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty