

The Trade and History of Porcelain:

The Palace Vases

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The Gibson House Museum was the home of three generations of the Gibson family and their staff from 1859 to 1954, when it was converted into a museum, and it has preserved many furnishings of the house, including antiques and memorabilia (“The Gibson Family”). Visitors can see the daily life of upper-class people from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so these items have special significance, including the Palace Vases. Their appearance, including color, graphic content, and material, reveal the unique artistic style behind the Palace Vases. Moreover, the vases show the development of the porcelain trade between China and the United States during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912).

Porcelain was first used for tableware and figurines, but over time, people used it for decorative purposes. The article “The Movement of Chinese Ceramics” states “[t]hrough this transformation, the ceramics were experienced as part of the room and would come to be seen as an essential feature of certain types of room interiors in the next two centuries” (Pierson 20). The Palace Vases played an important role in Gibson House’s style and provided unique visual appeal for the inhabitants.



Fig. 1. The Gibson House Museum Palace Vases

The Palace Vases had a unique and rare artistic value as objects made during the Qing Dynasty. The vases in Gibson House were painted in the traditional Chinese style, using *Famille rose*, which was prevalent during the Qianlong period (1736-1795). *Famille rose* is a richly-layered color with red glaze, which is a low-temperature glaze with trace amounts of gold and bronze as the coloring agent. This complex coloring method originated in Europe, after being “invented by the Dutchman Andreas Cassius and his son in 1650” (Yu 130). To fully understand the production of *Famille rose*, one must understand “glassy white” or 玻璃白 (*bōli bái*). This substance is a transparent, opalescent glass that contains arsenic and silicon as well as other natural minerals, lead blocks, and potassium nitrate to soften the colors. Its role is to prime porcelain and it is then used to paint various patterns on top with colored materials. During the Qianlong period, the combination of *Famille rose* with paste and piling carvings resulted in a richer and more complex process and technique. This technique can be seen on the handle of the Palace Vase in the Gibson House, as shown in Fig. 2. The combination of several superb techniques required a more complex process, resulting in a large number of people being involved in its creation.

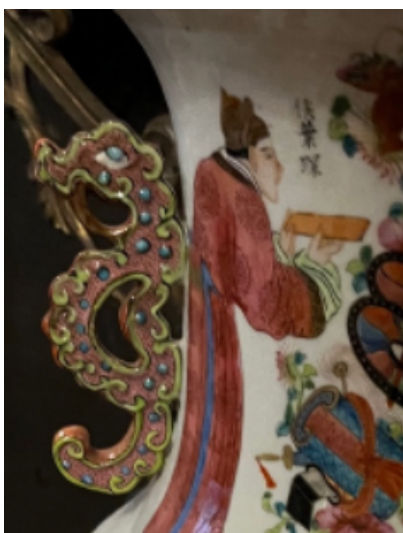


Fig. 2. Rui Wen, Gibson House Museum Palace Vase

Due to the booming export business, many vases from this period appear to portray Western characters and some motifs. However, the vases from Gibson House have traditional Chinese motifs only, which include swirls, pomegranates, plum blossoms, etc. However, unlike the “white space” or 留白 (*liú bái*), a technique in traditional Chinese painting, the design of these vases is more complex, following the Western belief that a painting should fill out a picture.

The figures on the Gibson House vases are works of the Qianlong period, and the style of figure painting is very advanced. As can be seen in Fig. 3, the portraits of the Qianlong period are more realistic. This style can be compared to far simpler portraits of the Kangxi period (1661-1722), as seen in Fig. 4. In Fig. 3, we see that the clothing is rendered in layers and the lines of action are more delicately drawn, with a modern sense of beauty. This style is inevitably related to Western painting: “Kwon-Glazed Porcelain figure painting is characterized by the combination of the light and dark painting method of Western oil painting with Chinese lines, and Kwon-Glazed Porcelain export porcelain painting is becoming more and more inclined to Western painting interest” (Norris et al. 194).



Fig. 3. Rui Wen, Gibson House Museum Palace Vases



Fig. 4. “Vase with ladies,” Qing dynasty, Kangxi period

Influenced by Western painting, these figures’ faces and clothing patterns are painted using light and dark colors. To portray these figures in more detail, porcelain painting techniques are divided into two categories: “Shese” and “Changxing.” The technique of Shese originates from the Jingdezhen pastel: the outline lines of the figures are first depicted in ink, and then filled in with color. However, the contrast in color is not strong, and the relationship between light and dark is not obvious in the processing of clothing patterns (Huang Collection 56) Thus, after the fusion with Western painting techniques, these motifs became more colorful and developed stronger contrasts than earlier ones, although the central part is more similar.

One of the porcelain pieces that bear a resemblance to the Gibson House vases is “Arbor,” a Chinese plate that ended up in the Dutch market (Fig. 27 in “Chinese Export Porcelain”). Both the vases and the plate include images of people wearing traditional Chinese garments with floral surroundings. They also include interesting details such as the dragon-shaped handles on the vases and the images of plants and animals on the borders of the plate. These details are enhanced by the wide range of colors that both of these pieces use. “Arbor” was

created using “Chinese and stylized European decorative elements” (Corbeiller and Frelinghuysen 26). It is not a coincidence that a piece that ended up in Europe incorporated a European style. Many of the pieces in “Chinese Export Porcelain” that arrived in America used American figures in the paintings. These characteristics are a result of the trade between China and the United States.

The Palace Vases and other similar artworks are situated in a broader trade context. The porcelain trade was initially dominated by the European market, with the American market at a comparative disadvantage. However, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, two large trading nations, the Netherlands and England, were at war with each other during the Anglo-Dutch Wars. These wars led to a reduction in foreign trade, and the number of European merchant ships arriving in China gradually decreased. As the Europeans gradually withdrew from the porcelain market, the United States increased its participation. The carrying capacity of the United States and other countries gradually strengthened to fill the gap left by the withdrawal of the British from the market (Van Dyke 121). This withdrawal was followed by a period of prosperity for American trade with China.

Looking back at the history of the porcelain trade between China and the United States, we can better understand how the Palace Vases ended up in the Gibson House, since they reflect the rise in America’s participation in the porcelain trade. Samuel Shaw, the first American consul in Canton, led the commercial voyage of the *Empress of China* in 1784 as a discharged veteran. The *Empress of China* was the first American merchant ship to reach Canton, modern-day Guangzhou, and was the origin of American-Chinese trade in Canton. Immediately afterward, in 1785, the United States government designated Shaw as the United States Consul in Guangzhou and the central leader of the trade. Shaw sent a signal to the Western world that Guangzhou was

rich in tea. Thereafter, the United States and some European countries, including England, Spain, Holland, and Sweden, looked to trade with Guangzhou (Johnson 33-34). Most of the trade consisted of silk and tea, but the porcelain trade soon emerged as well. Because of the weight of porcelain, it was used as a tool to ballast ships during transport before it was sold. Compared to the usual ballasting material like stone, porcelain was preferred due to its commercial value. Thus, porcelain became a commodity of trade. Its unique use as a product and ballasting material meant porcelain was a valuable commodity because “the quantity of China Ware is only a flooring for each ship and has been so scarce that there is not a usefull (sic) piece left in Canton” (qtd. in Van Dyke 123). Afterwards, the porcelain trade skyrocketed, and porcelain was recognized as a precious commodity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Boston, where the Gibson family lived, was a huge trading seaport due to its economic power and excellent location. Boston trade data in 1844 shows that “the arrivals of vessels from abroad, in that year, were 2174” and total profit grew to almost \$6 million, whereas the previous year it was only a little over \$3.5 million (Hill 3). In addition, the Gibson family, as members of the upper classes of Boston, would own Chinese porcelain pieces that displayed their status. Nathaniel Pope Russell, a close family friend of the Gibsons, was a Chinese trade merchant and a marine insurance broker who connected them to the abundance of porcelain seen throughout the Gibson House (Holmes). Thus, it is not at all surprising that the family owned the Palace Vases.

Overall, these vases hold much more history, meaning, and detail than one could see from simply looking at them. The Gibson House’s Palace Vases have a unique artistic charm, which comes from the cultural exchanges between China and the United States. The Palace Vases represent a world of culture stemming from China, and they continue to gain significance, as they have become engraved in the history of the Gibson House.

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