

GLASGOW COLOUR STUDIES GROUP

Notes following the Twenty-Ninth Meeting, 20th April 2016

The twenty-ninth meeting of the GCSG took place in Room 1, English Language, University of Glasgow. Thanks are due to Carole Biggam who organized the meeting, to Carole Hough who introduced the speaker and organized the refreshments, and to Rachael Hamilton who designed the poster.

Our speaker was Dr Yupin Chung, Honorary Senior Research Fellow, School of Culture and Creative Arts, University of Glasgow.

Dr Yupin Chung spoke on 'Red, Yellow and Blue: Ming and Qing Monochrome Wares in the Burrell Collection'

Her abstract is as follows:

The aim of the talk is to explore the meaning of colours in Chinese art and literature. What is the significance of the different colours to be found in Chinese porcelain, and what were the connections between the craft and design worlds? The Burrell Collection has a large number of fine monochromes including an extraordinary blue jar from the Tang Dynasty (618-906), a superb example of a copper-red glazed bowl and many refined imperial pieces with 'perfect' yellow glazes.

Commentary (by Carole Biggam; checked by Yupin Chung)

Dr Chung discussed the significance of colours in Chinese art, as illustrated by porcelain vessels from the Burrell Collection (which has 65 monochrome pieces). She explained that a connoisseur looks first at the shape of a vessel, and later, the colour. In China colours are considered auspicious or inauspicious and, in ancient times, the word for 'colour' involved a character meaning 'emotion', often referring to 'desire', including 'sexual desire'.

There are five elements, corresponding with colours, and these are:

- metal (white)
- wood (blue)
- fire (red)
- earth (yellow)
- water (black)

Dr Chung showed examples of porcelain in these monochrome colours and explained their symbolism. A 15th-century white bowl was shown, symbolizing purity and cleanliness often connected with the birth of a child. However, white is also the colour of funerals.

A blue vessel was shown next. Cobalt blue has been used since the Tang Dynasty, and blues represent nature, often spring, with a sense of tranquility and relaxation. Traditionally, blue and green formed a single colour category referred to as *qing* but they are now separately designated.

Red denotes good fortune and joy, especially in connection with the New Year, holidays and family gatherings. Copper red is the most difficult technology, with success depending on a number of variables such as the thickness of the glaze. From the fourteenth century, red was the colour decreed to be appropriate for vessels used on the altar of the sun. Several of these vessels have an imperial mark on the base.

A yellow bowl represents the colour considered the most beautiful in China. It was the colour of Imperial China from the fifteenth to the twentieth century and is often found in royal palaces. Only the Emperor, Empress and Dowager Empress were permitted to use vessels with a yellow glaze on the interior and exterior.

Black is seen in China as the king of colours but it represents depression, sadness and sometimes death. It was used in the court for the elite, and was exported to Japan in large quantities. The colour may not always be pure black but a brownish black.

Burrell purchased his first monochrome piece in 1921, and the second in 1925. He bought these vessels, in a red colour known as *sang-de-boeuf* from London dealers. Burrell's purchase book shows that he bought 49 items between 1942 and 1950 from different dealers and auction houses.

Of great interest is a book known as *Remarks on Porcelain from the Studio of a Wine-Lover* by Xu Zhiheng, written in the nineteenth century. Chapter 4 focusses on the names for colours. There are many red terms such as *red sky after rain*, *chicken blood red* and *Imperial consort Yang red*. Blue / green terms include *green bean*, *crab shell green* and *Mongolian yurt blue*, while yellow terms include *eel skin* and *old monk robes*.

News

This is the last meeting to be organized by Carole Biggam, a co-founder of the Group. The principal organizer will, henceforth, be David Simmons who can be contacted with suggestions for speakers at David.Simmons@glasgow.ac.uk. The rest of the organizing committee remains the same: Carole Hough, Wendy Anderson and Rachael Hamilton. Please note that we attempt to produce a balanced programme (i.e. different disciplines) and do not necessarily accept talks in the order in which they are offered. Nonetheless, all offers are most welcome.

Please report any colour-related news on our discussion list at ColourStudies@jiscmail.ac.uk. Do feel free to ask the membership any colour questions or to begin a discussion on a particular topic.