

International currents in Chinese glass - Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, UK

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Bristol Museum & Art Gallery in the west of England holds one of the most important collections of Chinese glass outside China, comprising about 300 pieces. It was bequeathed in 1950 by Mr H R Burrows Abbey through the Art Fund and supplemented since then by further acquisitions. The majority of the collection dates to the Qing dynasty (AD 1644-1911) and a substantial number of pieces are likely to have been made in the imperial workshops in Beijing.

A fascinating aspect of Chinese glass is the way in which it provides material evidence of interactions between China and other parts of the world, whether through the glass materials, techniques or styles. This paper will consider examples of these interactions through works in Bristol's collection. The earliest Chinese glass object at Bristol, an eye bead dating to the 4th-3rd centuries BC, shows the stylistic influence of eye beads from the Eastern Mediterranean as well as an early use of cobalt, a pigment likely to have been imported. There are a few examples of early blown glass in the collection dating to the Period of Disunity (AD 221-589) or the Sui dynasty (AD 589-618) which point to technical influences from abroad, associated with the spread of Buddhism. In addition Bristol holds a wheel-cut Iranian vase (AD 800-900) said to have been unearthed near Xi'an, an example of foreign glass as a luxury imported good.

A group of 'crizzled' (degraded) glass from the Kangxi period (AD 1662 -1722) shows the likely results of experimentations in glass-making at the imperial glass workshop in Beijing, established by the Bavarian Jesuit priest, Kilian Stumpf in 1696. Further European influences in Chinese glass can be seen in Bristol's collection in the use of diamond-point engraving, Venetian-style cane-work techniques and aventurine ('golden star') glass. It is possible that some Chinese glass of a clear ruby colour was made using colloidal gold, a European technique but this requires further analysis.

Glass snuff bottles, albeit with Chinese designs, reflect the need for containers for imported powdered tobacco whilst opaque white glass reveals interactions between Europe and China as well as a strong impetus to create a jade-like material. Other cultural interactions may be evidenced in glass made in the imperial workshops in the eighteenth century as diplomatic gifts or as utensils for use in Lamaist Buddhist practices as well as commercial glass made in subsequent centuries for foreign markets.

Chinese glass is known particularly for the carved overlay technique where the craftsman carves through from one layer of glass to another and the presentation will

touch upon the extent to which this incorporates stylistic or technical influences from abroad. The technique is first known in Roman examples such as the Portland Vase (AD 1 – 25) now in the British Museum, and was itself influenced by ancient traditions of gemstone carving.

Contemporary Chinese glass continues to reflect international influences and this will be considered in works by glass artists such as Dr Guan Donghai and Dr Shelly Xue.