

Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art



A Millennium of Monochromes
From the Great Tang to the High Qing
The Baur and Zhuyuetang Collections

From 27 September 2018 to 3 February 2019

Presentation of the exhibition

Tang (618–906) and Song (960–1279) Dynasties

The genesis of the monochrome ceramic

The Tang and the Song

In praise of hands

An imprint of the heart

A confluence of genres

Ritual and Ornamental Wares of the Emperors of China

Monochromes of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) Dynasties

Monochrome porcelain wares of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644)

Ritual wares, ornamental wares

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Monochrome symphony

Two famous portraits of the Manchu court

The Versailles painting of Qianlong and the “Chinese Mona Lisa”

From minerals to imperial colours

Presentation of the exhibition

This exhibition brings together two hundred outstanding works of world renown for the first time in Europe. The jewels of the collection of the Swiss businessman Alfred Baur, imperial porcelain wares that he acquired between 1928 and 1951 in close cooperation with the Japanese art dealer Tomita Kumasaku, are matched by the exceptional collection from the Zhuyuetang (The Hall of Bamboo and Moon) formed in Hong Kong from the end of the 1980s by Richard Kan, an art lover as fervent as he is erudite, who very early on became fascinated by the art of monochrome ceramics.

Having exhibited, in *The Monochrome Principle* in 2010, a selection of its precious Chinese ceramics alongside the important collection of lacquer wares from the Meiyintang and the Museum für Lackkunst of Munster, as well as with works characteristic of contemporary Western painting and prints, the Baur Foundation had already demonstrated close interest in the history under review. The occasion provided the opportunity to examine the fundamentals of art by comparing the aesthetics of these highly refined Chinese monochrome pieces, with their millenary past, to the most advanced pictorial research stimulated by Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*.

Merely through the suggestive power of their colours, the ceramics' glazes, devoid of all decorative and narrative purpose, have much in common with certain aspirations of avant-garde painters. The fascination of their chromatic energy and their purity also aspire to the universal, as is evinced by the many affinities shared by Alfred Baur and Richard Kan. Regardless of the geographic and temporal distances that separate these two men, and the destiny of their collections, what stand out are clearly the enlightening dialogues and complicity that occur naturally between the pieces.

In its attempt to bring out the subtleties and equivalences to be found in these colour ranges, the exhibition endeavours to highlight what it is that, across the long history of monochrome porcelain, nurtures and modulates the aesthetic of these objects. The organisation of the rooms in the exhibition sets the works in their historical, artistic and technical context. Introduced by the foundational tradition of the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) periods, the exhibition focuses on the extraordinary advances made in both ritual and profane imperial monochrome porcelain during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties.

As a result of significant loans from the Musée des châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon and the musée des Beaux-Arts de Dole, visitors will be able to admire two famous portraits of a

Qing-dynasty emperor and his concubine: the sovereign Qianlong (r. 1736–95), who is depicted on the delicate porcelain plaque produced at Sèvres, and the “Chinese Mona Lisa”, a painting attributed to the Jesuit painter from Dole, Jean-Denis Attiret, who will together survey the monochrome symphony.

In addition, a presentation of minerals from the Muséum d’histoire naturelle de Genève will explain technical aspects associated with the role of metal oxides in the colouring of porcelain glazes.

Exhibition curator: Laure Schwartz-Arenales

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Tang (618-906) and Song (960-1279) Dynasties

The genesis of the monochrome ceramic

The Tang and the Song

Following the rebellion of General An Lushan in 763, the golden age of the cosmopolitan and centralised Tang empire, whose influence radiated from its capital Changan well beyond its borders, along the famous silk roads in particular, was succeeded by a progressive fragmentation of power that would ultimately lead to the dismantling of the empire in 907 in spite of its constant economic growth. Bringing an end to the intense political upheaval represented by the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, in 960 the Song emperor Taizong succeeded in reunifying the territory and founding the Song dynasty with its capital in the city today called Kaifeng, which he founded in Henan on the Yellow River.

Progressively replacing the warrior nobility of the Tang dynasty, a bureaucracy of literate officials had under its control an army stationed on the empire's northern borders to counter the constant threat of "barbarian" peoples. Faced by the onslaught of the Jürchens, a tribe subject to the Liao and the founders of the Jinn dynasty (1115–1234), and despite the diplomatic strategies employed to contain their attempts to invade, Emperor Huizong (r. 1101–25) ended by submitting and the court was forced to withdraw to the south and settle in Hangzhou in Zhejiang Province. Although subject to the repeated assaults of its belligerent neighbours, the Southern Song continued to develop a thriving social life symbolised by the commercial dynamism of its capital and the power of the local elites.

From a technical standpoint the tradition of monochrome ceramics, which dates back to the end of the 2nd millennium BCE during the first imperial dynasty of the Shang, was already solidly rooted in Chinese earth. While continuing and developing the advances made in previous centuries, the potters under the Tang and Song competed with one another in virtuosity to meet new criteria of appreciation generated by the growing importance of tea in society and the demands of a new refined and literate elite that was eminently sensitive to the polysemic portrayal of the landscape and, more generally, to the art of colours. Regardless of the differences in their historical contexts and the centuries that separate them, what makes these creations original is that, in the manner they were produced and appreciated, they both exploited and reflected an ambient poetry and the dynamism of a new culture.

In praise of hands

On most monochrome ceramics of the Tang and Song periods it is possible to distinguish a few fine traces of fingernails on the outer edge of their bases. As a record of the instant of their creation that crosses the centuries, they are moving and tangible reminders of the presence of the hands of the craftsman. The traces, which reveal the tension in the potter's holding of the piece as he applied the glaze, would completely disappear on Ming and Qing imperial porcelain. The requirements, ideals and usages that the later imperial pieces had to satisfy would no longer tolerate the presence of marks of humanity. Far from being insignificant, as tiny and discreet as they are, such traces are directly associated with the existence and work of the craftsman and thus refer us to the status and production methods of the works on which they are found. Visible even on the most beautiful Tang and Song monochromes that bear the "Ying" or "Guan" (official) marks reserved for the emperor and his court, they indicate a certain degree of freedom and independence enjoyed by the potter. A sort of spontaneous signature, they make these ceramics – personalised and intimately associated with a specific regional environment – works of art in their own right. Unlike the Ming period, during which the rapid intensification and increase in the production of quality monochrome porcelain went hand in hand with its centralisation in the imperial factory in Jingdezhen, Song ceramics in particular are first and foremost local, "individual" creations associated with a master potter and reflect the vitality, autonomy and multiplicity of the kilns scattered around the entire country.

An imprint of the heart

Like the hermit artist who played on the infinite subtleties of expression made possible by the concentration, splashing or dilution of ink, master potters during the Song dynasty were skilled at representing and suggesting pure "natural" landscapes by means of the purification of the clay, the variation of the iron or copper content of the oxides, and the strict control of the firing atmospheres through variation of the quantity of oxygen permitted. For Guo Ruoxu, the great theoretician of the Northern Song, as for all Chinese literary artists, like an "imprint of the heart" (*xinyin*), artistic creation lies in the ability to develop nature (*tianxing*) harmoniously and without effort, in order to achieve long life, the supreme quality being what is natural (*ziran*). From this point of view too, like the random application of ink on paper or silk, the unknown factor in the firing process is part of the natural course of things and as such was accepted as an instance of ambient aesthetic criteria. This was the case, for example, with the formation of deep, dispersed layers of copper red on Jun stoneware, bubbles called "jade beads" caught in the glaze, and also the crackle generated by the differences in expansion of the body and its coating, whether the

crackle was discreet and lightly coloured (buff for the Ru and greyish for the Longquan) or dark (Guan stoneware). The crackle in particular, which was referred to as “iron wire and gold thread” or “fish scales”, and derived from the iron ore deliberately applied on the cracks during the firing process while they were still hot, were accompanied by smaller cracks that continued to develop naturally and gradually on the outer skin of the coating, sometimes for several months. Like the painter-literato, who, after being fully permeated by his subject in order to become one with it, succeeded in transcending it and extending its “breath”, the master potter seems to have succeeded in infusing his creation with a transcendent constellation of filaments that quiver with their own essence.

A confluence of genres

Some *sancai* glazes, above all those produced in the kilns of Yue, Jun and Longquan, shared the same shimmering and poetic profusion as the greatest “blue and green” masterpieces (*qinglu shanshui*) that symbolised the tradition of Tang and Song academic painting, represented by the painters who adopted the approach of Li Si Xun (653–718). Similarly, the floral arrangements – incised with the vigorous lines seen in Xing and Ding porcelain, Yaozhou celadon and delicate *qingbai* porcelain, and characterised by the very vitreous pure white and the bluish tints of the Jiangxi region in the south – dialogued with the calligraphy and paintings of flowers and birds in vogue at the court of the artistic emperor Huizong. Finally, many of these works reflect the spiritual outlook of the enlightened and virtuous painter, who, employing the resources offered by monochromy, allowed the spontaneous movement of nature to infuse his work. Among the ceramics most closely affected by this literary, Confucian and landscape aesthetic, and which found favour with imperial taste, were in particular the southern celadons, the Ding, the Jun, and above all the Ru.

Thus, while each piece, whether ceramic or pictorial, falls within a specific category and compels distinctive limitations and styles on account of the materials and method of fabrication used, the art of the monochrome during these periods, considered from the standpoint of the production context in which the individual artistry and prowess of a master potter were encouraged, as well as appreciation of that art, seems in any case to have transcended the boundaries and hierarchies between decorative objects and painting. Aside from their practical and ornamental functions, and their elegant floral motifs that enthralled the imperial court, these highly tactile works were nonetheless also “imprints of the heart” (*xinyin*).

Ritual and Ornamental Wares of the Emperors of China Monochromes of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) Dynasties

Monochrome porcelain wares of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) *Ritual ware, ornamental ware*

Arising out of the popular revolts against the Mongols, the Ming national dynasty was founded by the Hongwu emperor in 1368. A sound administrator, in 1384 Hongwu re-established the system of imperial exams and started on economic reconstruction. He promoted diplomatic relations with other Asian states while restricting foreign trade and creating the foundations of a centralised imperial power that would remain the model followed until the end of the empire.

Beginning in the second year of his reign, Hongwu issued edicts decreeing that thenceforth the containers used in sacrificial rituals should be made from either ceramic or gourds. With this change, which not only conformed to the *Book of Rites* but also saved metal, he began a tradition that would make the imperial manufactory founded in the town of Jingdezhen in 1369 famous right around the world. Geographically, the town was ideally situated near rivers that furnish the necessary water and enable the transportation of raw materials and finished products. Geologically, Jingdezhen had the required resources close at hand: porcelain stone and kaolin. The secret of the success of Jingdezhen's craftsmen lay in the combination of these two elements: poor in aluminium oxide but rich in potassium and sodium, lacking plasticity and resistance, porcelain stone was mixed with kaolin to render the material more suited to moulding, to give better resistance during firing and to allow the manufacture of large pieces. The official workshops (*guanyao*) were located in a ring around Zhushan while private workshops (*minyao*) were scattered in the district of the town, in Hutian and near the East River. They were placed under the control of the Ministry of Works (*Gongbu*), itself under the supervision of the Grand Secretariat (*Neige*) that answered directly to the emperor. The inclusion of reign marks began under the Yongle emperor (1403–24). Whereas the decorative *blue-and-white* wares, that had triumphed on foreign markets during the Yuan dynasty, enjoyed great success in the imperial court from the reign of the Xuande emperor (r. 1426–35), attention must be paid to the special attention given by the Ming emperors to the monochrome style. Representing themselves in this way as the heirs of the Song, they also adopted these pieces for ritual use.

The unity of the Chinese empire rested on the sacred role of its ruler and it was through State rituals that the emperor was recognised as the Son of Heaven. Performed in different temples on fixed days, these ceremonies assured his authority while also establishing

terrestrial and cosmic order. Each ritual had corresponding liturgical clothing and objects, among which monochrome porcelain wares – dishes, jars, bowls – replaced the traditional bronze vessels with more complicated forms. Their colours were determined by the place in which they were to be used. Thus white was reserved for the offerings made to the Ancestors (*Fengxiandian*), for the Altar of the Moon (*Xiyuetan*), for the imperial tombs and for Buddhist and Taoist rituals; deep blue was reserved for the Altar of Heaven (*Tiantan*); red for the Altar of the Sun (*Chaoritan*); and yellow for the Altar of the Earth (*Diqitan*) and for the emperor himself.

This period saw the development of a range of monochrome colours, which, in addition to the ceremonial white, red, dark blue and yellow, included others not associated with ritual use, such as light blue, black, brown, celadon green, bluish-white, turquoise, green, iron red and imitations of several types of glaze from the Song dynasty, all of which came to be used to decorate ornamental and everyday wares. The varied artistic creations of the Ming dynasty, during which sixteen emperors reigned, paved the way for those of the Qing, during whose dynasty monochrome wares experienced their greatest splendour and were among the most brilliant successes of the period.

The apogee of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Monochrome symphony

Called upon by the Ming emperor Chongzhen (r. 1627–44) to put down the peasant rebellions, the Qing, who derived from a group of Tungu tribes living in East Asia, took the city of Beijing from the rebel Li Zicheng in 1644, settled in, and, profiting from the general anarchy, put an end to the reign of the Ming. Under the guise of continuing the established tradition, the Manchu rulers set about reconstructing the State and economy essentially on the basis of the system of their predecessors.

Achieving its greatest size in the middle of the 18th century following the occupation of Tibet and Chinese Turkestan, with the latter being given the name Xinjiang (“New Frontiers”), the empire enjoyed exceptional cultural influence during the reigns of three great emperors: the collectors and art patrons Kangxi (r. 1662–1722), Yongzheng (r. 1723–35) and Qianlong (r. 1736–95). Admired by Europe during the age of the Enlightenment, their glory has been handed down to us in the writings of Catholic missionaries and painters, who had been allowed to enter the Chinese court since the end of the Ming. That glory is reflected in the two famous portraits in this exhibition.

Drawing on a millenary tradition, as well as on “foreign” Western enamels, monochrome porcelain wares were to reach unequalled sophistication during the reigns of these three

enlightened sovereigns. For the fulfilment of official orders, the craftsmen in the imperial porcelain manufactory in Jingdezhen – whose extraordinary activity was described by the letters of the Jesuit father François-Xavier d'Entrecolles – supplied enormous quantities of ceramic wares to the palace, temples and State administrations. They were directed by superintendents who, unlike the eunuchs in the court of the Ming, were appointed by the emperor on the basis of their abilities and experience. Indisputably among the most important were Zang Yingxuan (1683–88), Nian Xiyao (1726–36) and Tang Ying (1736–53).

Appointed in 1728 by the Yongzheng emperor, Tang Ying distinguished himself in particular by his practical and theoretical knowledge; he stimulated the revival of classic glazes from the Song period (Ru, Jun, Ding, among others) while also experimenting with new colours. In his famous text *Taocheng shiyi jishi beiji* (*Commemorative stele on ceramic production*) written in 1735, he gave a precise description of some 57 types of ceramic wares and almost 40 monochrome glazes: celadons, “tea dust”, “clair de lune”, “peach bloom”, “ox blood”, “ruby red”, “mirror black”, coral red, lemon yellow, aubergine, turquoise and golden hues, as well as coverings included in this exhibition that illustrate the unmatched refinement and variety of the monochrome porcelain wares associated with the three great emperors of the Qing.

On the death of Tang Ying, the quality of the imperial manufactory in Jingdezhen was maintained for some thirty years thanks to Laoge, his faithful assistant and resident foreman, who had mastered the manufacturing process and succeeded in training a second generation of potters. In 1787, the Qianlong emperor, who was more concerned by clamping down on corruption than by the porcelain quality standards, passed the running of the manufactory to the region of Jiangxi – at the latter's request – without a resident director, while also downgrading the position of its supervisor to the level of the local magistrates and police chief. This development set in motion the progressive decline in the quality of the pieces produced in the imperial manufactory during the last period of the Qing dynasty.

Two famous portraits of the Manchu court

The Versailles painting of Qianlong and the “Chinese Mona Lisa”

Taking as its theme the production of ritual and ornamental wares, the exhibition *A Thousand Years of Monochromes* also presents a slice of history in which China and the West encountered one another. Set among ceramics of shimmering uniform colours, two portraits displayed for the occasion at the Baur Foundation put two imperial figures, and lovers of porcelain wares, in the spotlight. One is the Qianlong emperor (r. 1735–66), who

was the principal client for these pieces as well as being a collector, and the other is of the concubine Ulanara (1718–1766), his second wife. Both the works of Western painters, they demonstrate the links that existed between China and Europe, France in particular. The existence of these portraits and the story they tell are yet another facet of the art world in 18th-century China.

An instance from the catalogue of ceramic wares, the portrait of Qianlong was executed on a porcelain plaque by the painter Charles-Eloi Asselin (1743–1804) in 1776. Taken from a watercolour (since lost) by Father Giuseppe Panzi (1734–post 1792), who succeeded Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766) as the Qing imperial painter, the plaque was produced by the French royal manufactory at Sèvres and displayed at the Palace of Versailles. The emperor is shown in a head-and-shoulders image wearing a fur cap topped by a large round pearl. The portrait is framed by a painted gold band adorned with Sinicizing motifs, and towards the bottom there is a fabulous Oriental bird. Made in France, the plaque demonstrates the skill of the artist in painting on porcelain and confirms the interest held by Louis XVI (r. 1775–93) in the Chinese empire.

The figure of Ulanara, on the other hand, is characteristic of the tradition of Chinese portraiture. Acquired by the musée des Beaux-Arts de Dole in 2001, it was painted in oils on paper in the mid-18th century by the French Jesuit priest Jean-Denis Attiret (1702–1768), who studied under and worked with Giuseppe Castiglione. The concubine who became an empress is shown wearing an otter-skin cap and earrings of Manchurian pearls. She is dressed in an imperial robe decorated with dragons on a yellow background, a symbol of power. Ulanara's intense gaze and the mystery surrounding the creation of this work have earned it the epithet "Chinese Mona Lisa".

These paintings are evidence of the presence of Jesuit priests in the Chinese court, many of whom contributed to spreading awareness of Chinese culture in Europe, but they also promoted the arts and sciences of the West in the Chinese empire. Western influence had a positive consequence on ceramic production when China began using enamels imported from Europe, allowing its craftsmen to learn new methods. The Jesuit father François-Xavier d'Entrecolles (1664–1741) was received in Jingdezhen between 1712 and 1722, when he visited the most important imperial kilns used to produce ceramics. He took the time to learn the secrets of their production, which he transmits to Europe. This was the background against which Jean-Denis Attiret and Giuseppe Panzi worked in the emperor's service. Their works exemplify the use of Western watercolours and oils in Chinese painting, techniques that were unknown in China until the arrival of the first Jesuit painters in the imperial court. However, in addition to these techniques, they provide confirmation of the innovation introduced originally by Giuseppe Castiglione to Chinese portraiture, the initiator

of the style that combined Western and Chinese painting practices. Stylistically, the portraits of Qianlong and his second wife are differentiated from Chinese painted portraits by their emphasis on realism, which is reflected in the care devoted to the depiction of the costumes and the representation of light and shadow, but most of all in the strikingly natural modelling of the pair's faces. These very particular portraits speak to us of the encounter between painters from the land of the Enlightenment and the Middle Empire.

From minerals to imperial colours

In the last display cases in the exhibition, Qing-dynasty porcelain wares are seen with minerals generously lent by the Muséum d'histoire naturelle de Genève. Given the variety and limitless delicacy of the colours of Chinese imperial wares, we felt an illustration should be made of the process by which the beauty of the raw ingredient – here minerals in the form of metal oxides – is transformed into monochrome coverings. The importance of the knowledge and experience of the craftsmen to the creation of colourings to satisfy the imperial orders is made all the more apparent.

On a technical level, monochrome glazes, which are made from mineral pigments, are distinguished by the temperature at which they are fired, which is required for them to achieve their colour. They are divided into high-temperature glazes (over 1200°C), medium-temperature glazes (950–1100°C) and low-temperature enamels (less than 800°C).

The glazes can be coloured by the addition of metal oxides like iron, copper, cobalt, manganese and antimony. Unlike underglaze decorations applied on a porous body, enamels are applied on top of a smooth glaze. During the 18th century, the Jesuits at the imperial court passed the secrets of pink and white enamels to the Chinese. Stimulated by the use of colloidal gold, pink enamel joined the palette of colours in painted ceramic decorations.

In the “reduction” firing process, which has the purpose of reducing the oxygen content in the firing chamber to a minimum, the atmosphere absorbs the oxygen contained in the ceramics, principally the metal oxides in the glaze. The oxides are reduced to an oxygen-free state that result, in the case of iron oxide, in colours verging on blue, green or grey, and of copper, on red. In an “oxidation” firing process, the opposite occurs: iron oxides turn brown or red, and copper takes on a green hue.

Useful information

Dates	27 September 2018 - 03 February 2019
Address	Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Arts 8 rue Munier-Romilly 1206 Geneva – Switzerland +41 22 704 32 82 www.fondation-baur.ch
Opening times	Open from Tuesday to Sunday from 2pm to 6pm (closed Monday), until 8 pm when guided visits are held (see below)
Tickets	Full : CHF 15.- Unemployed, handicapped and students: CHF 10.-
Exhibition curator	Laure Schwartz-Arenales, director
Design	Nicole Gérard with the help of Corinne Racaud
Press contact	Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Arts Audrey Jouany Deroire, musee@fondationbaur.ch
Catalogue	<i>Mille ans de monochromes, Vaisselle sacrée et profane des empereurs de Chine, les collections Baur et Zhuyuetang / A Millenium of Monochromes, from the Great Tang to the High Qing, the Baur and Zhuyuetang Collections</i> by Monique Crick, Peter Lam and Laure Schwartz-Arenales, Fondation Baur, Cinq Continents, Genève, Milan, 2018.
Cultural mediation	Anne-Sophie Kreis, mediation@fondationbaur.ch
Public guided visits:	Wednesdays, 6.30pm: 10 & 13 October, 7 & 21 November, 5 December 2018 9 & 23 January 2019
Private guided visits:	Reservation required, musee@fondationbaur.ch