THE CHARLENE QUITTER THOMPSON BEQUEST
An Enduring Veneration of Qing Dynasty Imperial Ceramics

BEATRICE CHAN

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SINCE THE founding in 2010 of the Ting Tsung and Wei Fong Arts of China Gallery dedicated to the display and interpretation of Chinese art, the interaction of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), with Chinese arts has grown dynamically in scope. In the past year, the MFAH secured the honour of presenting “Emperors’ Treasures: Chinese Art from the National Palace Museum, Taipei” (October 23rd, 2016 to January 29th, 2017), an inaugural loan from the National Palace Museum to Houston, and indeed, to the southern region of the United States. Previously, exhibitions highlighting the esteemed collection have only been presented at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, the Art Institute of Chicago, and, in both 1996 and as the organising institution in 2016, the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. In joining this list of illustrious American cultural institutions, the MFAH exponentially expands upon its mission of sharing Chinese art.

“Emperors’ Treasures” features documentary objects that served as the personal treasures of notable emperors, who ruled China from the Song (960–1279) to the Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. The imperial collection, greatly expanded under the auspices of the Qing dynasty emperors, will be represented by many Qing dynasty ceramics featuring luxurious glazes, vibrant enamelling and breathtaking forms, shown in the suite of Brown Foundation special exhibition galleries in the museum. The occasion of this momentous special exhibition, and partnership with the National Palace Museum, presents a unique opportunity to discuss highlights in the museum’s own collection of Qing dynasty ceramics, evidence of an Occidental appreciation of imperial wares and a curious tale of two generations of enlightened Houston/Galveston, Texas, collectors.

The Collection’s Illustrious Origins

The Bequest of Charlene Quitter Thompson (1) generously endowed the MFAH with over sixty Chinese artefacts made of ceramic, jade and metalwork, a selection of which are among the finest examples of Qing dynasty craftsmanship to have emerged from China during the 20th century. This magnanimous gift comprises the largest and most significant single contribution to the museum’s Chinese art collection in over fifty years: the calibre of the imperial objects rival those collected in any other Texan institution. It is truly a remarkable assemblage of objects that have enjoyed long and illustrious histories, and formerly engendered appreciation of their classic forms, beautiful glazes and intricate techniques, in the formal living room display in Thompson’s Houston residence.

Charlene Q. Thompson (1941–2013) and her husband, Clark W. Thompson, Jr. (1919–1998), inherited their collection from Clark’s parents, Clark W. Thompson, Sr. (1896–1981), a treasurer of the American National Insurance Company, and Libby Moody Thompson (1897–1990) (2, 3). Mr. Thompson Sr. served as a Democratic member of the House of Representatives of the Seventh District of Texas from 1933 to 1935, and the Ninth District of Texas from 1947 until he retired in 1966. He was born in Wisconsin and attended the University of Oregon before joining the United States Marine Corps, which brought him to Galveston in 1917. There, at a dance organised for the men of the military, he was introduced to Libby Moody, daughter of William Lewis Moody, Jr. of Galveston—a prominent entrepreneur and philanthropist. In a recorded interview, Mr. Thompson Sr. recalls having been introduced to Libby because he was a Phi Delta Theta, and Libby was wearing her father’s fraternity pin that night. The two married on November 16th, 1918.
Around the time Clark Thompson returned to serve in the House of Representatives in the late 1940s, the couple would have visited New York, perhaps on a holiday or a business trip, and began establishing their collection of fine Chinese ceramics and jade. Records left to the museum indicate that the couple purchased primarily from Ralph M. Chait, a world-renowned New York-based specialist in antique Chinese porcelain and works of art. While we do not have exact dates of any visits, Steven and Andrew Chait, who inherited the business from their father, Allan S. Chait, confirm that their grandfather was also known to have visited the Thompsons in Washington, DC, bearing remarkable selections of Chinese artworks during the two decades the Thompsons occupied their DC residence on Massachusetts Avenue.

Ralph M. Chait (1892–1975) arrived in New York from London in 1909 and opened his first gallery, at the tender age of eighteen. His galleries often welcomed notable clientele, including President Herbert Hoover, John D. Rockefeller, Yale Kneeland, Avery Brundage and Vice President Nelson Rockefellar; it is hardly a surprise that the Thompsons came to be clientele themselves. Chait was a trusted dealer in Chinese art because he had immersed himself in study and contributed to the scholarship of Qing ceramics during his lifetime. In 1937, he published a short study of Kangxi period (1662–1722) peachbloom glaze ceramics in Oriental Art. In the article, Chait asserted that from his survey of Chinese ceramic resources and records, only eight forms were ever decorated with the well known and pleasing rosy hues during the Kangxi era. The eight forms comprised a set of scholar’s objects intended to decorate a scholar’s table in his studio. Of the objects published in Chait’s article, four were represented in the Chait collection. Of these four, two were purchased by the Thompsons. The subtle charm of the peachbloom glaze has captured the attention of Qing dynasty emperors and American collectors alike. That American collectors came to appreciate the peachblooms, a shining achievement in monochrome glazes developed during the reign of the Kangxi emperor, attests to the high level of ceramic connoisseurship cultivated in 20th century America, in part aided by such dedicated scholarly art dealers as Ralph M. Chait.

Along with purchases from Ralph M. Chait, records indicate that the Thompsons also acquired works from the famed C.T. Loo Gallery, with its New York branch operating in the 1950s under the leadership of Frank Caro. The patrons of this gallery included major Chinese art collectors and institutions, including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, to name a few. Both C.T. Loo and Ralph M. Chait had strong connections to Europe: C.T. Loo had his residence in Paris while Ralph Chait had family in London dealing in European art, and often frequented auctions of British collections. Their European ties

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proved important in 1949, when the US placed an embargo on Chinese exports as part of efforts to disrupt, destabilise and weaken China's communist government. Advised by these two major dealers, Libby and Clark were able, without going to China, to collect during the 1950s, assembling a focused collection of exemplary ceramics that, though small in size, filled a superb vitrine display (5) in the Thompsons' DC residence.

While Clark served as a US Representative, Libby emerged as a supportive partner in his political career, fulfilling social obligations on behalf of her husband and graciously hosting elaborate parties. As Libby's reputation as a hostess grew, the Thompsons' residence on Massachusetts Avenue became known as the "Texas Embassy". Their ceramic display became a backdrop for the photographic records of the receptions they held to entertain notable fig-
Representative Clark Thompson smiles his approval as Mrs. Thompson welcomes Mrs. Lyndon Johnson (the Vice President was close behind) at the big reception given by the Thompsons in honor of the retiring Philippine Ambassador and Mme. Romulo. *The Diplomat*, March 1962.

President John F. Kennedy drops in at a reception given in honour of House Speaker Sam Rayburn (right) by Representative and Mrs. Clark Thompson (D. Tex.), Mrs. Thompson watches Rayburn greet the President.

The Gift of a Devoted Texan

When Clark Thompson Jr. (1919–1998) inherited his parent’s collection, the objects similarly occupied a place of honour in the family home. Clark Whitley, Thompson Jr.’s grandson and namesake, recalls that the ceramics were displayed in the formal living room in a custom-made cabinet, lit from the interior and protected by glass behind lock and key. It was understood that the objects held great value, and were a source of great pride for his grandfather. Clark Thompson Jr. was a 1947 graduate of The University of Texas, Austin McCombs School of Business, and became the first Texan partner of Arthur Andersen LLP, the former “Big Five” accounting firm. Upon his death, the Clark W. Thompson, Jr. Chair in Accounting at the University of Texas was named in his honour. Clark Jr. and Charlene were prominent figures in Houston social and philanthropic circles, lending their time and efforts to the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo on its International Committee and the Llama Committee. Mrs. Thompson Jr. was honoured with the title of lifetime director of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo for her dedication.

Upon his death, Clark Thompson Jr. requested that his family collection be left to the MFAH when his wife died. A collection of this calibre would have been a welcome addition in many international institutions, however, Whitley explained that as is the case with many other multigenerational Texan families, Clark Jr. was fiercely proud of his heritage, and so it was not surprising that the collection was to remain in Texas. In 2013, when she died, Charlene fulfilled her promise to Clark and the objects were bequeathed to the MFAH. A selection of these objects are highlighted in the remainder of this article, chosen to facilitate discussions regarding technical and artistic achievements, provenance and 20th century American collecting practices.

*Clark Whitley, interviewed by Beatrice Chan, July 8th, 2016.*
Kangxi Reign (1662–1722):
Peachbloom and Monochrome Glazes

Of the Thompson Bequest, the most significant pieces were created during the reign of the Kangxi emperor, whose perseverance in re-establishing the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen led to unprecedented advancements in ceramic technology, most notably innovations in monochrome glazes. In particular, under the direction of Lang Tingji (1663–1715), who supervised Jingdezhen from 1705–1712, Kangxi era ceramists succeeded in recovering the lost art of controlling the volatile copper-based glaze required to achieve underglaze monochrome reds that range from a bright sacrificial red to the velvety pinks of the famed peachbloom glaze (Chinese: jiangdou). The true reds, as seen on Bottle (8) with langyao glaze (named in honour of Lang Tingji), which require only a small amount of copper, are appreciated for their textures and the quality in which the glaze pulls away slightly at the rims, revealing the pure white porcelain bodies. In contrast, peachbloom glaze requires nearly four times as much copper, trapped between two coats of clear glaze that allows for the correct reaction in firing that produces a range of light greens, pinks and deeper pinks, resembling the hues of a ripening peach. The control required to fire the peachbloom glaze successfully necessitated smaller ceramic forms. As previously mentioned, Ralph M. Chait concluded in the 1950s that peachbloom ceramics fired during the Kangxi era were limited to only eight prescribed forms, a series of small pieces for the scholar’s writing table.

Libby and Clark Thompson purchased two peachbloom glazed ceramics from Chait, a Vase with Dragon (9) and a smaller Vase (10) also known as an amphora, alluding to the Bodhisattva Guanyin who carries a vessel of a similar form containing ambrosia. Of the two, the amphora-shaped vase presents a more successful peachbloom glaze in the sprinkling of mottled-pink dots across its shoulder, however, the Vase with Dragon may be the rarer form. In his article, Chait shares that, to his knowledge, only five peachbloom vases with a coiling dragon decorating the neck existed in the collections of: the Walters Art Museum; Benjamin Altman (now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession number 14.40.362); Yale Kneeland Collection in New York (sold at auction by Christie’s in Hong Kong in 2003);

8 Bottle, Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign, 1662–1722, porcelain with langyao red glaze (Jingdezhen ware), 22.9 x 12.1 cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, bequest of Charlene Quitter Thompson, 2013.491
9  Vase with Dragon, Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign, 1662–1722, porcelain with peachbloom glaze (Jingdezhen ware), 18.4 x 8.3 x cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, bequest of Charlene Quitter Thompson, 2013.487

10  Vase, Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign, 1662–1722, porcelain with peachbloom glaze (Jingdezhen ware), 15.6 x 4.8 cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, bequest of Charlene Quitter Thompson, 2013.466

a private collector in New York; and the one in his possession that he sold to the Thompsons. The MFAH vase manifests a velvety, dusty rose colour, which contrasts sharply with the apple-green glaze of the coiled dragon. Chait tentatively proposed that perhaps so few of the coiled dragon vases were extant because the dragon had imperial connotations, and thus were reserved to select sets.

The subtle charm of the peachbloom glaze has captured the attention of Qing dynasty emperors and modern American collectors alike. Five illustrious peachbloom vases will travel to Houston as part of the “Emperors’ Treasures” from the National Palace Museum, representing Kangxi period achievements. In addition to their own amphorashaped vase, the National Palace Museum will send a vase decorated with triple rings along its neck, a vase with a base in the form of a chrysanthemum or lotus blossom, a water coupe and a seal paste box (11, 12). If the reader is counting, this article has shared six of the eight prescribed forms. To complete the set, we include images of a Brush Washer (13) that entered the MFAH in 1966 as a gift of Henrietta Schwartz and a globular Water Pot (14), decorated in a delicate clair de lune glaze (Chinese: tiānqìng) that is also from the Thompson Bequest.

Forms reserved for the peachbloom glazes, such as the globular water coupe, were borrowed to host the delicate clair de lune glaze, which was also introduced during the Kangxi reign. Clair de lune is the lightest shade along the spectrum of high-fired cobalt-oxide blues. The refined colour is considered one of the most outstanding achievements in monochrome glazes during the Qing dynasty, albeit overshadowed by the reputation of the peachbloom glaze. Although not all clair de lune ceramics are marked with Kangxi reign imperial seals, a significant portion are, suggesting that these objects were reserved for use in the palace.3

The beautiful clair de lune glaze is also found on a Pair of Lotus-Leaf Cups (15), shining achievements in naturalism captured in porcelain. The two cups present as identical forms, but possess subtle variations in size and form. Lotus

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12 Water Container and Turnip-shaped Vase, Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign, 1662–1722, porcelain with copper-red glaze (Jingdezhen ware), National Palace Museum, Taipei, Image © National Palace Museum

13 Brush Washer, Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign, 1662–1722, porcelain with peachbloom glaze (Jingdezhen ware), 3.8 x 12.1 cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Henrietta Schwartz, 86.350

14 Water Pot, Qing dynasty, Kangxi reign, 1662–1722, porcelain with clair de lune glaze (Jingdezhen ware), 5.1 x 9.8 cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, bequest of Charlene Quitter Thompson, 2013.488
15 *Pair of Lotus-leaf Cups*, Qing dynasty, 18th century, ceramic with pale blue glaze, 5.7 x 10.2 x 7.4 cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, bequest of Charlene Quitter Thompson, 2013.489

16 *Pair of Bowls*, Qing dynasty, Yongzheng reign, 1723–1735, ceramic with ruby-ground enamel (Jingdezhen), 5.1 x 11.7 cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, bequest of Charlene Quitter Thompson, 2013.493

17 *Pair of Bowls*, Qing dynasty, Yongzheng reign, 1723–1735, porcelain painted with overglaze famille-rose (Jingdezhen), 7.3 x 11 cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, bequest of Charlene Quitter Thompson, 2013.502
pads, curved to reveal the leaf’s veins, formed in porcelain. Below, rough-textured roots coil to form a base before delicately curling upwards to create a small handle topped by a small lotus bud. Peeking into the cup, the viewer will see thinly incised lines where glaze lightly pools to create a delicate impression of the surface texture of a lotus pad. These remarkable details are markers of imperial ware, produced to delight elite and demanding connoisseurs.

**Yongzheng Reign (1722–1735):**
**Technicolour Overglazes**

On December 27th, 1722, Emperor Yongzheng succeeded his father the Kangxi emperor inheriting, among other things, a thriving ceramic production centre. Workshops at Jingdezhen continued to refine the techniques explored during the Kangxi reign, and during Yongzheng’s brief reign (reigned 1723–1735), potters made significant advancements in the category of enamelware glazes. While Ming dynasty workshops had successfully mastered polychrome overglaze decorations, Qing dynasty workshops further developed overglaze polychrome colours that bear resemblance to European painted enamels on gold or copper, introduced to the court via Jesuit missionaries. The access to opaque white enamel was integral in the development of Qing dynasty “enamelware”. The base colour allowed artisans to mix a spectrum of subtle shades, used for modelling and shading.

In addition to an expanded colour palette, this category of Yongzheng period enamelware is characterised by high quality porcelain bodies with walls scraped eggshell thin, as seen in three sets of Yongzheng period bowls from the Thompson Bequest. Although a *Pair of Bowls* (18) feature a rich and opaque layer of luscious red glaze, the objects still retain their semi-translucent qualities when held up to a strong light source. In other cases, the high quality porcelain bodies were highlighted by sparse, but richly coloured, bird and floral motifs. Delicate greens, yellows and even whites were used to paint blossoming vines that wrap around the decorative surface of a *Pair of Bowls* (17). Sensitive hands painted in a variety of colours and even a variety of textures, making the most of the inherent thickness of enamel glazes. The painterly quality on Yongzheng period ceramics surpasses those found decorating Kangxi period vessels; some scholars attribute this high degree of painterly prowess to the increased popularity of the bird and flower genre among mid-17th century artisans.

Although the colours usually resonate against a pure white porcelain body, at times, workshops introduced a background colour to enhance the visual effect further. The famille-noire Bowl (18) is perhaps the most striking from the sub-category of enamelware. “Famille” refers to the most prominent colour decorating a vessel, which in this case is *noire*, or black. This dramatic bowl graced the top of Libby and Clark Thompson Sr.’s vitrine display in their DC residence (6).

**Qianlong Reign (1736–1795):**
**Objects of Curiosity**

The Qianlong emperor had a voracious appetite for art that spurred production of immense proportions during his reign. Historians generally assign ceramics made during the Qianlong reign to three periods: the first period (1736–1743) is characterised by similar wares, if not a little lower in quality, to those produced during the Yongzheng reign without any major innovations; the second period (1743–1768) is characterised by outstanding wares; while the third period (1768–1795) saw a proliferation of ceramic forms, glazes and techniques elaborated to the verge of folly. The
Qianlong emperor revelled in ostentatious presentations of artistic talent, and craftsmen tumbled over each other in the hope of delighting the emperor with objects each more splendid and lavish than the last.

A **Puzzle Vase** (19) from the Thompson Bequest is one such object of wonder. The elegant vessel was created to recall a ritual *zun* vessel, with its high foot and curlicues decorating its surface. Perhaps even the blue-green celadon glaze was chosen to allude to the patina of an aged bronze surface. The classic form is curiously bisected by a meandering line that reveals itself as the silhouette of the *lingzhi* (immortality mushroom) form. The interconnected halves of the vessel cannot be separated, calling for the object to be fired as one piece with a technique that ensured the two halves did not fuse in firing. This elaborate decorative cutout renders the object non-functional, much like the **Vase with Revolving Core and Eight Trigram Design** (20) from the National Palace Museum collection. The *Vase with Revolving Core* has cutouts of trigrams placed above the *lingzhi* shaped bisecting line. Through these openings, the viewer can peer into the vessel to see a rotating core. The object was intended as a curiosity to showcase the virtuosity of Qing dynasty ceramic workshops. In comparison, the **Puzzle Vase** seems demure, but the careful application of lighter celadon curlicues references a different aesthetic vocabulary, harkening to the Song dynasty *pingdan* (even and light) aesthetic.

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News of the Qianlong emperor’s penchant for the sumptuous spread onwards from the capital city, Beijing, and in 1783, Bao Dai, a high-ranking Manchu official and imperial envoy to Tibet, presented the emperor with a tribute of eighteen accessories for the scholar’s table wrought from pure Tibetan gold. The entire set weighed over 5966 grams. Each object displayed whimsical forms of gold filigree that was masterfully intricate. The material may have been selected not only for its worth, but also for its reference to the huang di, emperor or literally “golden king”. An additional layer of polished Tibetan turquoise and lapis lazuli inlay decorates the decadent surfaces.

The full set of eighteen gold objects includes censers, an arm rest, table decorations, paperweights, etc. Dish with Stand (21) is an utilitarian object that is elevated by the presence of its stand with six legs carved in the shape of elephant trunks, a reference to archeaic ritual bronze vessel forms. Bottle with Stand (22) also resides atop a golden stand. This object contains an embedded rebus. In Chinese, the vase or bottle is known as jing, a homonym for peace, and the chrysanthemum flowers inlaid with turquoise are known as jiu hua “ninth month flower”. Jiu is also a homonym for longevity. Together, the two characters bear wishes of everlasting peace for the emperor and his empire.

The set was said to have left the imperial collection only when Puyi (1906–1967), the last emperor of the Qing dynasty, was unable to repay bank loans in 1908, and the objects were taken as collateral. The entire set was sent to the United States, and placed by Parish-Watson & Company of New York on exhibition at Chicago’s International Exposition (1933–1934). From there, the two objects now in the MFAH collection were purchased by Ralph M. Chait, who, in turn, sold them to Libby and Clark Thompson. A final image of a vitrine display (23) presents these two objects as the centrepiece in a carefully curated cabinet.

Conclusion

Several major themes connect the sixty-eight objects of the Charlene Quitter Thompson Bequest. Through the collection, visitors to the MFAH are able not only to appreciate spectacular examples of imperial Qing dynasty ceramics and decorative objects, but also take a glimpse into 20th century American collecting practices. Libby and Clark Thompson developed a Qing dynasty imperial scholar’s aesthetic, carefully selecting objects known to have been created specifically to grace a scholar’s table and bearing refined peachbloom and clair de lune glazes, stunning golden filigree and vibrant enamelled colours. Undoubtedly, Ralph M. Chait played a major role in advising the couple, and thanks to their efforts, devotion and careful scholarship, the MFAH has the distinct pleasure of exhibiting this select collection of Qing dynasty masterworks.