Chinese Porcelain in the Altman Collection

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Under a vibrant and tender green sky
Yellow-centered prunus blossoms high.

Anyone who looks with leisure at the green hawthorn vase illustrated on the cover will be rewarded with an instant sense of spring. White-breasted birds chirp joyfully while they thread in and out of the aubergine and green branches, among swaying bamboos and lichen-covered rocks. Perhaps only nature and great works of art can move us so deeply; for the Chinese there has always been a close connection between the two.

The vase is one of the magnificent porcelains given to the Museum in 1913 by Benjamin Altman, whose great bequest also included fifteen Oriental rugs, fifty-one paintings from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, and twenty-seven sculptures. The Rospigliosi cup is one of the most famous treasures of his collection.

Mr. Altman began his career as a collector in 1882, when he was forty-two years old, with the modest purchase of a pair of Chinese copper vases with enamel decoration. Soon afterward he began to acquire porcelain, with the help of Theodore Y. Hobby, Keeper of the Altman Collection from 1914 to 1958. The porcelains he bequeathed to the Museum number 429, most of which can be called masterpieces. Only one other collection in the world can be ranked with this one: the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. collection of Ming and Ch'ing ceramics, seventy-three pieces of which were bequeathed to the Museum in 1961.

The Altman porcelains are now exhibited in a new setting on the north and south balconies

Fig. 1. Left: mantle set of five pieces in famille rose. Ch'ing dynasty, Ch'ien-lung period (1736-1795). Heights 25 and 23 inches. Right: three pieces from a set of five in famille noire. Ch'ing dynasty, K'ang-hsi period (1662-1722). Enamel on biscuit. Heights 24 and 18 3/4 inches.

All the objects illustrated in this article were bequeathed to the Museum by Benjamin Altman in 1913.
overlooking the stairway in the Great Hall. Continuous cases have been designed (see Figures 1 and 2), with attic and foot lighting and flexible dividers, to bring out to the full the dramatic shapes and colors of these beautiful pieces.

Most of the porcelains were produced at Ching-tê chên during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Many of them, however, continue traditions that had existed for centuries before, for Chinese ceramic history has a continuity rarely found elsewhere. Some bowls and vases in the Altman collection resemble in shape early Chinese pottery and bronzes, which can be dated between 3000 B.C. and A.D. 300. It is, however, to the golden periods of Chinese art, the T’ang dynasty (618-906) and the Sung dynasty (960-1279), that the Altman pieces refer directly.

The most admired T’ang pottery is called “three-color” ware or T’ang san-ts’ai; in it impressionistic soft yellow browns, greens, or blues were used in combination with the rosy white clay body. The san-ts’ai technique was used not only for daily utensils, but also for tomb figurines known as ming chi. We are accustomed to seeing these tomb figures singly or in small groups, but they were actually interred in large numbers and often included architectural models. There were whole troops of horsemen and hostlers, female musicians and dancers, animals and household furniture. The custom of placing such objects in tombs may have been substituted for an earlier practice of burying alive with a man of rank his wives, servants, and livestock. The number of potteries placed in a given tomb depended upon
the rank of the deceased. After the middle of the fourteenth century, when the Ming dynasty came to power, the ming chi slowly disappeared; in their place, paper objects made to resemble them were burned at funerals.

The potters of the Sung dynasty, though they had not yet discovered true porcelain, achieved heights in the use of their medium that were unknown either before or after. Both colors and shapes became more refined and elusive as the makers concentrated upon the exact potentialities and limitations of the clay itself, without regard to works in other mediums. In their stoneware, or high-fired pottery, thick feldspathic glazes took the place of the runny and thinly applied lead silicate glazes used earlier. A series of outstanding monochrome wares, especially creamy whites and blue greens, was developed; in these the thick glaze was beautifully controlled. The many colors used were all derived from the effect of firing, with varying amounts of oxygen present, glazing materials containing iron or copper oxide. In the blue and red-violet Ch'ün pottery made at Chün Chou in Honan province, the thick glaze sometimes forms a delightful roll or suspended drop near the foot rim.

The same is true of the brown and black tea bowls made at Chien-an in Fukien province. Chien ware is often called by its Japanese name "temmoku" and is highly prized by the masters of the tea ceremony.

The wares known as Kuan ("official"), Ko ("elder brother"), and Ju are distinguished by their elusive bluish green colors. Yüeh glaze is usually a soft grayish green, and northern celadon a transparent olive. Celadon, as distinguished from northern celadon, has an opaque jade quality, and its colors are too numerous to describe. Ying-ch'ing ("shadowy blue") has the faintest blue green, particularly when the glaze is thick or applied over incised decoration. The beautiful creamy or white Ting ware made at Tingchow in Hopeh province derived its color from iron like the rest, but successful firing in this case depended on an oxidizing rather than a reducing (smoky) atmosphere in the kiln. A beautiful Ting bowl with molded decoration is the only Sung piece in the Altman collection, but more than a dozen examples of the pottery of this dynasty, particularly Ju and Kuan wares, can be seen in the loan exhibition of Chinese Art Treasures, opening at the Museum in the middle of September.

The Yüan or Mongol dynasty (1280-1368) carried on the pottery traditions of its Sung predecessors. To this period, however, belongs the
Fig. 5. Three Yung-chêng white pieces inspired by Sung Ting ware. Vase with delicately incised dragon chasing the flaming pearl. Height 12\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. Pilgrim’s bottle with incised dragons. Height 7\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. Plate with incised fish, waves, and peony. Diameter 11 inches

discovery of true porcelain, which was made by combining China clay (kaolin) and China stone (decomposed feldspathic rock) into a white clay. The pieces were shaped on the potter’s wheel or by means of molds, then dried to “leather” or “cheese” hardness so that the lower parts, where the vessels had been separated from the lump of clay on the wheel, could be trimmed to the desired thinness. They were dried completely before the decoration and the glaze were applied, then submitted in a kiln to a temperature between 1300° and 1400° centigrade. People often ask, “What makes the Chinese glaze fit so well?” The answer is not complex, for Chinese potters work with the simplest ingredients: porcelain clay plus fluxing materials such as powdered limestone and wood ash that melt into the glassy substance that forms the glaze. Since glaze and body are so similar in composition, their coefficients of expansion and contraction are equally close during the cooling of the kiln. Thus the glaze is unlikely to crackle. Before the glazing technique was perfected, there must have been accidental crackled effects. In time the potters began to create these intentionally. The large network one often sees is called in Chinese terms the “ice crackle,” while the tiny circular one is known as the “fish roe pattern.”

During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), Chinese porcelains were widely known. Both blue and white ware and celadons of this period have been excavated at sites as far-flung as southeast Asia, Korea, Japan, Iran, Iraq, India, Arabia, and Egypt. In the seventeenth century, during the late years of the Ming dynasty and the early ones of the Ch’ing (1644-1912), the European powers established direct trade routes with China. Thereafter the impact of Chinese porcelains may be seen in all the great porcelains of Europe: Dresden, Sévres, Meissen, and Limoges wares, among others, were inspired by Chinese exports; so was Delft pottery. Blue and white ware and
hawthorn vases were especially popular.

The Chinese porcelain of the Ch'ing dynasty reached a peak of technical perfection during the reigns of three important emperors: the K'ang-hsi Emperor (1662-1722), the Yung-cheng Emperor (1723-1735), and the Ch'ien-lung Emperor (1736-1795). Ch'ing-te chê'n, where the imperial kilns were, was first described for Europeans in a letter of 1712 from the French Jesuit D'Entrecolles. He estimated that the town had a million inhabitants, most of whom were associated with some three thousand kilns in the area. "They find Employment here for Youths and weakly Persons," he wrote; "there are none, even to the Blind, but what get their living here by grinding Colours." For a period of some seventy years, 1683-1750, the imperial kilns were under the care of three famous and able directors, Tsang Ying-hsuan, Nien Hsi-yao, and T'ang Ying.

It was at this time and place that most of the Altman porcelains were made. They are of three great color groups: blue and white ware, porcelains decorated in polychrome enamel, and monochrome ware. The brilliance and subtlety of their colors must be seen to be appreciated, but the illustrations here can give at least a sample of their varied decorative motifs, elaborate design, and beauty of shape. (Color reproductions of twenty-five outstanding pieces may be seen in the Museum's picture book Chinese Porcelains in the Altman Collection.)

Blue and white ware has been popular with collectors all over the world ever since the Ming dynasty. The blue comes from cobalt applied under the glaze. In earlier periods the cobalt was relatively unrefined, and impurities in it tended to ooze through the glaze and produce unintended dark spots. The potters used a rather linear style of decoration, therefore, because the accidental widening of a dark line would not spoil the design. But they kept refining their cobalt and searching for new methods of painting. The ware reached perfection during the K'ang-hsi period when, with highly refined cobalt, the most delicately shaded brush strokes

Fig. 6. Blue and white vase of soft-paste porcelain with a lion and an eagle. Ch'ien-lung period. Height 20 inches
were used; the blue took on new brilliance and
sparkled like sapphire against a white jade
ground. This pleasantly cool color scheme pro-
vided a poetic way for vase painters to depict
scenes as if bathed in moonlight.

Our ginger jar (Figure 4) represents the best
of this ware. Its white prunus (flowering plum
against a vividly painted "ice crackle" ground
suggests the first sign of spring. It is said that
noblemen used such containers to send sweet-
meats to their friends during the Chinese New
Year (which falls between January 21 and Feb-
ruary 19). The recipient was expected to return
the jar and often filled it with other delicacies of
the season. The fine brushwork typical of this
ware may best be seen in Figures 6 and 7. A
blue and white soft-paste porcelain bottle of a
more formalized design has four medallions dis-
playing the character that stands for longevity
(shou) and the bat that symbolizes happiness (fu).

The porcelains that are decorated in poly-
chrome enamel are a survival or later develop-
ment of the san-ts'ai or "three-color" technique
developed during the T'ang dynasty. In the
Ch'ing dynasty these were generally called wu-
ts'ai ("five-color") ware. They are usually known
by the French terms famille verte, famille noire,

Fig. 7. Detail of a blue and white beaker, showing
the shaded brushwork typical of this ware

famille jaune, and famille rose, meaning green,
black, yellow, and rose, according to the pre-
dominant color. The enamel decoration is gener-
ally fused either on biscuit (clay which has been
through one firing) or over glaze. The pieces are
then fired in a relatively low-temperature kiln
at about 900° centigrade; one or more firings at
successively lower temperatures prevent burning
out the delicate colorings and gold decoration.

Flowers are favorite subjects for polychrome
decoration, particularly those of the four sea-
sons: the peony (a symbol of wealth) for spring,
the lotus for summer, the chrysanthemum for
autumn, the prunus for winter. So are animals

Fig. 8. Lion (one of a pair) in famille rose. Ch'ien-
lung period. Height 15 1/2 inches
and birds, symbols of Taoist and Buddhist derivation. Legendary and historical scenes are also often used. The so-called hawthorn vases decorated with prunus, which resembles the English hawthorn, generally belong to famille noire, famille verte, or famille jaune. Among the superb examples of famille noire in the Altman collection is a rare mantle set, a garniture de cheminée, of five pieces. Seventeenth century Europeans may have seen such vessels as these (see Figure 9) in Chinese temples and imported them for use at home as mantle ornaments. A detail from an equally rare black hawthorn vase is shown in Figure 9; here the tree trunks are aubergine, the branches green, and the flowers white with yellow centers. This, like the dragon vase of Figure 11, was undoubtedly inspired by the san-ts'ai tradition.

The finest example of famille verte is a large vase decorated with iron-red flowers among variegated enamels. Another vase in this group depicts the Hundred Antiques, an assemblage of ritual vessels, paintings, bird cages, books, brushes, and legendary treasures of Buddhist and Taoist origin. Still another (Figure 14) is a charming example of figure painting.

There are several beautiful pieces of famille jaune, much rarer than famille noire. A baluster vase with beaker neck has long been known and admired by collectors in China as the rarest and largest of its kind; it is decorated with tree peony, magnolia, and guelder-rose, with green and white finches flying about under a white moon.

Famille rose (see Figure 16) derives its characteristic deep rose color from gold. New combinations of this and other thickly applied enamels created some of the most complex ornamentation and color schemes in Chinese ceramic history. It is said that famille rose was invented during the Yung-chêng reign, though it was more popular during the succeeding Ch'ien-lung period. This red color is almost identical with the rose du Barry that was invented in France about the same time in the eighteenth century.
The monochrome techniques of the Sung dynasty were revived during the reigns of the three great Ch’ing emperors, and many of the Sung wares were copied with the utmost skill. There is little doubt that the K’ang-hsi period leads in special glazes such as oxblood, peach bloom, café au lait, apple green, and clair de lune—names in themselves descriptive. The shapes of this period have in general a certain masculine strength achieved by means of straighter forms in combination with decisive curves. The decorations too are usually done with stronger drawing and stronger colors than in the two following periods. Shape and glaze tended to be more refined and feminine during the reigns of the Yung-chêng and Ch’ien-lung emperors.

Peach blooms, which the Chinese call chiang-tou hung (“bean red”), are highly prized by collectors. Among the thirty-three examples in the Altman collection is a magnificent group of imperial writing accessories (see Figure 19): water coupes, a brush washer, a covered box for vermilion ink used in seal impressions, an amphora-shaped bottle with ring neck, and a flower vase with chrysanthemum base. These pieces are coated with a glaze of various tints of ripening peach, sometimes beautifully invested with rare shades of moss green and ashes of roses. Most of the water coupes have medallions of archaic dragons incised on the paste. All the pieces have the six-character mark in underglaze blue that reads Ta-Ch’ing-K’ang-hsi-nien-chih, “Made in the K’ang-hsi period of the great Ch’ing dynasty.”

Oxblood, or sang de boeuf, the Chinese called lang-yao. Perhaps it was named for a family of famous potters, perhaps for Lang T’ing-tso, vice-roy of Kiangsi and Kiangnan provinces, who had charge of the potteries at Ching-tê chên at the end of the seventeenth century. The color is obtained by smoky firing, that is, firing in which the copper oxide is reduced. The technique had been used for the Chūn ware of the Sung dynasty and for the color known as sacrificial red in the Ming dynasty. Not until the K’ang-hsi period, however, was a brilliant red glaze under absolute control. Lang-yao, like peach bloom, has many variations. Sometimes it resembles curdled ox blood, brilliant red where the coating is of medium thickness and pale green where it is thin; at times misfired pieces yield the color of ashes of roses, liver, or dark gray; at other times the color is burned out to a transparent glaze.

Apple green (see Figure 15) also derives its color from copper. Green copper enamel is applied and fired over a crackled white porcelain glaze; the fusing in this ware oxidizes instead of reducing.
Fig. 12. Kuan Yin, goddess of mercy. Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Height 23 inches

Fig. 13. Shou Lao, god of longevity. K'ang-hsi period. Enamel on biscuit. Height 9 inches
Clair de lune, considered rarer even than peach bloom, is one of the palest and most elusive blues imaginable. Like peach bloom, it was probably made for imperial use. Only pale celadon, developed at Ching-tê chên, can rival clair de lune; its clear and delightful green color and potting are almost as perfect as peach bloom. The Altman collection has only one piece, a vase with a chrysanthemum base that bears the six-character K’ang-hsi mark in underglaze blue. It is shown in Figure 20 with a clair de lune vase.

Imperial yellows were used in the Ch’ing dynasty exclusively by royalty and by temples under imperial patronage. One sees the color in roof tiles that look golden in the sunlight, in magnificent embroidered robes, even in silk mountings for imperial portraits. The porcelain glazes were once believed to be derived from iron, but today most experts agree that the yellow is due to antimony or vanadium and shades toward mustard according to the amount of iron present. Every variation of the hue possesses a clear, strong tonality. The flower vase of Figure 18 has a rich golden glaze over an incised dragon and phoenix design. Perhaps it was not made for the emperor himself, but rather for some member of his household, since the dragon has four claws instead of the customary five.

Many brown and black wares were made during the eighteenth century, their iron-derived colors ranging from café au lait through chocolate and “iron rust” to wu-chin or “black gold,” generally known as mirror black. The latter was obtained by combining manganese, cobalt, and iron; the black has bluish or brownish reflections according to the varying proportions of the three minerals. Our mirror black bottle (see Figure 2) is among the best K’ang-hsi monochromes; not only is its glaze richer than most, but its shape and size are harmoniously noble. Iron rust is an oversaturated iron glaze; when it was fired metallic crystals or tiny flakes floated to the surface of the glaze, creating a combination of brown and gold. A vase of the color of café au lait is shown in Figure 17 together with a small pear-shaped bottle in “tea dust,” a green glaze probably containing chrome and applied over brown slip, that gives the effect of streaks of finely powdered green tea on a red-brown cup. The tactile

*Fig. 14. Famille verte vase. K’ang-hsi period. Height 10 inches*
quality of this glaze is as pleasing as its color—and a collector of fine Chinese porcelain is acutely conscious of the "feel" of the surface.

A breath-taking turquoise color, kingfisher blue or peacock green, was a favorite from the Ming dynasty on. Copper in an alkaline glaze gives a color similar to the Egyptian and Persian blues; the glaze is often crackled in the fish roe pattern. One of the most impressive turquoise pieces in the collection is the vase shown in Figure 21, with low relief decoration under the glaze.

As one comes to know the Altman collection, one realizes that each piece has a special quality of its own. The galaxy of K'ang-hsi polychrome is like a series of paintings of the same school but by different masters. The harmonious variety of the monochromes reminds one of a summer garden in full bloom. The new installation with its dramatic lighting shows the pieces in their true glory.
Fig. 19. Peach bloom rouge box, chrysanthemum vase, and water coupe. All K’ang-hsi period. Diameter of box 2 3/4 inches; heights of vase and coupe 8 1/4 and 3 1/2 inches

Fig. 20. Chrysanthemum vase with pale celadon glaze and clair de lune vase. Both K’ang-hsi period. Heights 8 1/4 and 6 inches
It may be of interest to sketch briefly the relationship of the Altman porcelains to the rest of the Museum’s very comprehensive collection of Chinese ceramics. New York collectors in the nineteenth century were fascinated by Chinese porcelains, and the fruit of their collecting has been a rich harvest for the Museum.

A number of fine Chinese porcelains came to us through the purchase by subscription of the Samuel P. Avery collection in 1879, the bequest of Edward C. Moore in 1891, and the gift of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Colman in 1893. Next came the Altman collection. The bequest of Mary Clark Thompson in 1924 added a rare collection of K’ang-hsi and Ch’ien-lung teapots, besides numerous fine Ming and Ch’ing porcelains. Mrs. Samuel T. Peters gave the Museum in 1926 some hundred pieces of pottery which had been on loan for years. They were selected from a much larger collection by Mrs. Peters and S. C. Bosch Reitz, then Curator of Far Eastern Art. Dynasties from Han to Ming are represented, and the group is especially rich in wares of the great Han, T’ang, and Sung periods. The Havemeyer collection, described elsewhere in this Bulletin, included nearly two hundred pieces of Chinese pottery and porcelain, again ranging from Han to Ming. Among them were Ming imperial turquoise jars, a rare peach bloom and moss green water coupe, and Yung-chêng underglaze red vases, of which the Altman collection has no examples. In 1931 the Michael Friedsam collection of Ch’ing porcelain added much-needed clair de lune pieces and some fine figurines: regal parrots and curiously curled-up cats of the K’ang-hsi period. The Jacob Ruppert bequest in 1939 consisted of Ming “three-color” temple jars and vases. In 1950 Mary Stillman Harkness bequeathed to the Museum a large pair of the finest Chün bowls, a group of Ting ware, and a set of K’ang-hsi wine cups in famille verte, each decorated with a flower representing one of the twelve months in the lunar calendar. In the same year Robert West bequeathed a collection that included fine T’ang “three-color” boxes, northern celadon bowls, and beautiful ox-blood vases. The magnificent Edwin C. Vogel collection, on a long-term loan to the Museum, features K’ang-hsi porcelain, with more than a dozen polychrome figurines and a rich variety of monochromes. Particularly outstanding are the many pieces of pale celadon, clair de lune, and yüeh-pai (“moon white”) wares and a pale yellow vase of the late K’ang-hsi period.

Thus the Museum’s collection has grown steadily and selectively, until it is now a very important one. As, in the coming years, various lacunae are filled, it will become of even greater importance. At present the Altman porcelains are centrally placed; other Chinese ceramics from the collection are on view in the galleries at the north end of the second floor.

*Fig. 21. Turquoise vase with incised dragon, phoenix, and ju-i (“fungus”) scroll. Ch’ien-lung period. Height 24 inches*