

## GERALD REITLINGER'S CHINESE PORCELAIN

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*“His manner was dry, not to say testy; enthusiasm, it was clear, was not the response in which he was interested, still less any fulsome expression of gratitude”,* wrote the Vice-Chancellor Lord Bullock in his preface to the Ashmolean’s 1982 exhibition catalogue of Reitlinger’s Eastern ceramics.<sup>1</sup> He concludes his account of their meeting in the Clarendon Building, however, *“I have negotiated with a number of benefactors in my time, but none ever impressed me as did Gerald Reitlinger. By the end of our talk I was not only excited by the prospect of what might come to the University, but put on my mettle to show that Oxford was capable of the flexibility needed to meet his conditions”*. The meeting took place in 1972 and the most unusual of those conditions was that the collection be given right away - but that Reitlinger meanwhile should retain it and live with it for the rest of his life. His life ended tragically, six years later, following a fire at his home, Woodgate in Sussex, that destroyed the house but not, for the most part, the collection of stonewares and porcelains from Japan to Germany and most major ceramic centres in between. Anthony Powell’s obituary summarised Reitlinger’s life and interests – traveller, writer, painter, collector, sometime soldier and frequent house-party host - and included something of his manner.<sup>2</sup> A portrait of him (Fig.1) in the Ashmolean by Christopher Wood pre-dates most of those activities but was drawn in 1926, the same year in which Wood painted Constant Lambert (another of Powell’s friends, also mentioned in the obituary) and produced designs

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<sup>1</sup> Ashmolean Museum, *Eastern Ceramics and other works of art from the collection of Gerald Reitlinger: Catalogue of the Memorial Exhibition (Ashmolean Museum 18 July-13 September 1981)*, Oxford, 1981, p.9.

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, 17 March 1978.

for Lambert's *Romeo and Juliet*. Both men appear throughout Powell's *Memoirs*, Reitlinger particularly for his house parties.<sup>3</sup> The obituary note written a few days later by the Director of the Ashmolean, Sir David Piper, focused by contrast and unsurprisingly on Reitlinger as collector.<sup>4</sup> His collecting began with Islamic ceramics and only later moved on to Chinese: in 1930-32 he excavated at Kish and Hira with David Talbot Rice, and subsequently travelled from Yunnan in southwest China to Burma, a journey that led to his 1939 book *South of the Clouds*, the title being the literal translation of *Yunnan*.<sup>5</sup> This then extended to Japanese and Korean wares, and finally to European as his interest in connections between Asia and Europe was piqued. The Powells' friend Eve Disher painted him in 1952 (Fig.2), depicting him sitting by three plates from the collection that are almost certainly Iznik wares. The eventual extent of Reitlinger's collection is best demonstrated by a summary of the donation lists compiled in 1972, each sheet initialled by Reitlinger and the then Keeper of Eastern Art James Harle, and organised with series' of numbers according to medium and geographical origin: 63 Chinese and Japanese paintings; 48 European drawings and paintings; 369 European ceramics; 50 Islamic paintings and textiles; 740 Islamic ceramics; 511 Japanese ceramics, and 961 Chinese ceramics. The total is 2742, with 25 rugs and carpets added five years later. The European ceramics were mainly Spanish, Italian, and Chelsea porcelain, and there were also 1486 fragments of Islamic pottery from Iraq.

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Powell, *To Keep the Ball Rolling: The Memoirs of Anthony Powell*, London (Heinemann), 1976-1982, and *Journals, 1982-1986*, with an introduction by Violet Powell, London (Heinemann), 1995, see particularly pp. 45 (16 December 1982); 56 (9 February 1982); and 84 (4 October 1983).

<sup>4</sup> *The Times*, 21 March 1978.

<sup>5</sup> *South of the Clouds: a Winter Ride through Yün-nan*, London (Faber & Faber), 1939; he also wrote an account of his earlier travels, *A Tower of Skulls: a Journey through Persia and Turkish Armenia*, London (Duckworth), 1932.

Among the Chinese and Japanese porcelains, two groups are particularly strong and mentioned frequently in association with Reitlinger: Japanese Kakiemon (Fig.3) and Chinese 17<sup>th</sup>-century (Fig.4). This paper focuses on the latter, which is not just of high quality, but as a concentration of the type was – and remains – the most significant of such collections in the field of Chinese porcelain: perspicacious in its time, growing progressively in its importance, and enduring in its quality. In mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century London there was a small group of English collectors of these ‘Transitional Wares’, so called from their dating between the end of Ming imperial patronage in the 1620s and its re-establishment in 1683 by the second Qing emperor, but they were the first since Queen Mary filled Kensington Palace with it in the 1690s.<sup>6</sup> Taste in porcelain had been dominated by armorial and Chinoiserie in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Nankeen ware blue-and-white in the 19<sup>th</sup>, and then among serious pre-War collectors by fine Imperial pieces of the Ming and Qing dynasties: those produced in the period of 17<sup>th</sup>-century dynastic change, necessarily for private markets, being considered utilitarian and insignificant. Consequently the prices were low. One of this group of collectors was Richard de la Mare, co-founding Director of Faber and Faber who had published Reitlinger’s *South of the Clouds* and who tried without success to persuade him to write a volume on 17<sup>th</sup>-century blue-and-white for the Faber monograph series on pottery and porcelain. De la Mare commented in conversation with Oliver Impey, Ashmolean Curator of Japanese Art from 1969-2005, that at Monks in Kensington Church Sreet it was generally possible to buy twenty or thirty pieces of Transitional blue-and-white any time for three or four pounds apiece; also that Gerald ‘...did do a lot of exchanging of pieces with other collectors. Soame (Jenyns) used to complain that Gerald always came off best’ (Fig.5).

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<sup>6</sup> For a recreation of Queen Mary’s porcelain displays at Kensington Palace see Mark Hinton and Oliver Impey, eds., *Kensington Palace and the Porcelain of Queen Mary ii: Essays in association with the exhibition CHINA MANIA : A re-creation of Queen Mary II’s display of Oriental Porcelain at Kensington Palace in the 1690s*, London (Historic Royal Palaces), 1998.

As a field for collecting, there is no doubt that the porcelain of the mid-seventeenth century was and is a smart one. The prices were low in Reitlinger's day not because the pieces lacked quality but because they did not possess the imperial associations that had defined what mattered. In the Chinese context, patterned porcelain was for the table, the desk and sometimes the altar, but only very rarely for the display cabinet; while in Britain, as mentioned above, 17<sup>th</sup>-century wares had not been the object of collectors' interest since shortly after they were made, and then only fairly briefly. All this disregards the facts that many, if not most, were finely potted, carefully decorated and perfectly fired – in short, of very high quality and not entirely surprisingly so, as many were produced by the same people and in the same places that had made the imperial wares (Fig.4) Added to this was the incentive to find new markets and in doing so experiment with new shapes and ornament. The great innovation in Transitional wares was in fact the new approach to ornament. Dominated in the Ming by a repertoire of phoenix, dragons, flowers and auspicious motifs, porcelain decoration in the early seventeenth century tended towards dull. By 1640 however, it included narrative scenes painted in gradations of richly coloured blue pigment, sometimes accompanied by poems and other excerpts of text in neat calligraphy that elevated the tone and certainly the interest of some standard forms (Fig.6). In addition to these, new shapes were created in response to overseas markets, particularly Japan (Fig. 7).

The narrative scenes and inscriptions became the subject of much study, identifying scenes from plays and novels and then the woodblock editions from which the painters may have copied them, leading to attempts (never entirely successful) to identify particular painters.

Since the dates on inscriptions were always given using the two-character combinations of the sixty-year cycle, controversy also arose. Were the pots examples of early Qing unmarked imperial wares, or could such sophistication have been achieved sixty years previously amid the upheavals of mid-century dynastic change? There were differences of opinion among scholars within China and within the West, where collectors and dealers also weighed in. The consensus now is that the earlier dates are correct.

One of the leading collectors was the diplomat and banker Sir Michael Butler, whose collection at the time of his death in 2013 numbered some 700 pieces. It consisted entirely of 17<sup>th</sup>-century wares and was inspired, Sir Michael often said, by Reitlinger, whom he met just a few times in the 1970s. The Butler Family Collection was the finest of its kind, the only comparable one being that of Julia Curtis of Williamsburg, Virginia.<sup>7</sup> Together they organised several exhibitions during the 1990s and 2000s; however, pieces from the Curtis collection have been offered at auction in the last few years, while the Butler collection was broken up after his death. Reitlinger's collection thus survives intact as the greatest group of Transitional wares. Butler's keen interest in 17<sup>th</sup>-century wares gave him a particular interest in Reitlinger's legacy, and it was through his efforts alongside Julia Curtis that £40,000 was raised among fellow collectors and dealers for the case that now displays 100 of Reitlinger's pieces on the museum's northwest staircase, installed in 2012 (Fig.8). He was also concerned that the 1981 Reitlinger catalogue needed updating, and went through the collection piece by piece, adding notes for the museum's records, particularly with regard to ornament.

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<sup>7</sup> Together they organised several exhibitions during the 1990s and 2000s, including 'Shunzhi Porcelain: Treasures from an Unknown Reign' (Virginia, 2002); however, many pieces from the Curtis collection have been offered at auction in the last few years, while the Butler collection has been the subject of a quite public dispute between Sir Michael's four children resulting eventually in its being broken up.

This specialist interest has undoubtedly benefited the museum, while it is also the case that the Reitlinger Collection, by virtue of being part of the museum, has been available to many audiences. Along with the collection, Reitlinger bequeathed his house Woodgate in order to provide funds for its display and in fact, until the Ashmolean redevelopment in 2009, both the Islamic Gallery and the Eastern Art Seminar Room were named for him. Beyond the museum, just over 100 pieces were lent to the National Trust for display in Beningborough Hall in Yorkshire, where they were to be seen from the early 1980s until their return to the Ashmolean in 2014. A more specialised, short-term loan, went to Kensington Palace in 1998 as part of the 'ChinaMania' project that re-installed 17<sup>th</sup>-century porcelains throughout Queen Mary's apartments in accordance with an inventory of 1698, while several individual pieces have been included in exhibitions in the US and the UK.<sup>8</sup> Reitlinger was an enlightened as well as a generous benefactor, stating, quite unusually, that the museum might sell duplicates in the collection.

Reitlinger may have imposed unusual conditions on his gift but equally, he was exceptional in the level of documentation he provided with it. His meticulously kept record cards are individually a source of information for each piece, and together make an impressive statement of the extent of the collection. More than that, though, dry as they appear they reveal something more about the collector. The annotations of subsequent prices fetched, sometimes over decades, reflect the financial successes of his choices along with changes in the art market. Clearly this is in keeping with his interest in low prices and advantageous exchanges, even more so with his being the author of 'The Economics of Taste', which appeared in 3 volumes between 1961 and 1970 and charts more than two centuries of prices in the art market. A look at one more of the cards though, reveals more (Fig.9).

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<sup>8</sup> See note 7.

The cylindrical vase C5 was a fairly early purchase, in 1953. It is a later Qing piece, in an area in which Reitlinger did not excel; while his 17<sup>th</sup>-century porcelains are superb, those of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and later are mediocre. He sold it quite promptly the following year but at a loss, unusually. But most unusually for this index, it includes a handwritten annotation that reflects the livelier side of Gerald Reitlinger as known from the accounts of his friends.

#### CAPTIONS

Fig.1

Gerald Reitlinger, 1926, by Christopher Wood (1901-30). Blue chalk on paper, signed and dated, 63 x 48.5 cm. Ashmolean Museum, gift of Gerald Reitlinger, WA 1978.51.

Fig.2

Gerald Reitlinger, 1960s, by Eve Disher (1894-1991). Oil on paper, 75 x 50 cm. Ashmolean Museum, gift of Gerald Reitlinger, WA 1978.33.1.

Fig.3 Hexagonal 'Hampton Court' jar. Kakiemon ware, Japan, Edo period, c.1680. Porcelain with polychrome overglaze enamels, ht. with lid 31.0 cm. Ashmolean Museum, gift of Gerald Reitlinger, EA 1978.688..

Fig.4

*Gu*-shaped vase, dated 1639. Jingdezhen kilns, China, late Ming dynasty. Porcelain with underglaze blue decoration, ht. 46.0 cm. Ashmolean, gift of Gerald Reitlinger, EA 1978.1276.

Figs.5 a and b

Gerald Reitlinger's record cards for two Chinese wares eventually exchanged with other collectors. The numbers follow Reitlinger's 'C' prefix sequence for Chinese porcelains. Ashmolean Museum, Department of Eastern Art.

Fig.6

Brushpot, 1630-40. Jingdezhen kilns, China, late Ming dynasty. Porcelain with underglaze blue decoration, ht. 21.0 cm. Earlier in the Ming dynasty, brushpots were more commonly made of jade or bronze. Ashmolean Museum, gift of Gerald Reitlinger, EA 1978.2056.

Fig.7

Dish, 1630-40. Jingdezhen kilns, China, late Ming dynasty. Porcelain with underglaze blue decoration and iron-brown painted rim, d. 19.7 cm. The peach-shaped form of the dish is an example of a new type of ware made for the Japanese market. Ashmolean Museum, gift of Gerald Reitlinger, EA 1978.2019.

Fig.8

Display of seventeenth-century Chinese porcelain from Gerald Reitlinger's collection, Ashmolean Museum, northwest staircase, installed 2012.

Fig.9

Gerald Reitlinger's record card for an eighteenth-century piece he owned briefly during the 1950s. His handwritten comment on the vendor's later misfortune provides a rare indication in his own words of Reitlinger's zest for society as depicted in Powell's *Memoirs*.

