Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Monumenta Serica
Journal of Oriental Studies

ISSN: 0254-9948 (Print) 2057-1690 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ymon20

Glorious Qing: Decorative Arts in China, 1644–1911

Claudia Brown, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2024. xii, 336 pp. 277 Color Illustrations, 3 Maps, Bibliography, Glossary-Index. US$ 75 (HB). ISBN 978-0-295-75191-7

Feng Schöneweiß

To cite this article: Feng Schöneweiß (2026) Glorious Qing: Decorative Arts in China, 1644–1911, Monumenta Serica, 74:1, 277-281, DOI: 10.1080/02549948.2026.2652801

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02549948.2026.2652801

Claudia Brown, *Glorious Qing: Decorative Arts in China, 1644–1911*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2024. xii, 336 pp. 277 Color Illustrations, 3 Maps, Bibliography, Glossary-Index. US$ 75 (HB). ISBN 978-0-295-75191-7

Survey books are difficult to write. They require the authorial determination to select and neglect people, events, artifacts, and topics in a curated sequence within a particular scope. Their methodology is oftentimes implicit. And they convey fundamental messages to a large readership – often larger than that of monographs – who either have no prior knowledge on the theme or have just entered the field. In this sense, surveys form the crucial points of reference for academic and methodological advancement – or for that matter stagnation – in respective disciplines. As such, they also command careful consideration in the historiography of the subject. Previous surveys in the field of Chinese art history often focus on a single medium or theme through a long period of time, or all artistic media over a single dynasty. Compared to monographs, surveys seem to fall out of scholarly fashion, when there is indeed a long-standing need for an entry-level survey on decorative arts in China.

Fulfilling exactly that demand, Claudia Brown's *Glorious Qing: Decorative Arts in China, 1644–1911* deserves serious attention of students and scholars of the histories of art in late imperial China, in particular the Qing period. The book follows the author's earlier volume on painting in the same historical period and geography, *Great Qing: Painting in China, 1644–1911*, by the same publisher (2014). Together, the two volumes form a diptych among the latest textbooks on Asian art history in English.

Glorious Qing aims to "offer a comprehensive survey of Qing decorative arts that will delight experts and novices alike, from collectors to students of art history" (front flap). It sets out to complete the task in a concise introduction and six chapters. As the four-page introduction succinctly states, *Glorious Qing* covers some of the most representative "three-dimensional, well-crafted art objects […] designed and fabricated" by individuals of varied social status during the Qing period (p. 1). Such art objects were made of various materials including ceramics, metalworks, plants (e.g., hardwood, lacquer) and other once-living organisms (e.g., bones, coral, mother of pearl), precious stones, textiles, in addition to a variety of enamels and color pigments. Differing from the approach of material culture studies, the book clearly focuses on "superbly crafted objects of art" rather than artifacts of other qualities and functions (see front flap). Kangxi and Qianlong periods each occupies a quarter of the book's length, while decorative arts under the Shunzhi and Yongzheng emperors together take another quarter. The rest of the Qing emperors share the last quarter of pages, in which the three years of Xuantong period (r. 1909–1911) proportionally receive nearly four pages (pp. 211–214).

Chapter One depicts the "ascendancy" of decorative arts during the Shunzhi reign (1644–1661), moving from court costumes, porcelain for domestic and external markets, to fine art and literati taste in the Jiangnan region (p. 5). During this period, as Brown states, "a Qing style of court dress was invented," appropriating dragon motifs in a bold and fierce fashion which can be seen from a garment in Tibet bestowed by the Manchu court (pp. 6–7, fig. 1.1). This and other objects of decorative arts show the wide political and cultural connections of the Great Qing with Tibet, Mongolia, and European nations. The broad strokes of these connections

are specified in porcelain made in Jingdezhen and Dehua to demonstrate the development of "commerce, trade, and shipping" (p. 10), with examples from diverse sources including maritime archaeology in Southeast Asia and historical collections in Central Europe. With curatorial authority, Brown also notes here the difficulty of dating Dehua porcelain with precision, "partly because marks and inscriptions are rare" (p. 14). The chapter moves on to the connection between scholarly taste and craftsmanship in the Jiangnan region, with examples of an Yixing teapot, a carved bamboo brush holder, a lacquered box, and fine objects made of jade, ivory, bronze, and rhinoceros' horn. A fascinating cluster of examples features the culture of scholar's rocks and their visual representation in painting and on porcelain surface. The chapter closes with Shunzhi's attraction to "Chinese Buddhism and Chinese painting" as well as his early death from smallpox.

Chapter Two portrays the "flowering" of Qing decorative arts during the Kangxi period (1662–1722). Emphasizing the inspiration of popular literature for crafting, the chapter delves first into decorative arts under private patronage "in the realm" (p. 33). Highlights in this regard include Liu Yuan's (ca. 1641 – before 1691, pp. 33–34) prints, Gu Erniang's (*fl.* 1700–1722) inkstones, Chen Mingyuan's (*fl.* Kangxi period) trompe l'oeil brush washer made of Yixing clay in the shape of a bamboo shoot (pp. 37–39), a lacquer box inlaid with mother of pearl and gold and silver foil, and scholar's rocks. Brown tirelessly corrects Eurocentric misunderstandings such as "Chinese art tradition lacked respect for sculpture," substantiating her argument with an example of a Dehua porcelain Bodhisattva which possesses "sublime awareness of sculptural form" and "highly refined concave and convex surfaces" (p. 41). A vase made of copper alloy and inscribed with Arabic scripts shows the transcultural connections of the Muslim community in Qing China (p. 49). The increasing diversity of artistic genre and styles at court was a result of the Kangxi emperor's recruitment of talents from across China and the realm beyond, for instance, the scholar Liu Yuan from Suzhou and the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ripa (1682–1746) from Italy. The chapter presents the making of decorative arts side by side with multiple imperial projects of compiling encyclopedia and catalogues of calligraphy and painting, thereby situating crafted objects of art in a larger network of religion, culture, governance, and identity (pp. 54–55). Global popularity of decorative objects crafted during the Kangxi period are exemplified with Jingdezhen and Dehua porcelain, Yixing clay wares, and large *kuan cai* 款彩 (incised color) lacquer screens.

Chapter Three focuses on the relatively short yet indeed influential reign of the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1723–1735), who gathered a community of talented artists, craftspeople, technocrats, and European missionaries who would continue to work under the Qianlong reign. At the time when he ascended the throne, the Yongzheng emperor was already a well-established patron and collector of arts. Paintings and decorative objects he commissioned before and since his reign are juxtaposed to show the continuity of interest and the ingenuity of artistic creation. The author discusses extraordinary works including the long scrolls of Pictures of Ancient Playthings (Guwan Tu) to demonstrate the entanglement of pictorial and decorative arts together with the history of imperial collecting (pp. 88–90). Techniques such as cloisonné and painted enamels show a fascinating new development of decorative arts in porcelain, glass, metalworks, and textiles, to which the contributions of well-known technocrats and artists including Nian Xiyao (1671–1738)

and Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766) are elaborated in detail. As the chapter's title reveals, Yongzheng's reign was the "refinement" that sustained the crafting of decorative arts during the high Qing period.

Compared to the Yongzheng period, decorative arts under the Qianlong emperor's reign (1736–1795) were worthy of the classic qualifier "grandeur" (p. 109). Chapter Four foregrounds the multifaceted history of imperial patronage and collecting of decorative arts under the Qianlong emperor. The chapter delves first into Qianlong's cataloguing projects in relation to works from Gao Shiqi's (1645–1703) and An Qi's (1683 – after 1745) collections, and his curation of portable treasure boxes (*duobao ge* 多寶格, p. 115), before moving on to the many palace workshops of decorative and functional objects Qianlong inherited and advanced further. Here, new types of glass objects become a focus of discussion. Court rituals and festivities produced a continuous demand for varied types and styles of ceremonial costumes and sets of vessels made of bronze, porcelain, or decorated with cloisonné enamels. Connections and exchanges between workshops in Beijing and Guangzhou revealed the dissemination of technical knowledge, skills, and works of art in transcultural styles. Qianlong's "retirement plans" after the sixtieth year of his reign generated a renewed demand for innovative works such as monumental painted panels (*tieluo* 貼落) to be mounted in interiors to create visual illusions (p. 142). Encyclopedic catalogues of literature, antiques, and paintings and calligraphy continued through his lifetime, just as his military projects to the border regions beyond the Great Qing. The origins of materials often tell a silent story of imperial conquering, such as the colossal jade (nephrite) mined from Xinjiang and sculpted into a representation of Yu the Great controlling the flood (p. 145). While colonization was taking place along the empire's peripheries, decorative arts made for the art markets domestic and abroad had been thriving in densely populated regions in eastern and southern China.

The last two chapters characterize the following two periods (1796–1861 and 1862–1911) as the "restraint" (p. 159) and "restoration and close" of Qing decorative arts (p. 191). The Jiaqing emperor (r. 1796–1820), "noted for frugality," continued previous emperors' cataloguing projects instead of large commissions of ceremonial objects. The following Daoguang emperor (r. 1821–1850), "even more frugal than Jiaqing," was depicted in a screen painting of an imperial courtyard scene not amid male scholars and antiques but surrounded by women and children (p. 175). The snuff bottle he holds in his right hand bespeaks the popularity of the object, as also seen in several examples within this chapter. To his left-hand side, the vivid depiction of a playful child reaching for goldfish in a glass fishbowl testifies to the author's keen observation of the pictorial representation of decorative arts (detail in p. 158). Daoguang's and his heir Xianfeng's time (r. 1851–1861) had been overshadowed by the two Opium Wars against the British and civil wars including the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace (*Taiping Tianguo*), causing damages to and destruction of the infrastructure and skilled labor for decorative arts. The trade of porcelain and other ornate objects with oversea markets, nevertheless, had shown the resilience of decorative arts against the backdrop of armed conflicts. Rather than the last three emperors, empress dowager Cixi is the actual protagonist in Chapter Six. Her patronage and often direct intervention in the making of photographs, textiles, and porcelain are detailed throughout the chapter. Inside-painted snuff bottles, as a remarkable innovation of this period,

can be seen in Ma Shaoxuan's (1867–1939) composition (p. 208) with the motif commonly known as "eight brokens" (*bapo* 八破) or "pile of brocade ashes" (*jinhui-dui* 錦灰堆).

Glorious Qing takes on the impossible task of a balanced survey – comprehensive yet succinct, inclusive and deliberate – with its attention to the diversity of materials and genres, to critical terminology, to provenance information, and to the accuracy of historical details. Chronology and terminology convey essential standpoints – mostly academic, sometimes beyond – of which the author is well aware. Preceding the introduction, a brief "note on enamel terminology" clarifies the meaning of confusing terms on porcelain decoration, distinguishing the Eurocentric and anachronistic nature of terms like *famille verte* and *famille rose* and advocating Chinese terms (e.g., *doucai* 鬥彩, *wucai* 五彩) of the Ming and Qing periods. This clarification shows Brown's dedicated effort in decentralizing North-Atlantic art-historical canons and terminology in non-European art history. What could bring this effort forward would be to decentralize male-dominated historical narratives, to decentralize Han-Chinese canons in Qing decorative arts, to destabilize hierarchical and dynastic time. The author's careful attention to details of provenance deserve proper appreciation. For instance, the caption of a Qianlong-period snuff bottle made in a Guangdong workshop (p. 139) throws light on how it went through Empress Dowager Cixi's diplomatic hands to eventually arrive at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The attraction of imperial provenance is further detailed in the auction of Prince Gong's collection in New York in 1913 (pp. 212–213). Clarification on the traditional Chinese way of counting age (e.g., pp. 5, 50) is very helpful for readers new to Chinese culture.

In addition to her position as a professor at Arizona State University, the art historian Claudia Brown is also a research curator for Asian art at Phoenix Art Museum. Her curatorial capacity is reflected in the book's informative yet concise captions in the style of exhibit labels, effectively offering more than two hundred examples of a curatorial skill crucial for art history graduates on the job market. These captions are often indispensable for the author's narrative, rendering it potentially necessary to incorporate these texts into the main text. Each caption includes a descriptive part and a narrative one, the latter using the same font (but a smaller size) as the main text. Perhaps this is a subtle indication that the narrative caption should be read together with the main text. One such caption refers to a delicate jade bracelet made by the Kangxi-period imperial jade workshop, whose intriguing design is, as the author rightfully points out, almost identical to a Möbius strip (pp. 61–62, fig. 2.33). The relevant main text only touches on the place of its production, the Palace of Tranquil Longevity (Ningshou Gong) within the imperial palace. It would indeed be more educative if the author could showcase the intriguing object's connection to Kangxi's interests in European sciences, the participation of learned Europeans (e.g., Jesuits) at the Qing court and imperial workshops, as well as the larger context of Sino-European cultural exchange. Occasional jargon might leave non-specialists wonder about their meaning. One such instance is a reference to "egg and spinach" glaze (p. 63) without an illustration, which actually is how English-speaking art market practitioners describe the glaze commonly known in Chinese as *susancai* 素三彩 (polychrome on clay biscuit) of the Kangxi period.

Glorious Qing tackles the complex and delicate task to write a balanced survey on historical art. The problem of historiographic representation, particularly

regarding gender and colonialism, is in fact interwoven with the issue of chronology as methodology. From the late nineteenth century, European-language surveys of art in China usually followed dynastic timelines to approach its subject. This influential convention of dynastic time entices historians to settle for the passing of time, a seemingly neutral arbiter of history, to arrange historical narratives. In the historiography of imperial China, this chronological approach mostly leads to a dynastic periodization that tends to follow the succession of political power. Unavoidably, the resulted narrative would then surrender the focus of analysis, to a large extent, to a patriarchal history that revolves around male, dominant figures (e.g., emperors) and their impact on culture, society, and art. The styles, patronage, techniques, and consumption of decorative arts are thus discussed under the rubric of the reign of emperors, though occasionally also that of empresses or the empress dowager. Yet, even powerful women such as empress dowager Cixi could not escape the historian's dynastic judgement. For instance, a colossal porcelain fish bowl decorated in grisaille, "the European technique of painting in shades of gray" (p. 198), was customized in Jingdezhen for Cixi's resort within the imperial palace, the "Hall of Harmonious Conduct" (Tihe Dian, p. 199). Despite its direct connection to a formidable woman's intimate space, periodization of the bowl states "Guangxu period" (p. 198) under the name of a male monarch of little executive power. The patriarchal narrative of history is furthermore a slippery path on which historians might trip into botanical allegory such as the "flowering" of art (Chapter Two). Historians' recent reconsideration of dynastic time and periodization can be found, for instance, in Wu Hung's *Chinese Art and Dynastic Time* (2022), and a series of essays and a forum in *Early Medieval China* (vol. 30, 2024).

The author's assiduous attention to terminology could be strengthened by a decolonial push and a diversity of critical perspectives (e.g., ecocritical, feminist). For instance, by using qualifiers such as "peaceful" (p. 1) and terms like "rebellion" (pp. 1, 2) and "pacification" (p. 52), the book adopts an imperial perspective without reflecting on the agency and subjectivity of the suppressed and eliminated. If certain ethnic groups and regional communities had not acknowledged or obeyed the mandate of Manchu rule, it would be more precise to speak of "resistance" instead of "rebellion." Similarly, "action-less" does not equal "peaceful," and "colonization" differs from "pacification."

Overall, *Glorious Qing* presents the latest scholarship on decorative arts of the Qing in an accessible and effective manner to entry-level readers. The book's rich contents are complemented by its superb quality of color printing. Together with its sister volume, the *Great Qing*, the two volumes can be adopted as the top pick for a comprehensive overview on the topic for a broad readership new to the histories of art in late imperial China.

Feng Schöneweiß
Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut

DOI 10.1080/02549948.2026.2652801