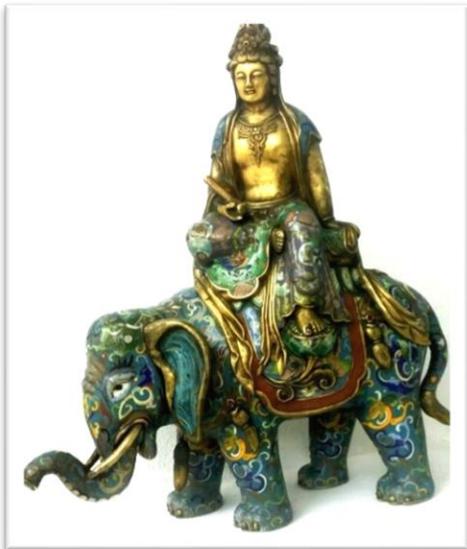


Chinese enamel: origins, techniques, and styles

1. CHINESE CLOISONNÉ – by Núria López-Ribalta (CIDAE)

Article translated from Catalan magazine “L’Esmalt”

It's said that there was a fire taking place in imperial palace in the first year of Yuan Dynasty. All of the treasures were destroyed in the fire. However, a vase was intact and shining. Officials were amazed about that and dedicated it to the emperor. The emperor was so fond of it and unwilling to part with it. It is said that all the treasures were melted in the fire and became the vase, which is current cloisonné. The emperor thought that it was a precious gift given by the god and asked all the craftsman in the capital city to learn the making methods and imitate it. Therefore, at the beginning, all Cloisonné wares were owned by the royals. Cloisonné became a courtly art and an important part in Chinese royal culture.



Pūxián¹ riding an elephant, Chinese cloisonné enamel, ArTchivio Museum.

CHINESE CLOISONNÉ UNDER THE YUAN DYNASTY (1271 – 1368)

Copper padding thread weaving enamel was introduced to China in the late 13th century from the Arabic countries. Records dating from this period include details of introduction of craftsmen who were imposed as prisoners when Yuan Mongol army conquered West Asia. They brought Yuan nobles the enamels that were popular in the Arab world, with raw materials and technology. This imported foreign goods soon merged the local Chinese style with profound artistic background and become an independent art form.

CHINESE CLOISONNÉ UNDER THE MING DYNASTY (1368 – 1644)

Most antique Chinese Cloisonné of Ming Dynasty were produced in the reign of Emperor Xuande (1426 – 1435), including Cloisonné bottle, plate, bowl, stove, censer and even the art-ware of tripod. The technology of Cloisonné continued to develop and innovate. Thus, when coming to the reign of Emperor Jingtai (1449-1457), Chinese Cloisonné reached its heyday, with a very high level of workmanship and more productions of flowerpot, basin, lamp, wine vessel, candlestick, etc. It was also in this period, Chinese Cloisonné was given the name of “Jingtai Blue. According to some antique Cloisonné collectors and excerpts, Cloisonné of the Jingtai period is the best and the most collectable.

¹ Chinese name for a potential Buddha who sacrifices temporarily his possibility to access Nirvana in order to guide and enlighten the other people with his teachings and example.

CHINESE CLOISSONNÉ UNDER THE QING DYNASTY (1636 – 1912)

Cloisonné was also much favoured by Qing emperors, who especially set up the royal Cloisonné factory. As the symbol of power and wealth, Cloisonné ware were seen everywhere in the palace, from the bed-curtain hook and folding screen to pagoda as high as a building (you can find similar exhibits in Imperial Palace Museum of Beijing and the Putuo Zongcheng Temple of Chengde). Cloisonné began to decline since the reign of Emperor Daoguang (1821 – 1861).

DEVELOPMENT SINCE 1949

Since 1949 cloisonné craftsmanship has undergone great development in two respects. Firstly, the colour range of enamels has been extended to pea green, rose purple, brown, egg yellow, azure and golden colour. Most cloisonné pieces now are made with polychrome, and polished to create various tones. Secondly, the design has been improved by borrowing from patterns found in old silks.

BEIJING CLOISSONNÉ CULTURE WITH A HISTORY OF 700 YEARS

Capital city of Yuan Dynasty, Beijing was the birthplace of Chinese Cloisonné and the most important production area. Beijing Cloisonné is famous for its elegant design, sophisticated patterns and beautiful colours.

BEIJING ENAMEL FACTORY

Located in 10 Anlelin Road, Yongdingmenwai, Dongcheng District, the factory is the biggest and most famous in the Chinese Cloisonné industry. It takes the craftsman these months averagely to create and finish one a piece of Cloisonné works. Inside the factory, China Cloisonné Art Museum possesses a wealth of Chinese Cloisonné treasures and displays valuable sources by video and other means.



Rooster and hen, Chinese cloisonné enamel, ArTchivio Museum.

2. CANTON ENAMEL – by Attilio Compagnoni (C.K.I. Italy)

Canton enamel is a variation of enamelling named after its main manufacture in the city of Canton (now called Guangzhou), a flourishing harbour in Southern China. This painted enamel technique evolved from the Limoges style enamel, introduced to China by the missionaries in the British or - more probably - French East India Companies under the rule of Kangxi, the fourth emperor of the Qing dynasty (1662-1722). The decoration usually consisted of flowers, insects, and human figures in everyday life contexts. The objects created with this technique were for the most part housewares and other domestic items.



Canton painted enamel, ArTchivio Museum, Ponte San Pietro.

THE “FAMILLE ROSE”

The colour palettes in use for these works have been nicknamed *yangcai*, a word meaning “foreign colours”, because the typical pasteur colour palettes of this style were unusual for the traditional Chinese art before their introduction from the West.

One of them, the so-called *famille rose*, is characterized by the presence of enamels whose colours span from pink to carmine red; it enjoyed a noteworthy fortune under the reigns of Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong, from 1722 until 1796. The introduction of the Purple of Cassius – a rare pigment imported for the first time by Italian Jesuit Giuseppe Castiglione, who worked at the Chinese imperial court – played a key role in the success of this style. The pigment was initially used on silk painting and for ceramic glazes, being finally adopted step by step for enamel painting.

This colour preference – though never completely abandoned – rapidly declined because it looked stranger to the standards of Chinese culture, being perceived as an art compatible with Western taste and good only for the foreign market.

Sources:

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- Con the Canton painted enamel technique:
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