



The World Of Yixing

History Part II

-The Qing Dynasty-

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Last issue, we discussed a brief history of Yixing during its childhood in the Ming dynasty. Now, we should continue that exploration through the Qing Dynasty, understanding the background before moving on to explore the clay, pots and other aspects of collecting, appreciating and using Yixing teapots today.

Not only did the Qing dynasty represent the noontide of Yixing production, the flourishes developed at this time would forever alter the very aesthetic of the medium. Yixing had another rise during the early twentieth century, in the Early Republic before World War II, but it was the Qing dynasty potters who first brought the Pottery City to the world.

Some scholars divide the history of Yixing pots into three periods: Early, Middle and Late. The Early period is then the Ming dynasty, with all the innovations we discussed in the previous issue of this magazine. The Middle period would be the 17th

and 18th centuries of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), especially during the reign of the emperor Qian Long. Lastly, the Late period then is the 19th century Qing and Early Republic period, which we may discuss more in a future article.

The so-called “Middle Era” of Yixing production was really its zenith, continuing upon the work of late Ming potters like Hui Meng Chen. At this time, the growing fame of Yixing teapots attracted more and more potters, and as their skills, tools and craftsmanship advanced, more and more famous masters came forth than ever before.

New developments in clay processing refined the medium, providing smoother and finer clays. And new tools of bamboo and metal were designed to craft the teapots in new ways, never dreamed of in the simple days when Gong Chun used only a wooden spoon. Finer details required finer tools. The clay



masters, unique to Yixing pottery, found new areas near Yixing to mine, discovering new kinds of ore and different clay. So much of the clay processing from this time is lost to modern times, and it is the differences in clay that are, therefore, the measure of an authentic Qing Dynasty pot. When identifying Qing pots, collectors begin by looking to the luminescence of the clay. There are, of course, many other factors in the dating of an antique pot, but the most fundamental relates to the clay and the way the light reflects off it. The light glows from within a Qing pot, whereas modern pots are glossy and shiny only on the surface. We plan to explore the authentication of antique pots, and even their separation into periods, in greater detail in many articles to come.

Beginning in the Song Dynasty, China established a civil service, in which any educated scholar could participate in the bureaucracy. As a result, over time a large class of literati developed, who in many ways provided more than government service. They were devoted not just to scholarly pursuits, but also the arts, and used their wealth to encourage many different arts to fruition. They cultivated poetry, calligraphy, music, literature and drama as well as the fine arts. Their leisurely lives were idealistic, and set moral and even philosophical standards for the masses, especially since there was nothing technically prohibiting anyone from reaching such a position themselves.

During the reign of Qian Long, the arts thrived. It was common for scholars of this era to display their treasured arts in their studios, resulting in the famed “Four Treasures” of the scholars’ study: ink and inkwell, brush and paper. Not only were these essential parts of every study, but artisans crafted exquisite inkwells from stone, brushes from wood, bamboo, jade and other materials, as well as handmade papers and inks. All the other paraphernalia of calligraphy and writing, like furniture or even paper rests to hold scrolls open—all supported huge communities of artists throughout the country. Most of the higher quality pieces were extremely elaborate, as the mainstream aesthetic of these scholars favored fine and rich details.

Besides admiring art and calligraphy with each other, these scholars, of course, loved to drink tea together. It was their favorite pastime, in fact. They associated tea with the Daoist and Buddhist hermits of ages past, and often idealized the mountain life, retired from the world. Many of the scholars in the Ming and Qing dynasties built grass huts and scenic gardens in/near their houses, to at least leave the “World of Dust” behind for a few hours now and again. Others really did retire to the mountains when their government service was up, devoting the remainder of their lives to quiet tea, calligraphy and writing. They believed that cultivation of the spirit



Chen Ming Yuan, *Pumpkin Pot*





and mind led to true artistic significance, seeking a deep connection with Nature and the Tao as inspiration for their art.

As Yixing teapots began to reach popularity amongst such scholars, who noticed how dramatically they impacted the quality of the tea as well as the beauty of the clay, it wasn't long before the literati themselves began to participate in the development of Yixing pottery—combining artistic traditions in ways never before. They wanted Yixing to join the “Four Treasures” of the study, and take its place as a great necessity of the scholar.

The potters' skills allowed them to mimic, already advanced at this time, the aesthetic of bronze, stone and jade work—creating many new and fantastical shapes and designs, often in the elaborate style that had become popular amongst the literati. Teapots were designed with elements from other common objects within the study, like legs from bronze urns, dragons or calligraphy.

It was not long, then, before the literati began to not only support and patronize the Pottery City, but also to participate in the creation of pots themselves. Literati worked together with potters. They

drew new designs to fit their needs, designed patterns or calligraphy for the clay, wrote poems to be inscribed on the side or bottom of the pot and sometimes even carved such themselves before the clay was fired—resulting in many collaborative pots.

During the Jia Qing and Dao Guang reigns of the Qing Dynasty, the fame of Yixing pots had spread throughout China and beyond. The great calligrapher Chen Man Sheng helped to develop new styles, further integrating poetry, calligraphy and even seal carving, of which he was a master. In the end of the Ming and early Qing Dynasties, potters began the tradition of stamping or carving their name into the bottom of the pot or inside of the lid, though they often paid homage to masters by carving their name instead. Like in most arts, students learned by copying the masters of yesteryear, and there were also plenty of forged antiques—even then—meant to be sold at a greater price.

In the early and mid-Qing Dynasty, there were a lot of patrons, like Chen Man Sheng, who would later become famous in the history of Yixing, for promoting and commissioning so many pots—just like some of the patrons of Renaissance art are as



Wang Dong Shi Kuan, *Piao Gua Pot*



Peng Nian Kuan, *The Coin Gathers*



famous as the artists themselves. The famous “Pan” pots would be one example of this, as would the pieces created for the collector “Chen Liu” and his friends.

Some scholars divide the pots produced during the Middle Period into Southern and Northern styles. The northern scholars, closer to the capital, often had large numbers of guests and preferred larger, more ornate pots—following the aesthetic of fine detail mentioned above. They wanted art that demonstrated their appreciation and affluence. In the south, what we now call “gong fu” tea was developed, using smaller pots and cups to brew tea amongst smaller groups. This tea was more simplistic, focused on the ideals of the reclusive life in touch with Nature and the Tao. For that reason, these smaller pots were often less elaborate, especially when this tea reached greater audiences, appealing to simple people as well as the literati.

The first Yixing pots had gone to Europe as early as the mid-17th century, and at this time many more were exported there and to Japan as well. The Japanese particularly treasured Yixing pots. They were a part of a growing movement away from the traditional tea ceremony to the brewing of loose-leaf tea, called “senchado”. These masters felt the tea ceremony was too constricted, and only for upper classes. They too modeled their lives on the ancient mountain poets, seeking a refined and secluded life in the mountains devoted to poetry, calligraphy and tea mastery. They preferred simple, unadorned pots and ordered many skilled potters to imitate the simplicity of the early Ming pots, without decoration, similar to what was appreciated by many southern scholars. In 1878, two master potters even traveled to Japan to teach how to make teapots.



Gu Jing Dan



Chen Yin Shang



There are far too many famous potters from the Qing Dynasty to explore them thoroughly, without writing a book—especially if you include the more modern masters that appeared just before the second zenith of Yixing pottery in the end of the Qing Dynasty and Early Republic eras. Yang Peng Nian and all of his family were some of the most famous potters of the Qing Dynasty, as well as Shao Da Heng, who developed many new and innovative styles that continue even today. Chen Ming Yuan and Chen Shang Yin are also quite famous, but the true list is an encyclopedia in the telling.

Appreciating Yixing teapots has always been in their balance, craftsmanship and quality; in the lines that perhaps decorate and enhance the surface; the clay and the way it was processed and fired; and most importantly in the function, the magic that it brings to some tea leaves. There is no doubt that Qing Dynasty pots are very different from all those that

would follow, and when you try some tea in a good Qing pot you can understand why that time really was the noontide of all Yixing production—carving, rolling, pounding and fluting a tradition that continues even today.



The Leaf



Yang Peng Nian, *Piao Gua Pot*



Wang Yen Chun, *Granulated Shi Piao*