

# Influence —Qing Dynasty and Contemporary Glass Exhibition

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## Exhibition Background

Contemporary Chinese glass art first appeared in China in the 1990s. After that, it gradually took root in the country, and in the year 2000 universities began introducing glass workshops and courses, laying an important foundation for nurturing future talent. In 2011, the Shanghai Museum of Glass was established, marking a new era for the Chinese Studio Glass Movement. Increasing

number of tutors and glass art enthusiasts have become involved in this movement, hoping to create a renaissance in Chinese glassmaking. I was fortunate enough to join the movement during its early years.

Whilst studying for my PhD in England, I came across all sorts of information about contemporary glass art and traditional glass practices. After sifting through the 2,000-year history of glass art in China, the focus of my research settled on the Western-influenced glassmaking in the Qing Dynasty. Study of the Qing objects in national museums in a number of Western countries, as well as collections of Western glass from the same period, led me to the discovery that the evolution of the making, forming and decorating techniques of glass at that time was in no small part due to the unique glass coloring and elegant decorative style of the Qing court's glass factories, which were operated under the guidance of Western missionaries. I couldn't help but be drawn to glass pieces from this period, and further research revealed many parallels with the development of glass art in contemporary Chinese universities and colleges. After that, I began to base my PhD research around the topic of 'Western-influenced contemporary Chinese glass art practices', dissecting the making, forming and decorating of Qing glass, and analyzing the material grades, costs, value and economic and cultural factors involved in glass creative practices – all from the perspective of a glass practitioner. My hope was, through research into Chinese glass practices during the Qing Dynasty and the use of my own glass practice, to provide insights and reference for the glass education in Chinese universities.

Research into this topic continues to this day. The inclusion of 'Chinese Glass Art in the Qing Dynasty' in the 'Shanghai Colleges First-Class Disciplines 'Fine Arts' Construction Planning Projects' has provided the opportunity for deeper research into Chinese glass art during the Qing Dynasty, and has made it a possibility for more glass practitioners to get involved in contemporary glass practices inspired by the Qing Dynasty. It will provide new theories and guidance that will help to diversify the glass education in colleges and universities.

### **About the Exhibition and its Achievements**

Research into Chinese Glass in the Qing Dynasty lasted three years. The team was made up of Chinese, American and UK academics, glass tutors from colleges and universities, and researchers from the Shanghai Museum of Glass. From six original members, the team grew to more than 20 Chinese and foreign artists, designers, academics and tutors, who all contributed to creating pieces for the exhibition and producing its written materials. 16 glass practitioners from China and abroad helped to create 30 pieces based around several Qing glass examples. The works touched upon academia, art, design and crafts, and from them was formed the Influence—

Qing Dynasty and Contemporary Glass Exhibition, the first academic glass art exhibition in China to combine both historical and modern pieces.

‘The combination of historical and contemporary was the starting point for this exhibition. Few limits were imposed on the theme of ‘Qing Dynasty Glass’, and the form, technique, decoration - even the creative methods and practical model - of Qing Dynasty glass became the creative inspiration for the contemporary practitioners. Though Qing Dynasty glass is primarily for functional purpose, this didn’t constrain their vision: the pieces they produced not only reflect the exquisite elegance of traditional Chinese art and craft, but also carry on the essence of ancient craftsmanship. They provide a creative interpretation of many areas in terms of the expression of ideas, understanding of material, and innovation of technique.

The glass practitioners<sup>1</sup> were selected from a diverse range of backgrounds. Practitioners that invited were Chinese, Japanese, and Korean artisans who all shared the same cultural origins, Chinese and Western practitioners from different cultural backgrounds, and artists, designers and traditional craftsmen whose work is applied in different areas.

To a greater or lesser extent, each of the practitioner’s work is based around the theme of ‘glassware’, yet the variety of creative approaches and cultural influences evident in pieces that were all based on Qing Dynasty glass reflects the huge influence of creative methods and regional culture on their works, as well as the importance of cultural interaction between China and the West. Furthermore, the exhibition is an exploration of the boundaries of art, design and crafts – an exploration itself inspired by the theme of the exhibition. The practitioners’ works and essays are a vivid demonstration the deep thought they have given to materials, craftsmanship, historical context, cultural connotations, and social values during the creative process, as well as of their viewpoints and opinions on glass practice, particularly the contemporary China.

It is my hope that Influence—Qing Dynasty and Contemporary Glass will stimulate more debate on this open topic of cultural heritage among tutors, students of glass art, and glass enthusiasts among the public.

As part of this research project, a book entitled Chinese Glass in the Qing Dynasty was published parallel to this exhibition catalogue. Through re-producing glass examples from the Qing Dynasty, I was able to analyze the technical difficulty, costs and manual work involved in the production at that time. These pieces were displayed during the exhibition, providing audiences with insights into all aspects of glassmaking during the Qing Dynasty. Of course, the pieces also lay a good foundation for future development of related design products.

It is worth mention that the research into 'glass conservation and restoration' became an unexpected outcome. It presents achievements in research and practices relating to the conservation and restoration of historical glass objects. This also needs the support and help of experts from different aspects, to initiate further and constant research into this area.

[1]I use the word 'practitioners' to describe artists, designers and craftsmen who use glass as their creative medium.