

Art for the Masses: Revolutionary Art of the Mao Zedong Era 1950-1976

Asian Art >
China

What are we to make of a traditionally shaped Chinese porcelain vase, of no obvious practical function, with a skilfully painted polychrome scene of a rosy-cheeked young soldier of the People's Liberation Army threading a needle for a peasant granny? Or a finely modelled biscuit porcelain statuette of an avuncular Lenin handing over power to an upstanding young Stalin? Devotees of revolutionary kitsch should not miss a small exhibition at the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh of arts and crafts from China, dating from the early years of Liberation post-1949 to the death of Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, and containing some remarkable, indeed unique, pieces.

By Alison Hardie

The title of the exhibition, 'Mao: Art for the Masses', is partially misleading as to its content. This is really two exhibitions in one. The first being that of genuinely 'mass' visual culture – the propaganda posters and Mao badges which were produced in their millions, and slightly less mass-produced objects, such as a mould-cast porcelain lampstand in the form of a scene from the ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*. The second exhibition is that of one-off or limited-edition pieces in which the finest traditional craftsmanship has been used to portray ostensibly revolutionary subject matter. There are some true laugh-aloud moments, when one spots the portrait of model soldier LEI Feng engraved on a beautifully shaped solid turquoise snuffbottle – what was the point of that? – or the frieze of communist hammers and sickles replacing the usual lotuses on the lip of a porcelain vase. This vase, dated 1968, is a fascinating piece, bearing a large underglaze blue portrait head of the Chairman in a nimbus of rays. According to the catalogue, it is the only known image of Mao in underglaze blue; the technique is subject to a high risk of kiln failure, and a failed representation of the Chairman would have drawn down the wrath of the Party on the craftsmen responsible. Many a brow must have been mopped, and not just from the heat of the kiln, when the successfully fired vase was revealed.

Pieces such as this, or the exquisitely detailed ivory carvings of bumper harvests and happy minority peoples, were certainly never produced for the masses – nor was the spectacularly colourful and detailed lacquer plaque, inlaid with mother of pearl, depicting the opening of the Yangtze River Bridge at Nanjing in 1969. This is estimated to have required 6,000 man-hours to produce; it was intended as an official gift from General XU Shiyou to Commander-in-Chief LIN Biao, but by the time those 6,000 man-hours were up, Lin Biao had crossed his last bridge. The embarrassing gift was never claimed by the donor, and remained with the No. 1 State Lacquer Factory in Yangzhou until it was purchased in 1997 by the collector Peter Wain. The entire exhibition in fact comes from the collection of Peter and Susan Wain, and Peter Wain also wrote the catalogue essay. The catalogue, in the form of a 'little red book', illustrates all the three-dimensional pieces in the exhibition, though only a couple of the propaganda posters.

Overall the interpretation is disappointing, particularly so in the case of the posters, whose contents and iconography are not explained beyond a literal translation of their titles or slogans. The exhibition captions, and the catalogue itself, are vague on the purpose of most of the items, except to note that



Mao's little red book, an internationally recognised symbol of the Cultural Revolution. Five billion copies were distributed at home and abroad, and it was translated into over fifty of the world's languages. Many different versions were published. This 182-page book contains Chairman Mao's 'new instructions' issued between December 1965 and January 1968.

such objects were often produced as diplomatic gifts – this was probably the intended future of the Lenin and Stalin statuette – or for sale to the overseas Chinese market. Given the almost heroic lack of functionality displayed by many of the pieces, this vagueness is understandable, but in the absence of information on what the objects were actually for, more information on where and how they were acquired by the collectors would have been very interesting.

For the non-specialist audience at whom this exhibition is evidently aimed, more detailed analysis of how the revolutionary subject matter relates to traditional iconography might have been helpful. One of the striking lessons of the exhibition is just how conservative 'revolutionary' art can be. In many cases there has been a change of surface decoration without any change in fundamental form – as with the Lei Feng snuffbottle, or the Mao portrait vase. At least the 'Red

Large porcelain vase with image of Chairman Mao, dated 1968 (height 65.5cm). On this vase, Mao's image is painted in under-glaze blue, a high-risk process that often resulted in kiln failure. In decorating the vase this way the maker took an even greater risk of being declared a counter-revolutionary had Mao's image been marred in any way.



Detachment of Women' lampstand, whatever its aesthetic shortcomings, is not a form which could equally well have been produced in the mid-Qing dynasty.

It would also have been useful to have had more background information on how decisions were made in the official workshops about the form, subject matter, and design of decorative objects, though there is some attempt in the introduction to put handicraft production into its social context. Did the craftsmen simply carry out instructions, or did they have an input into the design? Was their role within the workshops different from what it had been before 1949, or was it much the same? How did it change after the start of the Cultural Revolution? One of the subtexts of the exhibition seems to be the role played by individual craftsmen in the preservation of traditional techniques and skills through some of the most destructive years of the People's Republic. The efforts made to preserve China's heritage are explicitly illustrated here by a porcelain commemorative plaque dated 1924, finely painted with a traditional landscape scene; wherever it was in 1966 at the start of the Cultural Revolution, its custodian at the time had the brainwave of turning it round and inscribing revolutionary slogans – Sweep away the Four Olds! – on the reverse, thus saving it from destruction. It is good to think that the creator of the Lei Feng turquoise snuffbottle, or of the glass snuffbottle interior-painted with the Foolish Old Man Moving the Mountains, may have had a similar conscious intention to do their bit to keep alive the national heritage of traditional crafts through the darkest days of officially sponsored vandalism. <

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Peasant Girl, Sculpture, porcelain, 1960. Prior to the Cultural Revolution, New China valued images of youth, health, and materialism. The technical mastery of the artist Zeng Shandong can be seen in the girl's headscarf which is made from real lace dipped in glaze. The lace has burned away during firing to leave only the glaze residue.

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