Revitalising tradition

Ah Xian's cloisonné, jade and lacquer figures

IAN WERE

Ah Xian's life-size work — *Human human – lotus, cloisonné figure 1* 2000–01 — was cast (from a real person) and made at the Jingdong Cloisonné Factory in Hebei Province, east of Beijing, during 2000–01. 'In the flesh' the female figure is both extraordinarily beautiful and slightly unnerving; a near perfect integration of traditional and contemporary, with a typical enamelled cloisonné lotus-flower design closely covering its naked form.

Large carved cinnabar lacquer box, on wooden stand, dates from the Qing period and has the reign mark of the Qianlong Emperor (1736–95) on the base. Carved with a low relief design of imperial five-claw dragons pursuing a flaming pearl. 27.5 x 48cm (diam.) Collection: Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

> cloisonné /klwu'zonay/
> *noun* enamel-work in which colour areas are separated by thin, metal bands fixed edgeways to the ground or base. [French, from *cloison* meaning partition][1]

Historically (and traditionally) vitreous enamel was used on jewellery, small domestic and liturgical items, vessels and weaponry, mostly applied for its decorative jewel-like quality to precious and semi-precious metals such as gold and silver or copper. One of the first recorded uses was around the sixth century BC where a form of enamel was found on small Greek figurines of gold[2]; and later it was discovered that in the fourth century BC, Greek goldsmiths had inlaid flowers and other small designs with a thin coating of enamel between slightly raised outlines of gold wire. This technique, now known as cloisonné, is accepted as the forerunner to all other enamelling processes.[3]

Enamel was also found to possess several other useful qualities. The blue–black or spotted grey–white vitreous enamel you most likely have on your stovetop or washing machine bowl is a type of glass applied to steel and fired in a kiln at red heat. It has been used for street signs, house numbers and advertising panels around the world, for culinary vessels in many countries, clock dials, on luminous (aluminium) freeway signs in California, and on side panels of Sydney's suburban *Tangara* train. It is used because it prevents steel from oxidising, withstands extreme temperatures, is capable of bright colours and is not easily stained or damaged. In short, very durable — that is apart from those enamel signs used for rifle target practice in country Australia.

It is basically this same material and process that contemporary Chinese–Australian artist Ah Xian has so successfully brought to bear — albeit 24 centuries after cloisonné began — in his cast human form.

Although cloisonné has become synonymous with the decorative arts of China and other Asian regions, including Japan, India and Taiwan, there is no authentic record that enamels were executed in China before the thirteenth century.[4] In China, cloisonné began near Beijing — having been introduced from central Asia — and it continues to be made in factories in the region. The earliest extant cloisonné was made in the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) and outstanding examples were made during the Xuande period (1426–35) of the Ming dynasty. Several commentators mention the Jingtai period (1450–56) of the Ming, when artisans discovered a rich cobalt-blue base enamel which gave cloisonné a particularly elegant look and is still used today. Universally known as 'Jingtai blue' (*Jingtai lan*) after the Ming Emperor Jingtai, it also became the Mandarin term for cloisonné itself. During the Qianlong period (1736–95) of the Qing dynasty, cloisonné-making skills reached their pinnacle when pure copper began to be used for the base metal and cloisons, rather than bronze which had been used earlier. Cloisonné — which integrates several traditional Chinese skills including metalsmithing (bronze and copper), and porcelain working and painting — evolved to become a distinctively Chinese art by which most other cloisonné was measured.[5]

Noting that cloisonné is an elaborate and labour-intensive process, several modern Western enamellists have been lyrical in their descriptions of Beijing cloisonné, including this from Kenneth Bates in the early 1960s:

> . . . a small cup with dark green and turquoise coloring was done in 1426. The motifs represented were peonies, chrysanthemums, clouds, and scrolls in a rambling floral pattern done on gilt [metal] . . .[6]

This is quite similar to the way the decoration of a contemporary Chinese cloisonné might be described today. However, today's production is mostly based on copies from the past and includes a range of vessels — vases, jars, large urns, flasks — and other functional and sculptural objects.

The same intricate processes, combined with floral and other traditional patterns, were used to create Ah Xian's *Human human – lotus, cloisonné figure 1* 2000–01 — the third in a series of three attempts. Remarkably, the age-old enamel techniques and factories have survived the centuries, albeit through different social and political systems and dogmas. Due to the labour-intensive and complex nature of the process, it's hard to argue that such a work could have been realised anywhere but China. In the second half of the twentieth century, several contemporary Western enamellers (such as American, William Harper) produced substantial works using cloisonné techniques, but none like this — either in terms of size or concept, and particularly as it was conceived as a life-size cast figure.

The main processes in traditional Chinese cloisonné, and those employed in the making of *Human human – lotus*, involve[7]:

- Forming the copper vessel or body
  Copper, used for its malleability, is formed by metalsmiths into the required shape. Like the traditional vessels, Ah Xian's figure was made in several sections, beaten in moulds and then welded together. (In Ah Xian's case, zinc moulds were made from his original plaster casts of the human form.)

- Filigree soldering
  Small filigree copper strips (or cloisons) are welded onto the copper body, shaping them into what the artisan requires, usually a complex but traditional flowing pattern around the form. Ah Xian incorporated similar imagery.

- Enamel application
  Fine ground enamel pastes of various colours are applied by workers into the small compartments separated by the cloisons.

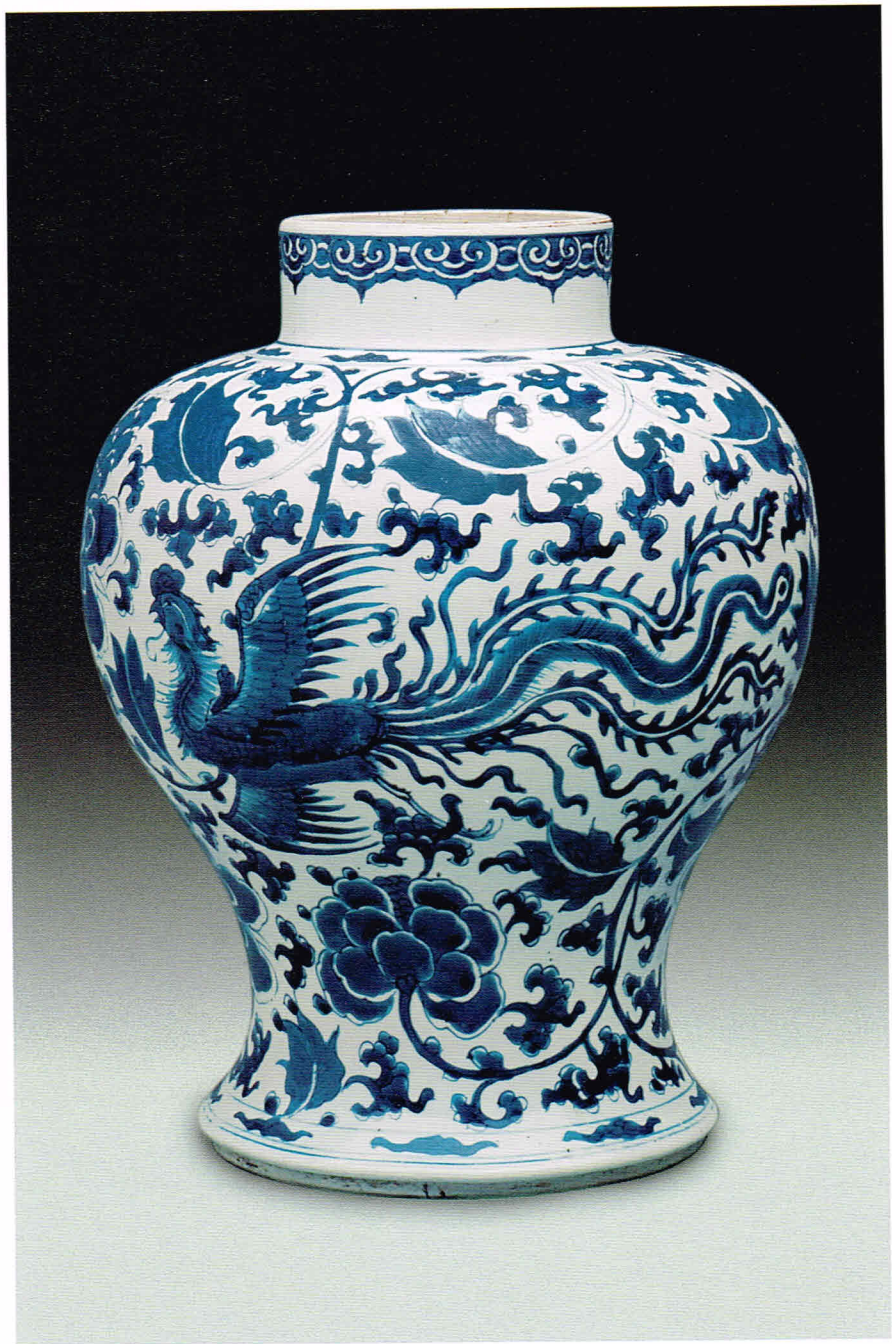
- Firing
  The copper body or vessel is then lowered into a kiln dug into the earth and fired at red heat. Firing fuses the chalky paste into coloured glass and turns the copper body a glowing fiery red. Refillings and refirings are required — as the enamel contracts after each firing — until every compartment is completely filled.

- Polishing
  To make the filigree and the filled compartments uniformly level, artisans grind and polish the form several times. The piece is then refired (to bring back the gloss) and repolished.

- Gilding
  Finally, the exposed copper sections and filigrees are electroplated with gold or silver to prevent oxidisation.

Ah Xian's cloisonné figure is preceded by his multiple busts in porcelain, which were initiated at the Jingdezhen Porcelain Sculpture Factory in 1996, and developed over a nine-month period in 1999.[8] Historically, Chinese porcelain predates cloisonné by approximately six centuries, and remains the most well-known and appreciated of Chinese crafts.

It was the artist's extensive porcelain work at Jingdezhen that led him to consider cloisonné and, in turn, was the impetus to explore how other traditional processes (and factories) might serve his art, including carved jade and lacquerware, and more recent experiments with malachite (a green ore of copper) applied to a bust. At one stage Ah Xian was involved with around five workshops simultaneously.[9]



Qing Dynasty, Kanxi reign, 1662–1722
Jar, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, c.1700
Porcelain, underglaze cobalt blue decoration
33cm high
South Australian Government Grant 1904
Collection: Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

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1 Four 'green' (unfired) porcelain busts loaded on a cart ready to be delivered to the kiln in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province, 2002. All four pieces by Ah Xian were unsuccessful due to over firing.

2 A glimpse of Ah Xian's busts lined up with commercial ware in the Jingdezhen Porcelain Sculpture Factory, where he worked for five months in 2002.

3 The display room of the Huanyu Craft Factory which specialises in making carved lacquerware, 2001.

4 Firing a section of a large cloisonné vase at the same pit-kiln where Ah Xian's *Human human – lotus, cloisonné figure 1* was fired.

5 Artisan filling between the cloisons of a vase with polychrome vitreous enamels, Jingdong Cloisonné Factory, 2001.

6 Artisan with a large fired vase, Jingdong Cloisonné Factory, 2001.

Photography: Ah Xian

During a stint at a specialist jade workshop in Hebei Province in the early 2000s, Ah Xian fashioned his sombre-looking work, *Human human – inlay bust 2, jade dragon scales* 2002–03, made of dark-coloured jade segments laid over a fibreglass body-cast.

Jade, often referred to as 'the stone of China', has a history extending back at least to Neolithic times (c.6500–1600 BC). While generally described as a semi-precious green stone, carved to make jewellery and other objects, the terms jade and the Chinese equivalent, *yu*, are somewhat inaccurately used to refer to a variety of hard and soft stones that can be worked and polished — varying in colour from white to grey–green and black. Jadeite, the now ubiquitous translucent green stone, was introduced to China (from Burma) only in the late 1700s. Over the centuries jade production (like porcelain and cloisonné) developed into one of enormous sophistication and variety, from early ritual objects and jewellery, to ornaments, vessels and sculpture of great virtuosity[10] — only to be replaced in recent times with the mostly repetitive reproduction of items of past golden eras.

Like jade, the complex history of lacquer making in China goes back to Neolithic times. The earliest unearthed example dating to this period was a wooden bowl, coated with vermilion lacquer, found at a site at Hemudu in Zhejiang Province. Historically, lacquer was painted on vessels and structural timbers as a protective and decorative coating. Over time and successive dynasties, it evolved into a sophisticated art form and, in combination with precious and semi-precious materials, was used to enrich weaponry, musical instruments and all manner of domestic items. Later, during the Yuan period (1279–1368), a complex process of relief carving through multiple layers of lacquer became highly refined.

Chinese lacquer comes from the sap of *Rhus verniciflua* (a small Asiatic tree), which can only be gathered in June and July each year. It must be tapped 'in the predawn hours before the cock's crow and sunrise', as the sun reduces the moisture in the air, stopping the sap's flow.[11] Lacquerware is durable, moisture-proof and heat resistant, adding beauty to function. Traditional-style lacquerware begins with a brass or wooden body coated with several dozen, and up to hundreds of, layers of lacquer, reaching a total thickness of five to eighteen millimetres. Carvers skilfully engrave and cut into the hardened lacquer, creating relief images of landscapes, human and mythical figures, flora, and fauna. The work is finished by drying and polishing. Traditional Beijing lacquer objects, made for the local and export markets, include chairs, screens, tea tables, trays, vases and other containers, sometimes combined and inlaid with materials such as gold, gems and mother-of-pearl.

The traditional relief carving process was used by artisans working with Ah Xian at a lacquerware factory in Beijing, to create his amazing *Human Human – carved lacquer bust 1, dragon* 2000–01. The multi-layers of lacquer in this case were applied over a life-cast fibreglass form. The colour is a deep vermilion, not too dissimilar one imagines, from the Neolithic bowl found at Hemudu.

It is to this scene and these traditional factories that Ah Xian comes, revitalising ancient practices with contemporary works in porcelain, cloisonné, jade and lacquerware; rediscovering and experimenting with his Chinese heritage and seeking other possibilities and traditions that will give new form to his art.

ENDNOTES

1 *The Macquarie Dictionary*, 3rd edn, Macquarie Library, Sydney, 2001.

2 Kenneth F. Bates, *Enameling: Principles and Practice*, The World Publishing Co., Cleveland and New York, 1951, p.21.

3 Kenneth F. Bates, *The Enamelist*, Funk & Wagnalls, New York, 1975, pp.2–3.

4 Bates, *Enameling: Principles and Practice*, p.34.

5 Yang Boda, 'China, People's Republic of: XIII, 6. Cloisonné' in *The Dictionary of Art*, vol.7, ed. Jane Turner, Grove, New York, 1996, pp.68–72; *Enamel Ware in the Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties*, National Palace Museum, Taiwan, 1999, pp. 45–52; Catherine Rickets, 'Cloisonné', *Antiques & Art in Queensland*, August to November 2003, pp.26–7.

6 Bates, *The Enamelist*, p.13.

7 Further details on the process used by Ah Xian can be found in Rhana Devenport's interview with the artist in this publication.

8 Much has been said about this ongoing porcelain series developed at Jingdezhen. See Claire Roberts, 'Fishes and dragons: Ah Xian's "China.China" series', *Art AsiaPacific*, no.26, 2000, pp.54–9; Roni Feinstein, 'A Journey to China', *Art in America*, vol.90, no.2, February 2002, pp.108–13; Rhana Devenport's interview with Ah Xian.

9 Rhana Devenport's interview with Ah Xian.

10 Barry Till and Paula Swart, 'China, People's Republic of: VIII. Jade-carving' in *The Dictionary of Art*, vol.7, ed. Jane Turner, Grove, New York, 1996, pp.1–11.

11 'Folk art 8: Lacquerware', *China Vista* <www.chinavista.com>, viewed September 2003.