

Jade: Ch'ing Dynasty Treasures from the **National Museum of History, Taiwan**

An exhibit at National Geographic Headquarters, Washington

Review by Eric J. Hoffman

When did the art of Chinese jade carving reach its zenith? The Warring States period has its proponents (including this author); others would argue for the Sung or Ch'ien-lung periods. But for sheer technical perfection, few would dispute the view of Dr. Kuang-nan Huang, director of Taiwan's National Museum of History, that "the craftsmanship of jade carving reached its pinnacle during the Ch'ien-lung era in the Ch'ing dynasty." The 250 jades from the NMH (not to be confused with its more famous neighbor, the National Palace Museum) certainly make a compelling case for Ch'ing preeminence.

The exhibit opens with a brief explanation of nephrite and jadeite. Wall-mounted photomicrographs illustrate the unique physical properties of jade that make it so well-suited for carving. A wall map shows the distant regions that supplied the Chinese with their raw jade. Oddly enough, the first jades the visitor encounters are Indian, not Chinese: a case of first-rate Hindustani jades, including a tiny and delicate Small White Chrysanthemum Cup carved to paper thinness. Hindustani jades, created by north Indian carvers, "synthesized Islamic, European, and Chinese styles." A jade-handled dagger inlaid with rubies, emeralds, and gold illustrates the Mughal love of embellishment. Ch'ien-lung was particularly fond of these treasures and imported the style to his Imperial workshops. The wall text explains the difficulty of now determining which Mughal jades were carved in India and which by the Chinese. Sharing this room is a 10" tall, masterfully carved spinach green nephrite mountain with six Imperial poems incised and gilt. The wall text "A Brief History of Jade" gives a thumbnail sketch of jade carving styles from 1600 B.C. The Ch'ing dynasty receives expanded treatment, of course, especially the Ch'ien-lung period. It was under this jade-obsessed emperor that jade carving reached its most recent high point. Interestingly, his best Imperial carvers came from Su-chou, home of "the elegant techniques." Following Ch'ien-lung's reign "designs evolved into forms that seem mechanical and commercial" and the "graceful artistry defining the best of the Ch'ien-lung carvings was never matched again."

The next room ("The Scholar's Desk") begins with three cases filled with snuff bottles, mostly in nephrite and jadeite, but a few in amber and agate. Additional cases of scholar objects include belthooks, thumb rings, brushpots, brush-holders, and brushwashers, but-- surprisingly-- only a single jade seal. Displayed amongst these scholar treasures are several jade bangles, including one in rare Inky Black jadeite and another in lavender jadeite so vivid that only its age and provenance argue against its being dyed. A case of a dozen or so ruyi rounds out this room; concise wall text clearly explains this unusual scepter form.

The next room ("Jade Carving in the Form of Ancient Bronzes") is filled with jade vessels of every size and type, in nephrite and jadeite. Many of these honor the ancient bronze forms of the Shang and Chou dynasties. Nearby are three cases of jade screens, including the exceptionally elegant white jade screen with orchids and extensive Imperial calligraphy, the souvenir I would most liked to have taken home. Jade "mountains" have always been treasured. A case of magnificent examples and a pair of Imperial jade books round out this room.

The final room ("Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Good Fortune") devotes several cases to animal and human forms in jade and a few other hardstones. One impressive jadeite horse and rider still bears a sticker from Sotheby's Hong Kong, a peculiar touch indeed.

A lavishly produced catalog, well worth the \$75 charged in National Geographic's bookstore, complements the exhibit:

Jade: Ch'ing Dynasty Treasures from the National Museum of History, Taiwan.
Taipei: National Museum of History, 1997. 295 + (1) pp, 215 color plates + 215 b/w illus, color frontis. Chinese and English text. Cloth, gilt, color illus appliqué, color illus d.j. Color illus slipcase. 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

This exhibit will be at National Geographic Society's Explorer's Hall, 17th & M Streets, Washington, D.C. through January 17th [1999] (Tel 202-857-7000). The exhibit then returns to Taiwan. Hours are 9-5 Mon-Sat and holidays, 10-5 Sun. Parking in this area is more precious than jade; the Metro (Red Line to Farragut North) is recommended.

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