

Press release

The Meiyintang Collection

Chinese ceramics of world importance

After a six-month rebuilding programme, the China department of Museum Rietberg will reopen on 11 January 2013. In the splendid, freshly refurbished galleries, the museum presents more than 600 objects from the world famous Meiyintang Collection. These ceramics brilliantly complement the museum's existing collection which now offers a unique overview of the development of Chinese art, from the Neolithic period (5th millennium BC) to the 18th century.

Museum Rietberg is delighted to offer free entry to the new China department as well as to all other collection galleries throughout the year 2013. The collection is our jewel – and open for all free of charge.

Over more than five decades, the brothers Gilbert and Stephen Zuellig have brought together one of the most important private collections of Chinese ceramics in the world, which is known under the name Meiyintang, 'Hall among Rosebeds'. Through their life and their business in the Far East, they developed a wide-ranging passion for Asian art and culture. Around 1960 the brothers began to build a systematic collection of Chinese art. Gilbert Zuellig specialised in early ceramics from the Neolithic period through the Han and Tang dynasties to the Song dynasty (5th millennium BC to 1279) while Stephen collected porcelain of the later dynasties (Yuan, Ming and Qing).

In 1994 the British Museum in London presented masterworks from the Meiyintang Collection to the public for the first time. Exhibitions followed in New York (1995 and 2000), in Monte Carlo (1996), in Paris (1999), and in Sarrahan near Limoges (2009). The collection gained international recognition in specialist circles when several volumes of catalogues were published from 1994 onwards in London. Regina Krahl, a leading authority on Chinese ceramics, provided a scholarly record and description of all the artefacts. Krahl's volumes on the Meiyintang Collection are seen today as a definitive reference work.

For specialists and lovers of Chinese ceramics, but also for a wider audience it is a stroke of luck that the older part of the collection which was transferred to a foundation is now publicly accessible. The Meiyintang Foundation and the family of Gilbert Zuellig (1918–2009) have ensured that this eminent collection is maintained in its entirety by lending it to the Museum Rietberg as a long-term loan. In addition, the Foundation will cover the expenses incurred by the refurbishing of the China galleries. The existing rooms in the Emerald pavilion were completely rebuilt and redesigned over six months. For the presentation of the ceramics in floor-to-ceiling display cases, a novel exhibition concept was developed using LED luminaires thanks to which the different shapes and glazes of the ceramics are highlighted in an ideal way.

From 11 January 2013, more than 600 works from the Meiyintang Collection will be presented together with the museum's existing collections. Thanks to this new permanent loan, and together with the collections of Eduard von der Heydt and Charles A. Drenowatz (Chinese painting) as well as the

collection of Alice and Pierre Uldry (Chinese cloisonné as well as gold and silver) which are also on permanent loan to the museum, Museum Rietberg can now claim to be one of the leading museums of Chinese art in the world.

Chinese Ceramics from Six Millennia

In the West, Chinese ceramics acquired such renown that the word China became a synonym for porcelain in the English language. And indeed ceramics are seen as one of China's most important art forms. From the 5th millennium BC to the modern age, Chinese potters continued to display great creativity in the development of new techniques, shapes, and design possibilities. Intricately worked ceramic objects gave their owners considerable prestige even in the earliest times and some pieces were regarded as exquisite gems of the highest rank.

Potters in the Neolithic period built up their pots, bowls and jars from clay coils and then tapped them with a flat piece of wood until the shape was perfectly harmonious. Decorations consisted of impressed patterns and soon, too, of painting in black, red and white. The linear patterns of parallel lines paired with geometric shapes and abstract figural representations gave the vessels their liveliness. In the 3rd millennium BC the development of the fast-moving potter's wheel led to new, more sophisticated vessel types. The black cups of the Dawenkou or Longshan culture (3rd millennium BC), for example, with their eggshell-thin walls and high stems sometimes with openwork decoration, are of a unique, almost modern elegance.

With the spread of the technique of bronze casting in the 12th century BC, ceramics lost their leading position but the potters continued to innovate. They tried to imitate the intricate bronze vessels in ceramics, getting as close as possible to their shape and appearance. They developed the first proto-porcelain a – body of hard-fired, kaolin-rich clay.

In the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) the tradition began of furnishing graves like subterranean homes. The dead were not only given food and drink in fine vessels in their graves but also small models of all kinds of things for life after death. Potters made objects such as kitchen stoves and water wells, guard towers, grain stores and houses, even sheep and pig stables (including an earth closet); also figures of horses, dogs, and other domestic animals, as well as servants and entertainers. Whereas the architectural models were mostly covered with a greenish, shimmering lead glaze, the figures and storage vessels were painted in many colours after firing. The latter often show mythical creatures in the decoration which point to the magical world of the afterlife.

During the Tang dynasty (618–907), grave offerings became increasingly luxurious. Potters developed colourful lead glazes in white, deep green, warm yellow-brown and deep blue. Applied over a white engobe, these glazes create a strong and attractive luminosity. Variety in shapes and figures also reached its peak during the Tang dynasty. Influences of Sassanid silversmithing were adapted in ceramics, and apart from beautiful women and horses, camels and their foreign cameleers, elephants, lions and other exotic creatures were also represented. When the cost of furnishing the graves rose to astronomic levels, the government found itself forced to put strict limits on the tradition of grave offerings.

The ceramic workshops and kilns reacted swiftly to the new situation and changing tastes. With the start of the Song dynasty (960–1279) there was a return to the old ideal of the virtuous scholar. In ceramic art simple elegance and noble restraint became the highest signs of quality. The different ceramics centres now each specialised in a particular type of ceramic and developed it to the highest perfection. Thus the kilns of Dingzhou in northern China are known for their pure white ware; others

specialised in green ware which is also called celadon in the West. The decoration is mostly limited to incised or cut patterns which shine through the varying thicknesses of the glaze. But many objects of the Song dynasty stand out because of their elegant shapes and the subtlety of their colour. It is not surprising that the most beautiful pieces were praised by poets and described by connoisseurs. Already at the time they were regarded as precious gems, expressions of perfect taste, and were traded for large sums.

To this day, the ceramics of the Song dynasty are seen as a high point of Chinese ceramic production and were repeatedly copied and adapted throughout Chinese history.

Guided tours

Free public tours in German

Saturday, 12 and 26 January 2013 14h
Thursday, 7 February and 7 March 2013 18h
Thursday, 21 March and 11 April 2013 12.15h

Private tours in English

Book a tour by calling +41 (0)44 206 31 11 / 31

Information and contact

Further information and download of photographs on www.rietberg.ch

Museum Rietberg Zürich | Gablerstrasse 15 | CH-8002 Zürich
T. + 41 (0)44 206 31 31 | F. + 41 (0)44 206 31 32 | Infoline: T. + 41 (0)44 206 31 00
museum.rietberg@zuerich.ch | www.rietberg.ch

Hours: Tue–Sun 10.00–17.00 | Wed and Thu 10.00–20.00
Access: Tram 7 (direction Wollishofen) to the “Museum Rietberg” stop (4 stops from “Paradeplatz”). No parking; disabled parking available.

2013 free admission to the permanent collection!