



## THE OBJECTS OF CHINESE, TIBETAN AND VIETNAMESE ART ACQUIRED FROM THE COLLECTION OF B. FORMAN IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY IN PRAGUE

Michaela Pejčochová\*

The National Gallery's Collection of Oriental art includes eighteen objects of Chinese, Tibetan or Vietnamese origin that were acquired from the collection of B. Forman. Most of them were bought directly from the collector during the 1970-ties and 1980-ties, some were sold only after his death by his widow. The greater part of the set is formed by Chinese painting and calligraphy, complemented by few pieces of ceramics and applied art objects. Tibetan art is represented by three most common ritual objects – a bell, a scepter (*dorje*) and a bolt (*phur-bu*).

Since the rest is quite heterogeneous in nature, a few words can be said concerning the Chinese painting and calligraphy part, which includes the most interesting pieces of the set. It is obvious, that the collector was guided by a good taste that in part compensated for the lack of experience in connoisseurship. The painting Nr. 1, River Pavilion, ascribed to Zhao Boju, is of course a much later work, but very fine in execution. It is one of the most beautiful album leaves in the NG's Chinese collection and was published as one of the masterpieces of Asian art. Similarly elegant is the painting Nr. 4 by Yun Bing. This lady painter was not very famous during her lifetime. Today, however, her paintings are rare and highly appreciated. The lively scene of fish and lotus flowers is one of the few extant paintings, which document her remarkable painting skills.

The other two paintings, Nr. 2 Landscape ascribed to Guo Xi and Nr. 3 Geese at Riverbank signed in the name of Wang Yuan, are problematic as for both authorship and quality. Both bear signatures of the famous painters of Song and Yuan dynasty respectively, but were probably painted much later right for the art market. While the Landscape can still be considered a quite faithful attempt to produce a painting "in the manner" of the famous master, the Geese at Riverbank have nothing to do with Wang Yuan's painting style. It was very common that European collectors, unaware of such practices, bought these supposed "masterpieces" and even sold them to important public collections.

---

\* Curator of the Chinese collection, National Gallery in Prague



The two leaves Nr. 6 are more of a curiosity than real Chinese paintings. Such scenes were painted by request of the Europeans and show a strange mixture of European and Asian elements. Their authors were technically skilled professionals, who painted also on the surface of three dimensional objects (ceramics, enamel ware) or produced interior decorations. The "oriental" atmosphere of such pictures might have appealed to the western collectors even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Of the applied art objects, especially the buckle in the shape of two fish and bat (see No. 9 deserves attention. Its elegant design is based on the combination of metal and jade, which together with the symbolic meanings of the depicted animals makes it a fine accessory of a gentleman.

## The catalogue of the Chinese, Tibetan and Vietnamese objects from the Forman collection follows with extended descriptions added where appropriate.

### China

#### 1. Anonymous painter, attributed to Zhao Boju (active in the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century)

River Pavilion

Ming dynasty ?

Ink and colors on silk

Album leaf, 18.5 × 27 cm

Bought from B. Forman in 1974

Vm 3356 – 1151/101

Published in Kesner, Ladislav, ed. *Mistrovská díla asijského umění ze sbírek Národní galerie v Praze*. Praha: 1998.

The picture is probably part of a larger work cut to suit the album leaf format. A large two-storied pavilion overlooking water surface is being visited by a noble lady accompanied by maids. The painting is executed in a fine and sensitive brushwork and was originally richly colored with touches of blue, green and red pigments. Apocryphal signature "Boju" is still partly visible in the top left corner under the palm trees. In the top middle part, *Qianlong yulan zhi bao* seal can be seen. The leaf was severely damaged, remounted in the past and some parts were retouched or added during the restoration, i.e. the rock in the middle of the bottom.

#### 2. Anonymous painter, attributed to Guo Xi (ca 1001–1090)

Landscape

Early Qing dynasty

Ink and colors on silk

Album leaf, 28.5 × 34 cm

Bought from Mrs. Forman in 1996

Vm 6274 – 1151/130

A small landscape scene in the manner of the Song dynasty painter Guo Xi is painted on an album leaf format. Trees with "crab-claw branches" (*xie zhuazi*) are stylized in the Li-Kuo tradition, stones and rock formations imitate the "cloud-shaped strokes" (*yuntou cun*) characteristic of Guo Xi's painting style. Composition obviously evokes the disposition of Guo Xi's most famous preserved work, *Early Spring*, kept in the National Palace Museum, Taipei. Central part of the painting is occupied by a massive mountain, to which gradually rise the rocks with large trees in the foreground. The left-hand part shows a river receding in the "level distance", in the right-hand part a bridge is spanning over a small waterfall. Two characters "Guo Xi" written on the rock near the right margin imitate Guo Xi's signature with traits of clerical script style on *Early Spring*.

#### 3. Anonymous painter, attributed to Wang Yuan (active in the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century)

Geese at Riverbank

Late Qing dynasty, false date 1357

Ink and faint colors on paper

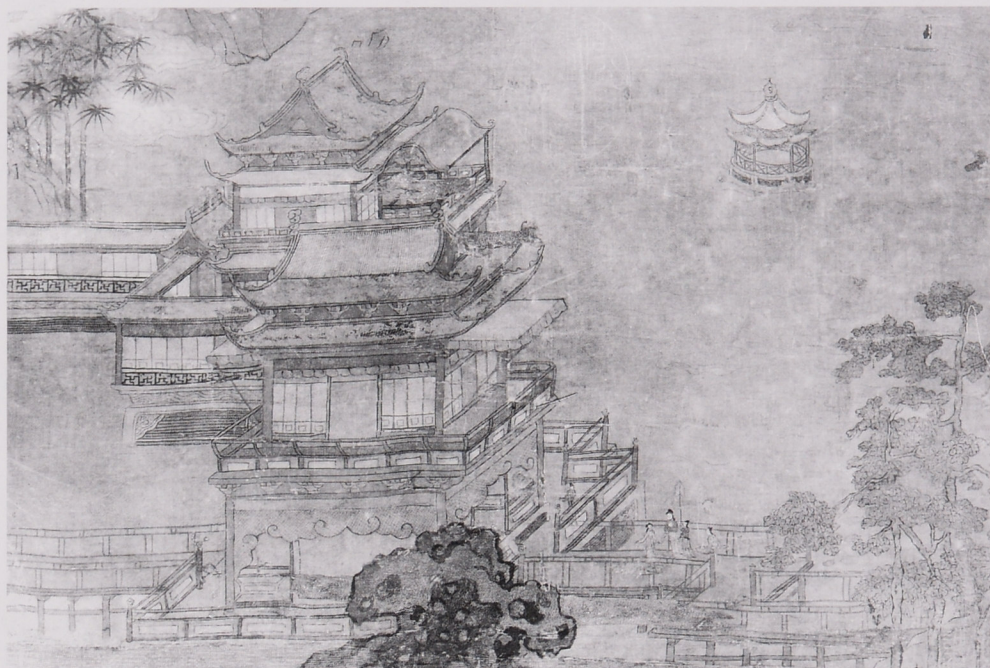
Mounted leaf, 45 × 39.5 cm

Bought from B. Forman in 1974

Vm 3357 – 1151/129

Wang Yuan was a Yuan dynasty painter known for an individual painting style. In landscape painting, he is said to follow Zhao Mengfu, and in the painting of flowers and





1

birds Huang Quan. This painting of geese among reeds and grass, signed in Wang Yuan's name and dated to "the seventeenth year of the Zhizheng era (1357)" is however a much later fake produced intentionally to deceive the viewer or buyer. It is evident from the way the paper has been dyed and damaged to look older. The painting style is far from the subtle and elegant lines this painter was reportedly famous for, as well as from the style of Wang Yuan's painting in the genre of "birds and flowers" preserved in the collection of the National Palace Museum in Taipei.

#### 4. Yun Bing (active at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries)

Fish under Lotus

Dated 1833

Ink and colors on paper

Hanging scroll, 113 × 53 cm

Bought from B. Forman in 1981

Vm 5195 – 1171/510

Yun Bing was a female descendant of the famous artistic family, of which Yun Shouping (1633–1690) became best known for his paintings of fragile flowers in pastel tones. This educated lady continued the family tradition of birds-and-flowers painting producing skillful

and lively images such as this one. Colorful fish are shown in a cheerful play under the stalks of lotus flowers, which might symbolize wealth and happiness. The lotus leaves are painted in the "boneless technique" (*mogu hua*), particularly interesting is the rendering of reverse parts turning inside and contrasting with the green surface.

#### 5. Shejing studio

Painting manual

Dated 1886

Print on paper

Album, each leaf 19 × 25 cm

Bought from B. Forman in 1980

Vm 5074 – 1171/497

The album consists of paintings by famous masters active in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reproduced in lithographical print. Volume I presents landscapes, figures and figures in landscape settings by painters Zhang Xiong, Qian Hui'an, Pan Zhenyong, Sha Fu, Lu Peng, Cao Hua, Ren Xiong and one unidentified author. Volume II includes landscape sceneries of the Eight Views of the Western Lake series, auspicious rocks, plum blossoms, peonies and other themes by Yang Peifu, Shu Hao, Zhu Cheng, Ren Bonian, Hu Yuan, Sun Kai, Zhou





2

Jun and one unidentified author. Similar albums of original paintings were produced as collaborative works of the prominent artists of the time. They were frequently reproduced and much sought after by painters and art lovers, who couldn't afford to buy the original works. The most famous and successful of these manuals are two centuries older albums *The Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual* first published

in 1679 or *Ten Bamboo Studio* printed in 1633.

**6. Anonymous Cantonese painter**

Two western-style pictures

18<sup>th</sup> century

Ink and colors on paper

Album leaves, 27.5 × 22.5 cm

Bought from B. Forman in 1980

Vm 5070, 5071 – 1171/493, 494

The two leaves, originally probably part of





3

a larger series, show interiors of strange “oriental” palaces, one with a group of five people dressed in odd costumes and the other with the traditional Buddhist theme of “Washing the white elephant”. The richly colored drawing is executed in European-style perspective with the stress on strict spatial recession, contrasting with traditional Chinese elements such as roofs, railings or decorative motifs. Such pictures were produced in 18<sup>th</sup> century Canton and were popular among foreigners, who sometimes

even provided drafts for their execution. The customers’ interests and taste resulted in this strange mixture of details belonging to Chinese, Near-eastern and European traditions.

#### 7. Imperial edict

Dated 1735

Ink on brocade

Hand-scroll, 31 × 419 cm

Bought from B. Forman in 1980

Vm 5072 – 1171/495





癸丑大暑後三日寫於秋蘭之室清于女史惲水画







9

### 8. Imperial edict

Dated 1845

Ink on brocade

Hand-scroll, 31 × 419 cm

Bought from B. Forman in 1980

Vm 5073 - 1171/496

The two Qing imperial edicts were issued in the 13<sup>th</sup> year of Yongzheng era and the 25<sup>th</sup> year of Daoguang era respectively. Both were written in standard script (*kaishu*) Chinese and Manchu against five-colored background, the colors representing five cardinal points (blue, red, white, black and yellow). Yongzheng emperor is especially known for paying attention to the memorials of his subjects and personally writing long detailed reactions. These texts, however, were written in standard form by court calligraphers and not by the imperial hand.

### 9. Buckle formed as two fish and bat

Ming dynasty ?

Gilded bronze and jade, 4 × 16 cm

Bought from Mrs. Forman in 1996

Vu 4008 - 1153/107

A fine example of the integration of bronze and jade. Two fish gathered around a bat can symbolize affluence (*yu*, the homophone for "fish") and happiness (*fu*, the homophone for "bat").

### 10. Bowl shaped as chrysanthemum with garden scene and floral motifs

Qing dynasty, Kangxi period (1662-1722)

Porcelain painted with enamels and gold, h. 9, diameter 19.5 cm

Bought from B. Forman in 1980

Vu 3608 - 1174/882

### 11. Bowl with impressed and engraved design of flowers and scrolls

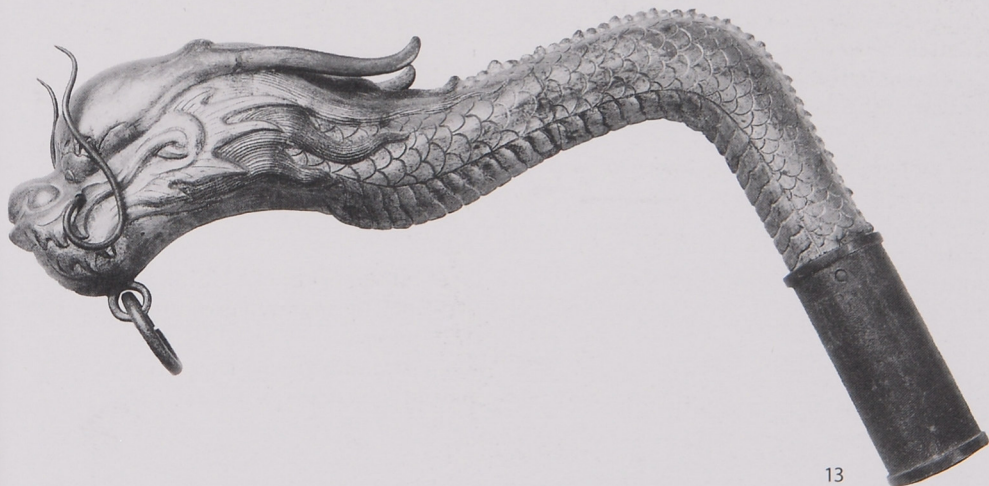
Yuan dynasty ?

Stoneware with celadon glaze, h. 4, diameter 17 cm

Bought from Mrs. Forman in 1996

Vu 4010 - 1154/88

Decoration in greenish celadon glaze was especially typical of the Yuan dynasty stoneware. This is a standard work of rustic kilns, where the glaze was applied over the body im-



13



14

pressed and/or engraved with floral designs.

**12. Bowl decorated in brown paint**

Song dynasty ?

Stoneware, h. 7, diameter 18 cm

Bought from B. Forman in 1980

Vu 3609 – 1154/76

The bowl decorated in brown paint over white slip is another example of stoneware produced in rustic kilns. This type was known as *Cizhou yao* and is probably somewhat older than the bowl with celadon glaze described above.

**13. Lamp or lantern handle shaped as head of a dragon**

19<sup>th</sup> century

Gilded bronze, l. 21 cm

Bought from Mrs. Forman in 1996

Vu 4007 – 1173/192

**Tibet**

**14. Ritual bell**

Dating uncertain

Bronze, h. 24.5 cm



15

Bought from B. Forman in 1973

Vu 2892 – 1143/41

**15. Diamond scepter – *dorje***

18<sup>th</sup> century ?

Gilded bronze, h. 19.3 cm

Bought from Mrs. Forman in 1996

Vu 4009 – 1573/30

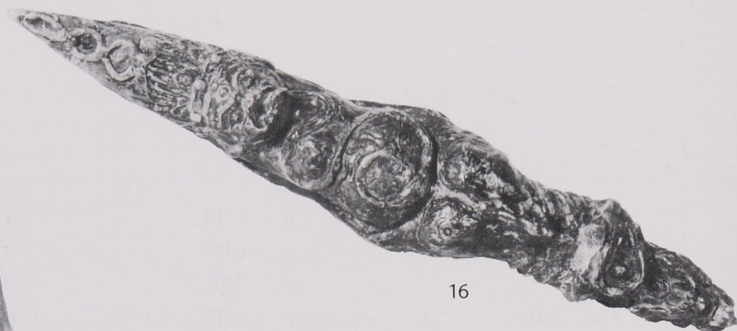
**16. Ritual bolt – *phur-bu***

20<sup>th</sup> century

Artificial resin, l. 29 cm

Bought from B. Forman in 1979

Vp 2894 – 1565/1



16

All photos © 2005 Národní galerie v Praze.

**Vietnam or Southern China**

**17. Vase with engraved decoration**

20<sup>th</sup> century

Stoneware with yellowish glaze, h. 28 cm

Bought from B. Forman in 1973

Vu 2893 – 1364/7