

Book Reviews

Kindred Spirits. 100 Japanese Ceramics in Chinese Style. The Shen Zhai Collection



Clare Pollard (editor);
foreword by Patrick K.M. Kwok; contributions
by Clare Pollard, Rose Kerr, Maezaki Shinya and
Fukunaga Ai
Arnoldsche, Stuttgart, Germany, 2024
360 pages with 483 colour illustrations
ISBN-978-3-89790-719-5
Hardcover, £75

I like well-produced, hard-cover books, with good paper, a clear design, excellent illustrations, notes and a bibliography. *Kindred Spirits* is such a book. Even more, I like publications on lesser known, unusual topics in the field of Asian ceramics, with new insights and a scholarly approach. *Kindred Spirits* is such a publication, too.

As the title indicates, the book deals with the influence of Chinese ceramics on Japanese master-potters, resulting in pieces of the highest quality. One hundred examples from the Shen Zhai collection in Singapore are discussed and illustrated, mostly three-dimensional pieces like vases, jars and bottles. Less frequent are incense burners, bowls and dishes where only a few figures are included. Of course, if there is a mark on the porcelain, it is illustrated, but equally important are the photographs of the original, inscribed wooden boxes that most of the selected ceramics still have. The dates of the works range from the Meiji period to the early Showa, roughly 1860–1930.

The thorough introductions by Clare Pollard and Fukunaga Ai give an in-depth historical overview of the reception and appreciation of Chinese ceramics in Japan, while Rose Kerr specifies which types from Longquan and Jingdezhen were preferred by Japanese collectors. When browsing this catalogue it becomes clear that two main groups of Japanese ceramics are represented: those that strictly follow a Chinese model and even try to surpass it in shape and glaze; and those that combine a Chinese inspiration with Japanese elements. The first group is rich in celadons in Longquan style, in which the works by Suwa Sosan I (1851–1922) and his descendants stand out, discussed by Maezaki Shinya. In the second group Miyagawa Kozan I (1842–1916) is a leading figure, discussed by Clare Pollard.

For a Western reader like me this is not an easy subject. We are 'brain-washed' in the way we look at (decorative) art for originality, for the creative handling of shapes and decorations, for the individual expression. Chinoiserie and

Japonism opened our eyes to the appeal of mingling elements of different cultures, thus creating new styles. In that sense, the works by Kozan found a welcome reception in the West.

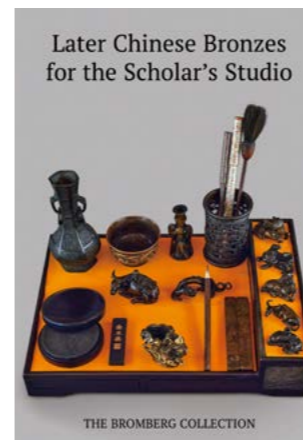
The perfect ceramics by Sozan are more difficult to understand for us if we are not familiar with the Asian tradition of paying homage to great teachers and masters of the past. It takes a while to fully appreciate these works as re-creations instead of mere high-class imitations.

There also is the question of why there was such a sudden output of master pieces. They are contemporary with changes in Japan when the country suddenly went from a traditional, closed society to a westernised one. The cultural identity of Japan was promoted by the Japanese government, not only at domestic venues but also at international World Exhibitions where, for instance, 'modern' ceramics were shown and praised. In Japan, the interaction with Chinese ceramics became a balancing act between admiration and competition. The superb re-creations of Sozan reflected not only the taste of traditionalists, but also of modernists seeing these ceramics as highlights of a new Japanese identity and power.

There are more layers to unravel in the history of the appreciation of these ceramics in Japan, in Asia and in the West. For instance, what was the impact of the first Sino-Japanese war (1894–95) on producers and collectors in Japan? For those interested in such aspects, and in the excellent examples of craftsmanship shown in the catalogue, this is the perfect guide.

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Later Chinese Bronzes for the Scholar's Studio – the Bromberg Collection



Paul Bromberg;
introduction by Rose Kerr
Arts of Asia Publications Ltd, 2025
172 pages with 227 colour images
ISBN-9789887093602
English with Chinese captions
Hardcover £ 75

The year 2025 may have been one of those few occasions when later Chinese bronze art came under the spotlight. From late February to September, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York staged the most comprehensive exhibition so far on the subject, *Recasting the Past: The Art of Chinese Bronzes, 1100–1900*, featuring approximately 100 pieces from the museum's collection as well as nearly 100 loans from around the world. Pengliang Lu, the curator of that exhibition, contributed an article about *Recasting the Past* in this Newsletter (pp.77-81). Following its run in New York, the exhibition was extended until March 2026 at the Shanghai Museum, co-organisers of the show. Coincidentally, the book under review, *Later Chinese Bronzes for the Scholar's Studio – the Bromberg Collection*, was also published last year.

Indeed, as the MET's exhibition correctly points out, later Chinese bronzes made from the 12th to the 19th century are an often-overlooked category of Chinese art and have even long been stigmatized as poor imitations. Both the exhibition and the Bromberg collection argue, however, the opposite, presenting a renewed and growing interest in and endeavour of the study of later Chinese bronzes in both the academic and collecting communities in recent years.

Compared to the MET's exhibition, which takes a comprehensive approach, the Bromberg collection catalogue presents a more refined focus, including a fine selection of 122 later Chinese bronzes primarily from the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties. The collector's passion for and focus on bronze artefacts for the Chinese scholar's studio, as well as the groupings of objects in the catalogue, have demonstrated his grasp of an essential aspect of the subject. He concentrates on the aesthetics of Chinese scholar-officials, which were a fundamental driving force for not only the rediscovery and revival of early Chinese ritual bronze forms, but also for the revitalisation of new art forms in this medium to suit the literati aesthetics and practices developed in later China.

The first section of the catalogue is mainly comprised of bronze paperweights. They were essential for the most important scholarly activities in China, writing and painting, which were predominantly practised, mounted, and viewed in various forms of scrolls and could not be properly worked on or looked at until flattened by paperweights. The author of the catalogue, who is also the collector himself, has carefully identified the cultural references of the various forms of bronze paperweights in his collection in both the introductory essays and catalogue entries, which would surely help the readers in understanding the collection in relation to China's remarkable tradition of literati culture.

The second section offers a rare, yet insightful observation of incense paraphernalia used in the scholar's studio. Indeed, the practice of burning and enjoying incense was one of the 'four leisurely pastimes' not intended 'for uneducated amateurs' (the other three being painting, connoisseurship, flower arrangement, and tea making), but a signature activity to cultivate and demonstrate one's aesthetics since the Song dynasty (960–1279), precisely when bronze as an art medium and the forms of archaic ritual bronzes were rediscovered and revived. Meanwhile, archaic bronze vases were favoured for flower arrangements, as they were believed to extend the life of cut flowers. It is, therefore, appropriate for this catalogue to include bronze incense paraphernalia and flower vases in the same chapter and discuss them concurrently in the context of archaism and scholar-official aesthetics.

The catalogue's approach to later bronzes for the Chinese scholar's studio is further supported by Rose Kerr's introduction essay, which offers an insightful illustration of the relationship between later bronzes and the Chinese scholar's world. If translated, this accessible volume showcasing a rare and exquisite collection of later Chinese bronzes would undoubtedly be well received among Chinese readers too.

Yi Chen