
CONSERVATION PROBLEMS

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CHINESE PAINTINGS ON PITH: A UNIQUE PAINTING SUPPORT

The Kunstkamera has in its collection twelve albums with rich red brocade silk covers which contain 115 brightly coloured images of an exotic land (*fig. 1*). The albums were brought back from China by Nicholas II of Russia when he travelled on a Grand Tour of the Orient in 1891 [1]. He later donated them along with other gifts and acquisitions from his journeys to the Ethnographic Museum in St. Petersburg [2]. The images in

the albums are painted on “pith paper”, a fascinating and unusual support which can be found in collections spread all over Europe and America. The Kunstkamera albums are still complete and are in relatively good condition. However little has been done to investigate the nature of this material and how it degrades and many such paintings in other collections are often in a dangerously fragile condition.

An Art Made for Strangers

Pith paper or “rice paper”, as it has been erroneously called in West, is in fact a material obtained from *Tetrapanax Papyrifera* (*fig. 2*) a shrub which is native to Southern China and Taiwan. The plant has been cultivated for centuries in China and its pith was used primarily for the making of artificial flowers [3]. It is also still commonly used as a diuretic in traditional Chinese medicine. However, in the early years of 19th century Chinese painters began to adopt it for a new purpose, as a painting support for watercolour paintings. It appears that it was used only for paintings produced for Western visitors and traders. Initially, in the early years of the century, albums of pith paintings were brought back by merchants, seamen and sometimes diplomats as souvenirs of their visits to foreign land. The albums in the Kunstkamera were presented to the Crown Prince Nicholas when he visited a tea factory in Hangzhou which was one of the largest suppliers of tea to Russia. The albums bear the seal of the tea company Molchanov, Pechatnov & Co. They are therefore an interesting example of paintings which were brought back directly from China by a significant personage.

Clunas [4] points out that export art occupies a space which is neither wholly Chinese nor wholly

European. It was, as he puts it an art made for strangers and it is perhaps particularly significant that the use of pith paper as a painting support seems to have been limited to watercolours produced for these strangers. Paintings on pith are therefore the supreme example of this genre. By the end of 19th century paintings on pith dominated the Chinese export watercolour market. The earliest dated example of a painting on pith is from 1820s [5] and they continued to be produced into the early years of 20th century. Their production therefore spans a significant and dramatic period in the history of relations between China and the West. Chinese paintings on pith reflect a joint history of trade with China when the USA and many European countries including England, Holland, France, Denmark, Sweden, Austria and Spain were establishing trading links with China. Paintings on pith are subsequently to be found scattered in collections all over the Western world. Early trade with China was carried out mainly by large licensed monopoly companies such as the Honourable East India Company. By the mid century the commerce was dominated by business houses and free trade ruled. There was a gradual shift from tribute trade to treaty trade.