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Prologue

Welcome to The Hong Kong Museum of Art, the first public art museum in the city, now custodian of an art collection of over 17,000 sets, presenting a wide world of contrasts, from old to new, Chinese to Western, local to international with a Hong Kong viewpoint.

The exhibition we will tour today is titled “#popcolours — The Aesthetics of Hues in Antiquities from the HKMoA Collection”. The exhibition is located on the 3rd floor in the Chinese Antiquities Gallery. Before we proceed to the exhibition, let’s take a moment to orient ourselves in the gallery. This gallery is divided into five zones — Blue, Red, White, Black and Yellow — according to our walking sequence. This tactile guide booklet presents one selected artefact from each colour zone, of which we can locate on the tactile floor plan.

Exhibition Introduction

Studies suggest that when we observe an object, our attention is first drawn to its colours rather than its shape. Artefacts were once everyday objects in ancient times, created in hues ranging across a broad spectrum. Are these colours a reflection of personal tastes, spiritual beliefs, ritual systems, sentiments or trends?

It is stated in *The Art of War* that: “There are not more than five prime colours, yet in combination they produce more hues than can ever been seen.” In ancient China, a scheme of “five prime colours” was commonly adopted, consisting of Blue, Red, Yellow, White and Black. The artefacts in this exhibition are grouped according to these categories, including certain items that are in secondary colours. It aims to showcase the colourful world of Chinese antiquities across times that also serves as a bridge between the past and the present.

Tactile Colour System

Tactile Colour System (TCS) is a system incorporating 8 different tactile patterns to represent 8 different colours. With the help of TCS, the visually impaired can also understand the concept of colour. Believing that the emotional aspect of colour is not exclusive to the sighted, the visually impaired can also be more connected to society with more understanding and experience of colour through the implementation of TCS.

This is a colourful tactile drawing on white paper, divided into three columns. The left column shows three cool colours: green represented by horizontal lines pattern, blue represented by wavy lines pattern, and violet represented by diagonal lines pattern. The right column shows three warm colours: red represented by dots pattern, orange represented by diamonds pattern, and yellow represented by triangles pattern.

At the top of the middle column is a hexagon composed of the above six colours, below is a colour legend of the hexagon. At the bottom, we can see grey represented by dash diagonal lines pattern and black represented by a raised smooth surface.

Blue Zone — Pair of peony-shaped drinking cups in aubergine glaze
Kangxi period (1662 to 1722), Qing dynasty
Ceramics

Visual description and analysis

This tactile drawing is shown in blue outline on a gradient blue background. It includes three diagrams, a top view diagram on top centre, followed by a side view diagram in the middle and a colour indication diagram at the bottom. This is a pair of peony-shaped drinking cups in light purple glaze. Each cup has a fixed drinking straw. It is about 13.5 cm wide, 15 cm long and 5 cm high, similar to the size of an open palm. From the top view, the peony-shaped drinking cup is almost horizontally symmetrical. The peony in full bloom is meticulously detailed with multiple layers of overlapping petals, with clear outlines engraved on the inner and outer surfaces of the cup. The centre of the peony is represented by cross-hatching pattern, to its nine o'clock direction is the fixed drinking straw, with two raised smooth ovals representing two ends of the straw.

From the side view, we can clearly see that attached to the left of the petal cup is the pedicel-shaped straw, its bottom end is connected externally to the receptacle-like cup base. This pair of drinking cups is punctiliously structured and creatively designed. The colour indication diagram at the bottom shows that the entire cup is coated in purple glaze, a hue that carries a tinge of blue (blue represented by wavy lines pattern). The thicker the wavy lines, the darker the shade of blue in that area. This thick and shiny glaze in brightly saturated colour brings the peony vividly to life.

Colour's history and colourant

Purple glaze, also known as aubergine glaze, first appeared in the Ming dynasty and matured in the Kangxi period of the Qing dynasty. Aubergine glaze has a wide colour spectrum, ranging from as dark as the night sky, to as light as the shade of young aubergine.

After manganese is added as the colourant and fired at a high temperature, it appears as aubergine purple and known as "aubergine glaze".

Red Zone — Bodhidharma, Shiwan ware

Mid 20th century

Ceramics

Visual description and analysis

This tactile drawing is shown in red outline on a red background. It includes two diagrams, a large front view diagram to the right of the page and a small square mark at the bottom left corner. This is an upright Bodhidharma statue in pomegranate red glaze, about 47 cm high and 25 cm wide, it is similar to the height from shoulder to wrist. The multiple dots patterns are representing the red colour on the exhibit. Bodhidharma, one of the most important Buddhist characters, who is said to have arrived in China in 520 CE. He was once invited by the Emperor Wudi of the Southern Liang dynasty to discuss Buddhism, but following a divergence of views, Bodhidharma left and went to stay at the Shaolin monastery.

Starting from the top of the statue, we first touch the face of Bodhidharma. He has a pair of thick black eyebrows and a beard that covers the lower half of his face. His head is slightly tilting upwards, which shows his nostrils, and he is also wearing a cloak's hood over his head. To the eight o'clock direction from his face is his right hand holding onto a baguette-like shoulder pole, represented by a raised smooth surface. To the direct left of the shoulder pole, we can touch a denser dots pattern, which represents a Chinese farmer's hat and a cloth wrapping bag at his back. Further down, we can see the Bodhidharma is wearing a pomegranate red cloak (red represented by dots pattern), the pomegranate glaze is bright and saturated in colour. During the high-temperature firing process in the kiln, the red glaze layer ran downward naturally, exposed its underlying white bisque layer, and turned the draperies into white, which are indicated in the drawing by the raised white outlines. This effect adds a greater sense of depth to the art piece. At the bottom of the cloak, we can see the front half of his left foot exposed. In short, the Bodhidharma statue is exquisitely handcrafted, with a dramatic facial expression, lively posture, smooth-flowing draperies, and a proportional human figure. At the bottom left corner of the drawing is a square mark of 'Wanxi Liu Chuan' inscribed on the base of the statue, indicating that it was made by Liu Chuan, a famous Shiwan potter in the 20th century.

Colour's history and colourant

Copper-red glaze includes different shades of red, which evolved during several eras. In the early Ming dynasty, the Jingdezhen imperial kiln produced high temperature copper-red glaze. The glaze is thick, and its colour is rich and pure. As this shade of copper-red glaze was often applied on ritual vessels, it was also named "sacrificial red". In Chinese, this is sometimes called by another homonym "*jihong*", comparing it to the mesmerising shade of afterglow after rain. Later, in the Qing dynasty, craftsmen from the imperial kilns created

more shades of copper-red glaze, including *Langyao* red and peach-bloom red. In the 20th century, pomegranate red, one of the distinctive glazes, was created in the Shiwan kiln.

Copper is a major colourant in copper-red glaze. It appears as brilliant red colour after firing in high temperature. The success rate of the production of copper-red glazed ware was extremely low due to the challenging requirements for temperature control and craftsmanship, it would appear muted-looking with a slight deviation.

White Zone — Stem-bowl with *anhua* dragon design in *tianbai* glaze
Four-character mark of Yongle and of the period (1403 to 1424), Ming dynasty
Ceramics

Visual description and analysis

This tactile drawing is shown in white outline on a white background. It includes two diagrams in 1:1 scale to the exhibit, on the top is a front view diagram, and at the bottom is a top view diagram of the bowl's inner wall. This is a stem-bowl in *tianbai* white glaze, 10.5 cm high and with a diameter of 15.5 cm, similar to the size of two open palms side by side. The front view diagram shows the inside and outside of the entire bowl, emitting pure white and a gentle glow. The bowl's outer surface is smooth and even. Its stem, which is the part below a dash line, is about the height of a fist, serving as a grip for this drinking utensil. It also shows partially of the bowl's inner wall, part of the head and body of a dragon is subtly shown. When we closely appreciate it from different angles, we can merely see some hidden decorations inside the bowl.

The top view diagram with multiple thin curvy lines is presenting the translucent and subtle graphics on bowl's inner wall. We can see two dragons chasing each other's tails in a circle. The dragon has one head, four limbs and one tail. A pair of dots raised more prominently is the eyes of dragon. To the left and right of the dragon's head are its five-clawed arms. As we follow its scaled body, it branches up and down to its five-clawed legs, and finally to its three-pronged tail. In addition, at the centre of the bowl, a small circle in curvy lines, is the "Yongle *nianzhi*" reign mark. At the back page is the same 1:1 scale top view diagram but printed flat and in black outline, to facilitate visitors with low vision.

The bowl's paper-thin bisque is so translucent that it admits light, which then reveals the patterns. Vessels of this nature are described as "semi-boneless". Thanks to the extraordinary skills of craftsmen from Yongle imperial kiln, etching ornate patterns on such a thin surface was made possible. Only those who are allowed to hold this bowl in their hands and appreciate it from different angles, can truly apprehend its mysterious charm. Yongle Emperor of the Ming dynasty was one of the fortunate ones. In declining a gift of foreign tribute, he once said: "The ceramics used daily by me, the Emperor, have a crystal-clear quality that appeals to the heart (soul). Therefore I have no need for this."

Colour's history and colourant

Tianbai glaze was the signature colour of the Yongle period of Ming dynasty. *Tianbai*-glazed ceramics were used extensively in the palace, accounting for more than 90% of all unearthed relics from the early Yongle period. Because of their surpassing delicacy and milkiness, they have been highly sought after by later generations. After white sugar

became widely used in the 16th century, art experts have been comparing the purity of white porcelains from the Yongle period to the frosty white of sugar icing, hence the name “*Tianbai*” (sweet white).

The colourant of Yongle *tianbai* glaze still remains unknown. It was made using a special formula. Due to the chemical composition of the glaze, alongside the large number of solid particles and tiny bubbles, light scatters intensely from the porcelain surface. This colour is a snowy white with a tinge of pink and has been favoured for its pristine and elegant quality. Despite countless attempts, no one has been able to reproduce white porcelains with the same immaculate shade, gentle glow, and delicate icing-like texture.

Black Zone — Carved black lacquer cupstand with dragon amidst cloud and wave design
Song dynasty (960 to 1279)
Lacquer

Visual description and analysis

This tactile drawing is printed on both sides of paper, shown in black outline on a black background. It includes three diagrams in 1:1 scale to the exhibit, a side view diagram on top, a roll-out diagram below, and on the back page is a top view diagram. The side view diagram illustrates a cupstand in black lacquer, about 6.7 cm high with a diameter of 16.5 cm, similar to the size of two open palms side by side. It was used as a saucer for placing a tea bowl or teacup. The cupstand can be interpreted by its top and bottom halves. Its top half is narrower, so as for tea bowl or teacup to fit in nicely, with a horizontal sea-dwelling *chi* dragon carved on its outer surface. Touching from left to right, this angle only shows part of the dragon from its waist to head. Cloud and wave patterns are inscribed in the background. The bottom half of the cupstand is wider, resembling a plate with a short stem, also carved with cloud and wave patterns on its outer surface.

Below is a roll-out diagram presenting the top half of cupstand. We can clearly see the entire *chi* dragon in nimble form, which appears to be in a horizontal stomach sleeping position. Touching from left to right, we first encounter its forked tail in the middle. The dragon has three-clawed limbs. Underneath its tail is its right leg, and as we follow its body with no scales, we find its left leg, followed by its two arms branched up and down. To the right of its arms is its head with a mane, which resembles pigtail hairstyle. Cloud and wave patterns are also inscribed in the background. Patterns like this are commonly seen on lacquer ware from the Southern Song dynasty.

On the back page is a top view diagram, with a large and a small circle on top of each other. The smaller circle at the centre, is featuring the black inner surface of the top half of cupstand (black represented by a raised smooth surface). The larger circle is featuring the inner surface of the bottom half of cupstand, also inscribed with cloud and wave patterns. The cupstand is made of wood and coated with multiple layers of lacquer. After the layers were thick enough, the craftsman would carve the patterns on the object to create a relief-like effect. This technique is called “carved lacquer”. It can be further differentiated by colour as *tihong* (carved cinnabar), *tihei* (black) and *tikai* (colour lacquer).

Colour’s history and colourant

In *Shuowen Jiezi* (Elucidation of complex graphs and explanation of simple graphs), a Chinese dictionary from the Han dynasty, black is described as “the colour of (a thing) smoke from fire”. Black vessels were made of different materials across the ages. In the

Neolithic period, black pottery wares were made through a carburising firing process in a sealed kiln. In the Song dynasty, makings of lacquer wares and porcelains have had a significant influence on each other. Take the mallow-shaped dish as an example, dishes in similar shapes would be made of different materials, such as using black-glazed porcelains, pursuing the deep, lustrous and lacquer-like black.

The colourant of black lacquer is raw lacquer. Raw lacquer, resinous sap of the lacquer tree, is creamy white in colour. It turns light brown once hardened and then black after oxidation. The lacquer can be made ripe through stirring and processing, and toned black by adding dyeing materials such as iron powder or lampblack. The black lacquer can be applied on the surface of wares for a lustrous black finish.

Yellow Zone — Bright yellow dragon robe with the twelve imperial symbols
Xianfeng period (1851 to 1861), Qing Dynasty
Textile

Visual description and analysis

This folded page of tactile drawing is shown in black outline on a yellow background. It includes two diagrams, a larger front view diagram in the middle and a smaller colour indication diagram on the right. The front view diagram shows a flat lay, open-armed dragon robe in bright yellow textile, 144 cm long and 204 cm wide. It belonged to the Xianfeng Emperor of Qing dynasty, as a formal attire for rituals and ceremonies. At the far left and far right of the robe are its horse-hoof cuffs. At the top centre of the robe is a half-circle in raised thick band that extends along to the eight o'clock direction, representing the round collar and overlapping lapel of the robe, with dragon motif recessed into the raised band. At the six o'clock direction from the round collar is a front-facing dragon and at its five and seven o'clock directions are two dragons in profile, forming a triangle. Dots raising more prominently are the eyes of the dragons. The robe is embroidered with three dragons both at the front and the back, in addition to two front-facing dragons on either shoulder, and one on the inner facing which only becomes visible when the lapel is turned down, they therefore make a total of nine dragons on one robe, with five always in view from whatever angle. This is an indication of the emperor's supreme status as the "Son of Heaven". The upper half of the robe has a densely patterned ground of stylised twelve imperial symbols amidst clusters of *ruyi*-shaped clouds interspersed with wan emblems and other auspicious emblems, all reserved above the hem of robe, with the Eight Buddhist Emblems rising from the terrestrial diagram and diagonal *lishui* stripes.

The colour indication diagram indicates different colours on the robe. The robe's horse-hoof cuffs are in orange (represented by diamonds pattern). The upper half of the robe with dense clusters of *ruyi*-shaped clouds is sewn on a bright yellow ground (represented by triangles pattern). The hem of the robe with *lishui* stripes is formed by multicoloured diagonal lines in opposite direction which split in the centre neatly. Wavy line represents blue, dotted line represents red, and straight line represents green or violet. The Qing dynasty used pattern and colour as embodiment of rules and rituals. Bright yellow was worn exclusively by the emperor, empress, and empress dowager during the Qing dynasty. It is the supreme colour among the nobles.

This folded page of tactile drawing is shown in black outline on a white background, which shows zoom-in diagrams of the twelve imperial symbols and their positions on the robe accordingly. The twelve imperial symbols are exclusive to dragon robes worn by the Qing emperors. They symbolise a ruler's power and embodiment of the highest virtues. Open the tactile drawing, we can see on the top left corner is a front view diagram of the robe, and on the bottom left corner is its back view diagram. Numbers on them represent positions of the corresponding imperial symbols. The twelve symbols are: on the shoulders, 1: the Sun, representing the illumination of the myriad things; 2: the Moon, representing yin-yang balance; at the front, 3: a constellation of Stars, representing harmony with the heavenly laws; 4: a *fu* symbol, representing the ability to distinguish clearly between right and wrong; 5: a sacrificial axe, representing decisive and acute judgment; 6: the water weed, representing purity and cleanness; 7: a pair of sacrificial vessels meant for ancestral worship, representing loyalty and filial piety, wisdom and courage; at the back, 8: the mountains, representing steadfastness; 9: a pair of dragons, representing deft adaptation to change; 10: the pheasant (*huachong*) standing on one leg, representing impressive literary cultivation; 11: the flames, representing brightness; and 12: the millet, representing material plenitude. There had been multiple interpretations of the twelve symbols, but generally speaking they were thought to signify the worship of Heaven, glorification of ancestors, making-manifest of ritual propriety, and veneration of morality.

Colour's history and colourant

Yellow was the exclusive colour for the imperial family in the Ming and Qing dynasties, not until the Qianlong period of Qing dynasty was bright yellow officially decreed to be used exclusively for the emperor's garments. Since the Qianlong period, dressing regulations had been well established by the *Illustrated Regulations for Ceremonial Paraphernalia*, where yellow was classified into multiple shades, to signify the different ranks of the nobility. The lower ranks must not overstep.

The colourants of yellow dyes include gardenia, flower buds of Japanese pagoda tree, wood from Smoke tree, etc. In ancient China, gardenia had been the primary ingredient for producing bright yellow pigments. It was during the Qing dynasty that the flower buds of the Japanese pagoda tree became the preferred colourant for the yellow dye for the emperor's robes, due to its superior colour fastness under exposure to the sun.