



Masters of the Knife

Chinese Carving in Wood, Ivory and Soapstone

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The Chinese traditionally loved small, beautiful objects that needed no obvious function but were delightful to look at. They were often pleasing to handle and usually meaningful through the associations they conjured up. Among these trinkets were objects made with a knife: carvings in wood, ivory, rhinoceros horn, soapstone and other relatively soft materials, known in Chinese as *diao*ke. This article examines seventeenth- and eighteenth-century carvings in various materials from Dutch collections. Most came from that of Jean Theodore Royer (1737-1807), a well-documented group of objects which is shared by the Rijksmuseum and the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden.¹ Information about the history of the development of his collection may contribute towards a better understanding of these objects.

In studies of Chinese art it is often assumed that there is a difference between the objects that were made for members of the 'elite' and the things that were intended for all the strata of society below them. And there is a third group – objects destined for export to Europe.² Although this classification simplifies the truth and the boundaries between the different groups cannot always be drawn precisely, it is correct in broad terms and offers a framework for the study

Detail of fig. 16

of the pieces. The difference between art for the elite, art for the people and art for export also acts as a starting point for the classification of the pieces discussed.

It is difficult to define the 'elite' with any precision. The concept could mean different things in different places and at different times. Broadly speaking it alluded to the world of the literati and scholarly officials. The scholarly way of life was seen as exemplary and to be emulated, so similar objects were also used and appreciated outside the group of scholarly art lovers.³

For the Chinese Scholar

Chinese sources reveal that the art of the knife was a skill that was highly appreciated by scholars. In general that meant admiration for the work of renowned artists, but scholars themselves also made carvings.⁴ The scholar as amateur painter is a well-known phenomenon, but the amateur carver existed too. The special status of carvers is illustrated by the story of Du Shiyuan from Suzhou who had a reputation as both a drunkard and a master carver. He was summoned to work at the court of Emperor Qianlong. Deprived of drink and employed as a common artisan, he went downhill to such an extent that he soon regained his freedom to return to Suzhou, where he went back to work in the

same old way.⁵ This gives us an idea of the carver's unusual status, a position that Craig Clunas argues was similar to that of the amateur painter and differed from those of potters and weavers. Famous carvers signed their work, and it is signed work in particular that is popular among Chinese devotees. As with paintings, a signature is extremely easily added – either immediately after a piece is made or by a later owner – so it is dangerous to trust blindly on the presence of such a mark.

The carvers worked with a variety of materials. The highest esteem was afforded to works in bamboo and these were also the items Chinese enthusiasts wrote the most about.⁶ Bamboo is known as unspoilt and rustic, and is consequently associated with simplicity. Ivory lacked any particular associations. It was regarded as 'just' an easily worked, attractive material. During the Ming period (1368-1644) the group of enthusiasts who were seriously interested in *diao*ke was smaller than in later centuries, but they had much stronger opinions about the specific materials that were suitable for each type of object. An object could be *ya* (elegant) or *su* (vulgar). This seems to have been primarily a personal judgement that the arbiters of good taste failed to explain in their writings. They essentially ignored ivory. In the Qing period (1644-1911) there was a watering-down of these opinions. More people surrounded themselves with fine objects, but the choices were less emotionally-charged. A large group of unknown artisans was working for a far larger group of less fastidious and less extravagant customers than in the previous period.⁷ Soapstone was regarded as even more lowly than ivory, save for one use – seals. Both the face of the seal and its decoration received the utmost attention, and they were highly valued by scholars. However seals were rarely collected outside China and certainly not in the Netherlands.

In spite of their associations with rustic simplicity, it is above all their virtuosity that is praised in writings about carvers. One early example is the description from the early Ming period of the work of Zhang Cheng. He was, admittedly, active in the Song period, but the description nevertheless clearly reflects what it was that true enthusiasts admired. 'His carving was of a fantastic and incomparable refinement. I have seen a birdcage by him where the panels on all four sides were made from bamboo strips on which palaces, figures, landscapes, plants and birds were carved and every detail was accurate. The carving was minutely fine, with openwork and moving parts.' The Chinese name for such consummate work is *gui gong* – the work of the devil.⁸

Ivory Figures

Carvers made such objects as brush pots and perfume holders for scholars' desks, but they also produced figurines. The figures typically represented Buddhist or Taoist characters and could be used in private devotion. However this role was secondary when it came to the most beautiful figures. In these cases the importance lay in the quality of the carving and the good wishes that were conveyed with the presentation of such a figure. The gift of a figure of an Immortal was automatically accompanied by the wish for a long life.

The ivory figure of Taiyi, a deity from the Taoist pantheon who was able to bring scribes inspiration with his light-emitting staff, is an example of fine carving combined with good wishes (fig. 1). Figures like this – long familiar in wood, bronze and earthenware – were not made of ivory until the end of the sixteenth century. The centre of production was the province of Fujian, which in the sixteenth century had to a large extent wrested control from the central Chinese authority and focused on overseas trade with the Spanish, Portuguese and

Fig. 1
Figure of the Taoist
God Taiyi, 1680-1720.
Ivory, h. 26 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum, on loan
from the Vereniging
van Vrienden der
Aziatische Kunst,
AK-MAK-1397.
The translation of
the inscription on the
scroll reads: 'I made
my thorn staff ignite'.



others. Ivory from southern Asia was easy to come by and there was a great demand among Europeans for figures of Christian saints, examples of which were given to the carvers in ivory or as prints. The city of Zhangzhou was the main centre for these figures. Although observations about the special position of carvers may lead one to suspect otherwise, the workshops were commercial businesses, which, after the success of the production for the Europeans, recognized that there was still a much larger market in China for similar figures of Buddhist and Taoist personages.⁹ The hey-day came between 1580 and 1650 when the new Qing rulers started to bring Fujian under control. Dehua, the site of the kilns where the white porcelain known as *blanc de Chine* was made, lay close by. From around 1600 figures that display a strong resemblance to ivory figures were made there. The *blanc de Chine* figures were made with the aid of moulds. These moulds were taken from a figure, generally of wood, made by a carver. Around the middle of the seventeenth century Zhangzhou started to lose its special position and figures like these were also being made in other centres where work in the same tradition continued. In view of the fine details in parts of the figure in fig. 1 and the sharp folds of the garment, it dates from later in the seventeenth century or the early eighteenth century.

Soapstone

Carvers worked in various materials. The soapstone figures of a woman, the Immortal Lü Dongbin and a young scholar were made for the same target group as the ivory Immortal in fig. 1 and fulfilled the same role (figs. 2-4). The first figure represents a woman with a vase in her hand. The pose and folds of the garment are reproduced naturally and convincingly. Motifs in the clothes are incised and gilded. There are traces of decoration on the



Fig. 2
Figure of a Woman,
 c. 1700-25.
 Soapstone, h. 23.5 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 on loan from the
 Vereniging van
 Vrienden der
 Aziatische Kunst,
 AK-MAK-1709.

face. The figure is not signed, but it is part of the group of highly sophisticated pieces made at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth. Lü Dongbin was one of the Eight Immortals, identifiable by his fly-whisk and the sword he carries on his back (fig. 3). In terms of elegance and refined detail the figure is comparable to the previous piece. The student or young scholar can be recognized from his cap and clothes (fig. 4). In his hand he holds a small square box, intended for ink for seals. At 52 cm tall, the piece is remarkably large. As soapstone is so soft, figures any larger than this are technically

impossible. Once again the quality of the carving and the incised decorations is extraordinarily high.

The term soapstone refers to a soft, greasy type of stone with a pleasant feel to it, which is easy to work and to polish into a gleaming surface. It is its magnificent colouring that makes it so attractive. It is a form of talc (magnesium silicate) known in China since the late sixteenth century under a variety of names: *hua shi* (slippery stone), *dong shi* (frozen stone) and *lu shi* (wax stone), names that primarily refer to the stone's tactile properties. Qingtian stone and Shoushan stone, other names often used in China, are

Fig. 3
Figure of Lü Dongbin,
 1700-25.
 Soapstone,
 h. 44.5 cm.
 Leiden, Museum
 Volkenkunde,
 Royer Collection,
 360-47.



indications of where it is found. Both places are on the coast of Southeast China (in the provinces of Zhejiang and Fujian respectively). Soapstone was probably not an acceptable material in the eyes of the arbiters of good taste in the Ming period, which explains why these figures did not appear until later, in the seventeenth century.

Figures for European Collectors

Lü Dongbin and the student (figs. 3 and 4) are part of the Royer Collection. Jean Theodore Royer was a lawyer in The Hague who collected Chinese objects as a hobby, with the express objective of gathering knowledge about



Fig. 4
Figure of a Student,
1700-25. Soapstone,
h. 52 cm.
Leiden, Museum
Volkenkunde,
Royer Collection,
360-49.

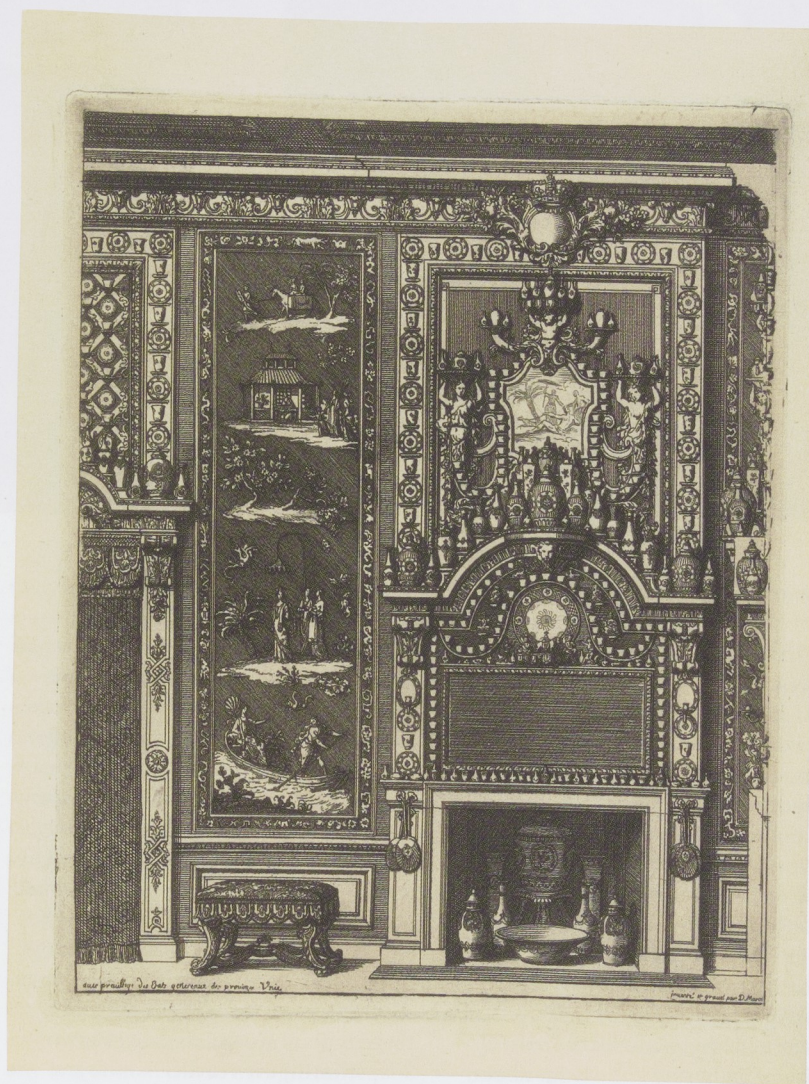
this empire that so intrigued seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europeans. Through the contacts Royer had in the Dutch East India Company he knew at least two Chinese people, who assisted him in putting together and studying his collection. They were a personal servant to one of the Company officials and a Jack-of-all-trades, one Carolus Wang, who had abandoned his training as a priest and become a small trader in Canton. Royer's correspondence and notes reveal that he did most of the work on building his collection in the mid-1770s. On stylistic grounds there is good reason to date the two soapstone figures earlier, to the late

seventeenth or early eighteenth century. It seems far more likely that Royer bought them in the Netherlands, where soapstone regularly came on to the market, than that his Chinese contacts sent him pieces that were anything from fifty to seventy years old. They sent Royer the latest products that were to be found in the Cantonese workshops. What is remarkable is that these splendid figures, which pre-eminently appear to have had a function in scholarly circles in China, were in the Netherlands at all. In practice the distinction between scholarly art, people's art and

art for export was not that strict in the seventeenth century (and at the start of the eighteenth). Pieces were evidently produced 'for the market' and in the seventeenth century buyers of soapstone objects also included Europeans, who shipped anything they could get their hands on to Europe, including on occasion high-quality figures like these intended for scholars. The fact that the places where soapstone was found, and hence the production centres too, were so close to the coast made it easy to transport the objects to the ports where the Europeans traded.

Fig. 5

DANIEL MAROT,
Design for a mantel-
piece and wall decora-
tion in *Nouvelles*
Cheminées..., 1703.
Etching c. 1673-1703,
247 x 195 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
purchased with
the support of the
F.G. Waller Fonds,
RP-P-1964-3043.
The soapstone
figures are above
the mirror.



Chinese Soapstone Figures in Europe

Research into old European collections confirms this view. Soapstone was often regarded as a minor adjunct to the Chinese porcelain that had already found a place in many interiors at the end of the seventeenth century. Stadholder-King William III (1650-1702) and his wife Mary (1662-1694) both had small galleries in Paleis het Loo, with oriental fabrics on the walls and a group of Chinese porcelain objects on display. The two collections also contained a few soapstone figures and there were

other soapstone pieces among the porcelain that was looked after by the steward.¹⁰ The limited numbers and the practice of keeping these pieces with the porcelain tally with what we know from pictures of the same period. Above the mirror in a design by Daniel Marot for a mantelpiece with porcelain and a wall covering based on Chinese lacquer work there is a small group of figures that can be interpreted as soapstone (fig. 5). This is even clearer in a 1719 painting by Pieter Jansz van Ruijven of what is probably an imaginary arrangement of porcelain and soapstone (fig. 6).¹¹

Fig. 6
PIETER JANSZ
VAN RUIJVEN,
*Overmantel
decoration with
ceramics, soapstone
and parrots, 1719.*
Oil on canvas,
112 x 117 cm.
Amsterdam, Amster-
dam Museum.



Fig. 7
Figure of He Xiangyu,
one of the Eight
Immortals, c. 1770-80.
 Soapstone, h. 30 cm.
 Leiden, Museum
 Volkenkunde,
 Royer Collection,
 360-51a.

Fig. 8
Figure of Guanyin,
1750-1800. Blanc
de Chine, h. 28 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum, on loan
 from the Vereniging van
 Vrienden der Aziatische
 Kunst, H.K. Westendorp
 Bequest, AK-MAK-658.

There is still plenty of soapstone in various German collections. Anton Ulrich, Duke of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (1633-1714) had a large group of soapstone objects in his collection. The traveller Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach mentioned it in 1709 and no fewer than six hundred and sixty-six items are listed in an inventory of 1784.¹² In Dresden the collection of four hundred and sixty soapstone objects owned by Elector August the Strong (1670-1733) was displayed in its own cabinet in the Japanese Palace, where his porcelain collections were also housed.¹³ Remnants of collections of soapstone objects that were in each case combined with Chinese porcelain

can be found in other German royal collections.¹⁴ The surviving information we have about these German collections reveals that the pieces were usually purchased in the Netherlands. The quality varies in these old collections. Sophisticated pieces like the Lü Dongbin in fig. 3 are a rarity – a great many of these things were mass-produced. It has been suggested that the quality of the carving declined because of the huge demand from European traders who were satisfied with anything they got, but it is more likely that these mass-produced figures were initially made for the enormous group of Chinese buyers who wanted them for their private devotions. At



this time European traders bought folk art 'in the market' and on occasion acquired a piece which could have had a function in scholarly circles. It was too early for products specifically tailored to their requirements.¹⁵

Soapstone figures are hard to date, but objects found in historic collections can give us something to go on. If the figures from the Royer Collection are compared with those in the collections in Braunschweig and Dresden it is noticeable that certain types that Royer had are not found in the older collections. These are the figures, for the most part carved from a light-coloured stone, with a striking number of folds and great animation in their garments (fig. 7). I assume that these are the new carvings Royer received straight from China. The features are probably typical of the second half of the eighteenth century – it is a development that has its parallel in the figures made of *blanc de Chine* from the same period (fig. 8).¹⁶ The vivacity is further reinforced by the bases in the shape of elaborate openwork rocks. Other figures stand on carved wooden bases that fit exactly and were obviously made for the pieces – something that is not found in the German collections.

The group of lions, apes, fruit and other decorative items made of pure white soapstone is striking (fig. 9). Other objects like these are almost impossible to find, but they do occur in large numbers in white jade. Jade is many times harder than soapstone, cannot be fashioned with a knife and was held in much higher esteem in China. The practice of copying expensive objects in cheaper materials is widespread in China – one only has to think of bronze vessels that were copied in earthenware. We know of soapstone objects which imitate jade in graves from as far back as the Han period (206 BC - AD 220).¹⁷ To my mind, the fact that this soapstone group can be found in Royer's collection has to be linked to his special



Fig. 9
Figure of a Buddhist Lion with Two Boys, c. 1770-80. Soapstone, h. 12.3 cm. Leiden, Museum Volkenkunde, Royer Collection, 360-63b.

connections in China. Carolus Wang, who collected for Royer, was a leading member of the group of traders who tried to copy the way of life of the Chinese elite, at any rate in so far as they could, in an attempt to advance socially. In the Qing period, commerce and the ruling elite were less segregated than they had previously been. The traders were more respected and members of the elite were more often active in business in one way or another. The best way to get on as a trader was to establish and safeguard the firm's reputation. Appearances were very

Fig. 10
Brush rest, c. 1770-80. Decorated soapstone, h. 8 cm. Leiden, Museum Volkenkunde, Royer Collection, 360-83b.



important: the traders endeavoured to look like members of the traditional upper class of Chinese society as much as possible in their dress and in their choice of the objects with which they surrounded themselves.¹⁸ Many of the things that Wang sent Royer convey this; they have a hybrid character: elite, folk and export art converge. The group of 'white' figures and ornaments belong to this hybrid group and the same also applies to the writing desk accessories in soapstone, such as brush holders, splashboards, water bowls, ink stones and paperweights. There are far more of these in Royer's collection than in other collections from the same period (fig. 10).



Wooden Figures

In the eighteenth century soapstone was very popular in the Netherlands as part of porcelain displays. This applied far less to wooden Chinese figures. Porcelain (and also soapstone in combination with porcelain) was part of the fashionable, elegant interior, whereas these wooden figures were found in specific collections. The brothers Jan and Pieter Bisschop were wealthy cotton traders in Rotterdam. They had a mansion on Leuvehaven where they kept their large collection of paintings, prints and drawings and European and Asian objects, including very fine Japanese, Chinese and 'Saxon' porcelain.¹⁹ When the

Fig. 11

Figure of Li Tieguai,
one of the Eight
Immortals, c. 1770-80.
Root wood, h. 39 cm.
Leiden, Museum
Volkenkunde,
Royer Collection,
360-165.

Fig. 12

Figure, c. 1770-80.
Root wood, h. 24.5 cm.
Leiden, Museum
Volkenkunde,
Royer Collection,
360-177.



collection was sold in 1771 it contained no fewer than twenty-three Chinese figures made of sandalwood.²⁰

There was an unusual arrangement in the teahouse of Castle Rosendael, which was built to a design by Daniel Marot between 1725 and 1727. Wooden figures representing Chinese people stood one above the other in niches in eight narrow triangular shelves. Some of the figures have survived. In all probability they are carefully made Dutch copies of Chinese examples. They are approximately 30 cm. tall, taller than is usual for Chinese figures, and made of a soft type of wood.²¹ Be they copies or originals, this remains a remarkable display, reflecting the interest in Chinese wooden figures in the Netherlands in the eighteenth century.

Royer also had exactly twenty-three of these small Chinese figures in his collection, including clowns, acrobats and figures of deities we also know of in ivory and soapstone.

The root wood figures in this collection are worthy of mention (fig. 11). A carver would 'see' a figure in a gnarled root and release it with his knife. Here again, this was a form of decorative art that was originally made for the Chinese elite. Their presence in old royal collections, however, reveals that they soon came to Europe as rarities and, to judge by eighteenth-century estate inventories and sale catalogues, they even became quite common in Dutch private collections.²² Royer had thirty of these carvings (fig. 12).

Shaped to European Taste: Ivory for Europe

The influence of European buyers on the appearance of carvings in soapstone and wood was modest, but the situation was quite different where ivory objects from the second half of the eighteenth century were concerned. The appreciation of Chinese decorative objects in Europe had changed dramatically. Before 1750 or so, admiration was the predominant



feeling and the exotic nature of the objects was appreciated; after that people were impressed first and foremost by the ability to copy European examples accurately. The mother-of-pearl plaque that Cornelis Schipper commissioned in Canton in 1733 is an interesting and early example (fig. 13). In that year Schipper sailed to Canton on board the Dutch East India Company Zeeland Chamber's *Nieuwvliet*.²³ The Company had started to rent a trading post there in 1729 – until that time Chinese junks shipped Chinese goods to Batavia – and from then on it was easier to maintain direct contact with Chinese artisans and to give them specific commissions. Schipper had married Judith Bartholomeussen the year before he went to Canton. While he was in China he ordered a dinner service decorated with their two coats of arms and this identically decorated plaque. The artist must have misread Judith's name, and so she appears on the plaque as 'Judick'. The plaque may have been used as an inlaid decoration on a chest. Such chests have been found, but inlay work of this size is

Fig. 13
Plaque with the
arms and names
of Cornelis Schipper
and Judith
Bartholomeussen,
1733.
Mother of pearl,
diam. 13 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
AK-RAK-2008-1.
The Chinese
carver mistakenly
rendered Judith's
name as 'Judick'.

unknown. It is therefore also possible that it was intended as a decorative piece in its own right.

The esteem in which Chinese decorative art was held clearly emerges from the notes made by William Hickey (1749–1830). Hickey, a ne'er-do-well from a good English family who was packed off to Asia, spent some months in Canton in 1769. He writes enthusiastically about how one of the English merchants from the British East India Company showed him his 'very choice collection of curiosities of his own' and then took him round the workshops where these objects were made. There was nothing of interest to see in Canton, the Englishman told him, but there was in the small area outside the city where the Europeans were permitted to live.²⁴ This reveals a combination of admiration for the craftsmanship in Canton on the one hand, and on the other a contempt for the Chinese culture of which the craftsmen who made these products were a part. Carvings in ivory were by definition highly-prized. John Barrow,

a member of the British mission led by Lord Macartney that travelled to Peking in 1793, wrote that the Chinese had achieved the highest perfection in ivory carving and in that respect were not equalled by anyone else in the world. 'Nothing can be more exquisitely beautiful than the fine openwork displayed in a Chinese fan ...'²⁵ Folding fans were used in China, but the sort of fan referred to here, made entirely of ivory, was only produced for the Europeans. The principle of the incredible virtuosity – the devil's work – is indeed the same as that in the carving valued by Chinese connoisseurs in the Ming period, but now it was applied to objects that had no function or meaning whatsoever for the Chinese. The situation where there was just one market where Chinese and Western buyers were often satisfied with the same items had to a large extent come to an end in the second half of the eighteenth century. In 1785 the United States became active in Canton, and in catalogues of Chinese objects shipped to America from then on there is no

Fig. 14
Brisé fan of carved ivory with three cartouches with a depiction after A. Kaufmann on the front and two prints of sprays of flowers on the back, c. 1795. Ivory with decorated panels, h. 22.5 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, A.E. van Braam Houckgeest Collection, purchased with the support of the Van Braam Houckgeest Family, the M.A.O.C. Gravin van Bylandt Stichting, the Stichting K.F. Hein Fonds, the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, the Mondriaan Stichting and the Rijksmuseum Fonds, AK-RAK-2003-9.



to show off the carvers' dexterity. They are very well-known and much-praised examples of the export objects of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However it appears that these puzzle balls were already being made much earlier specifically for Chinese enthusiasts, proving yet again that even in this period the boundaries between the export and the domestic markets were not always that clear.²⁷

Royer's widow bequeathed her husband's Chinese collection to King William I, who marked the bequest by founding a new museum: the Royal Cabinet of Rarities (initially Chinese Rarities). In the first years of its exist-

ence the museum grew rapidly thanks to purchases, gifts and bequests. The fact that carvings in ivory were seen as desirable museum pieces is revealed by the speedy acquisition of some remarkable ivory baskets. In a guide dated 1824 there was a reference to 'five valuable worked ivory baskets, pierced and ornamented with raised fields...'²⁸

According to the description three of them were stacking boxes. Undoubtedly the box with the two small painted medallions is one of them (figs. 17-19). The quality of the carving is impressive. The trailing flowers in the handle were cut in a deep and truly three-dimensional relief, the quality of the

Fig. 17
Stacking box,
1795-1810.
Ivory with two
painted medallions,
h. 47.5 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
AK-NM-7023.

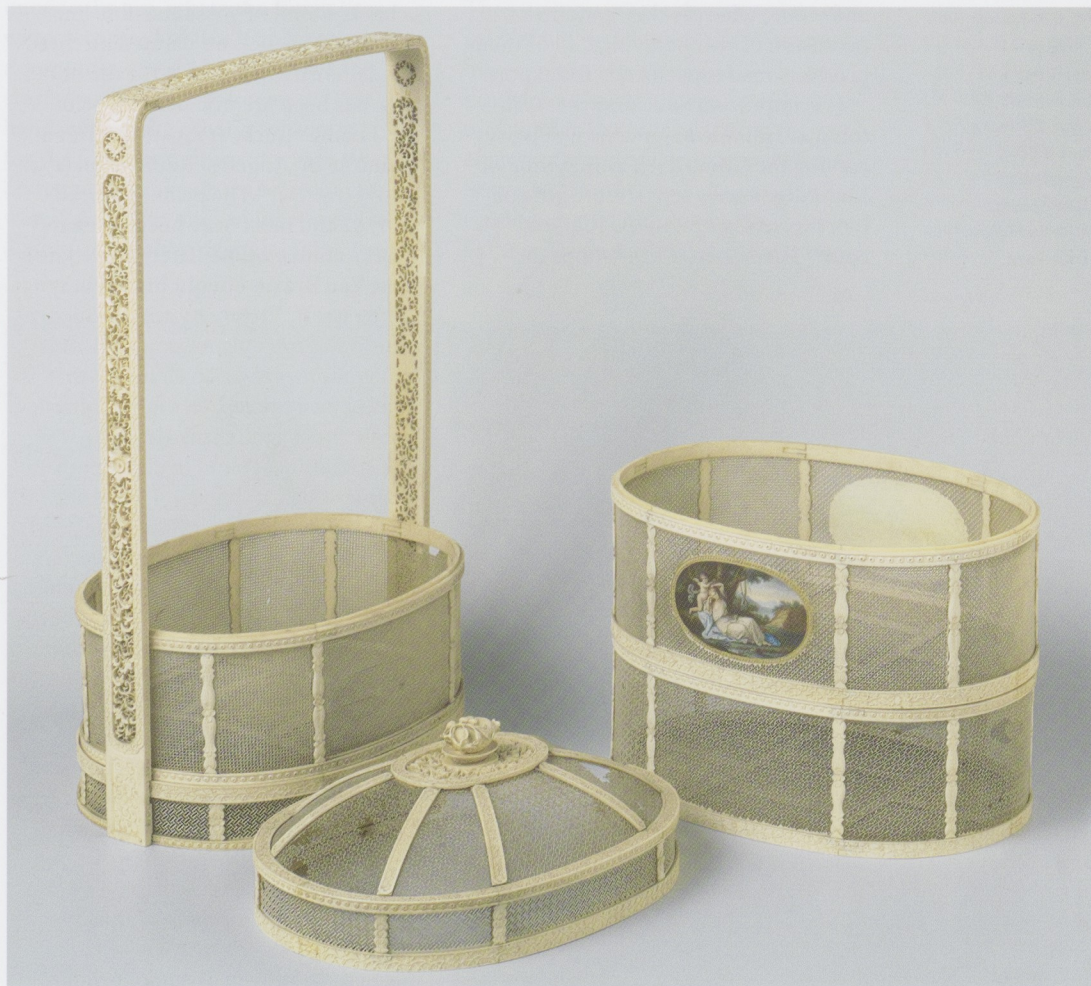




Fig. 18
Details of the panels
of the stacking box
in fig. 17.

openwork panels is evident in the variety of the patterns and the incredible crispness with which they were executed. How the patterns were cut into the very thin panels without breaking them is not clear. In this case, too, the examples for the medallions were prints made by Thomas Burke, this time dated 1794, after *Cupid Binding Aglaia to a Laurel and Cupid Disarmed by Euphrosyne*, paintings by Angelica Kauffmann.²⁹

Among the three stacking boxes that were in the Royal Cabinet in 1824 there was a remarkable pair, now in the Rijksmuseum (fig. 20). These boxes are far more exuberant and are decorated with narrative scenes of figures in landscapes against an openwork background. Although they were previously dated somewhat later in the nineteenth century, nowadays it is assumed that they were made in the first decades of that century. This means that they may be linked to one of the first gifts to the museum in September 1816 of '2 Artistically worked Vases or Workbaskets' presented by Mr Swarth of the firm of Insinger & Co.³⁰ Workbasket and workbox are terms that were often used in this period for Chinese stacking boxes. In 1801 Hans Jacob Swarth

(1774-1834) had become partner to his brother-in-law Herman Albert Insinger (1757-1805), the founder of the Insinger banking and trading house. After Insinger's death in 1805, Swarth successfully took over the



Fig. 19
THOMAS BURKE,
*Cupid Disarmed by
Euphrosyne*, 1794.
Stipple engraving
after a painting by

Angelica Kauffmann,
32.6 x 37.2 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
RP-P-OB-22.491.



running of the firm and turned, among other things, to trade with China. The first ship to go to Canton to bring back tea after the end of the French occupation of the Netherlands – it sailed on 11 June 1814 – was financed by the firm of Insinger and the company had also been active in the China trade before this.³¹

All three stacking boxes had become dirty over the years and were damaged in places. They have been cleaned and restored in the furniture conservation workshop so that they can now be seen in their full glory.

One box from the Hermitage with the initials of Elizabeth Alexeievna (1779-1826), the wife of the Russian tsar Alexander I (1777-1825), is the same shape as the box in fig. 17, but the carving in the panels is like that of the

boxes in fig. 20. The tsarina probably received the box as a gift from members of the Russian mission to China and Japan in 1803-05. Interestingly, there is another similar box in the collection of the National Palace Museum in Taiwan. This box would have found its way into the imperial collection as a tribute gift from Canton and it is remarkable that very high-quality export products and imperial tribute gifts could be similar in this period too.³²

We shall conclude by looking at some unusual objects that do not fall into the categories of scholarly, folk and export art which, with some hesitation, we defined earlier. Among the Cantonese tribute gifts there is a sleeping mat made of thin, woven strips of ivory (figs. 21 and 22), which

Fig. 20
A pair of stacking
boxes, 1800-15.
Ivory, h. 52 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
AK-NM-7006-A and B.

the Cabinet of Rarities acquired in 1823. In terms of its size, function and technique this mat is far removed from the precious *diaoke* trinkets with which this article commenced. The mats were used to sleep on – the woven ivory provided a cool base, like the woven bamboo mats which the ordinary Chinese made do with. According to Chinese researchers there were five ivory examples in the Forbidden City in the Yongzheng period, two of which are still there.³³ As far as the two other known examples are concerned, there are indications that they were removed from the imperial palaces in the time of the British and French occupation and sold – the usual way that objects like these were distributed. It is remarkable that the 'Amsterdam' mat came to the Netherlands by way of Batavia – a very surprising destination for Chinese court art. The painter Adrianus Johannes (Jan) Bik (1790-1872) had sent it from Batavia to the botany professor C.G.C. Reinwardt (1773-1854) whom he knew from the East Indies, where



Fig. 21
Sleeping mat,
1700-50. Braided
ivory with silk lining,
212 x 133 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
NG-NM-7000-TN-1.

Fig. 22
Detail of fig. 21.

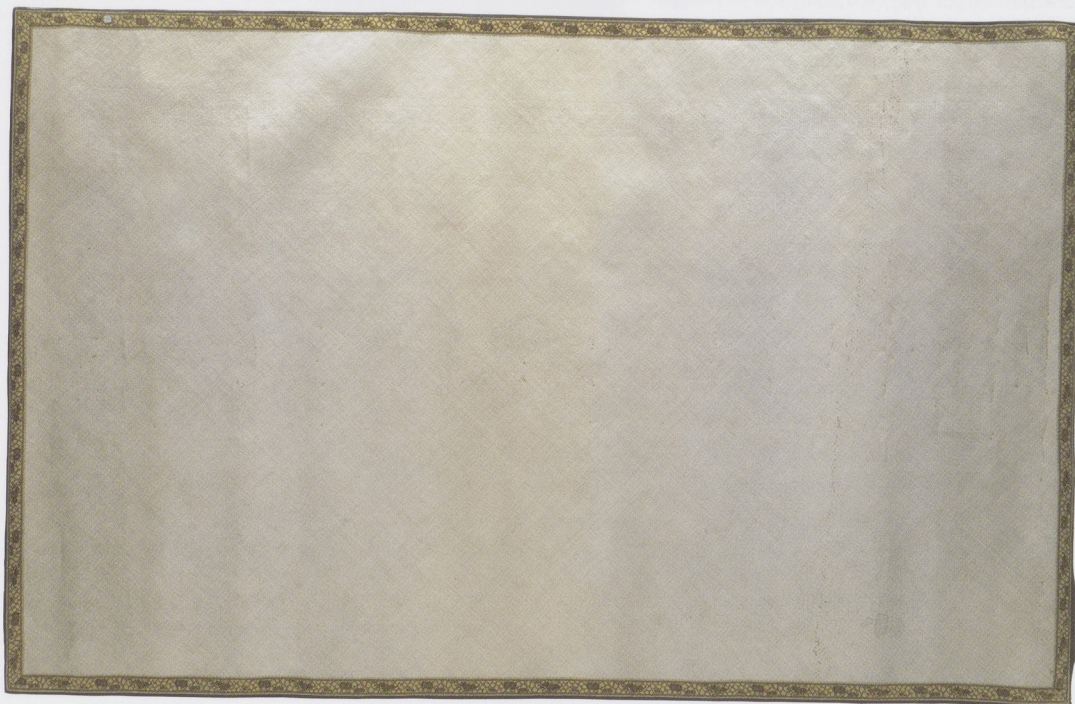


Fig. 23
Figure of a
European Tribute-
Bearer, 1725-75.
Ivory, h. 15.8 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
AK-RAK-2006-4.





Fig. 24
Panel with three
Dutch Merchants
in a Sloop, 1700-50.
Ivory, l. 16 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
NG-1994-12.

Bik had taken part in expeditions led by Reinwardt. A letter from Reinwardt dated 10 November 1823 accompanied the mat to the Royal Cabinet of Rarities.³⁴ After the museum closed, the mat found its way into the Rijksmuseum's collection.

In the eighteenth century, people in circles in and around the Chinese court began to take an interest in foreigners that was akin to European exoticism. It goes without saying that Cantonese ivory carvers, who had ample opportunity to see the strange Westerners, responded to this demand. The figure of a tribute-bringer holding an elephant tusk is an example, as is the group of European men in a sloop who appear to be engaged in unloading their treasures (figs. 23 and 24). Small ivory plaques like this occur on screens depicting the Pearl River – the place where the Europeans had their trading posts – and this panel may have come from one such screen.

The Chinese masters of the knife worked with an often astounding technique for a wide clientele. This produced the very divergent results presented in this article. The distinction between the work for scholars, the Chinese middle classes and European

enthusiasts is often less clear-cut than is often assumed. The carvers worked for 'the market' and the buyers found what was to their liking there.

In the four hundred years that these carvings have been known in Europe, European appreciation of them has been subject to interesting swings of taste. In the seventeenth century they were admired for their exotic nature and in the second half of eighteenth century and the nineteenth century for their technical ingenuity. There was a reaction in the twentieth century. Chinese export trinkets were so much better known in the West than products for the Chinese market that publications focused specifically on the taste of the Chinese elite so as to achieve a better balance. The interest in the objects made for the Chinese middle class is relatively recent – these pieces were neither one thing or the other. They never really appealed and consequently seldom survived or were collected; the Wang pieces in the Royer Collection are a random selection from these middle-class objects, accurately dateable to the 1770s. They give us a rare opportunity to see what these objects were like.

NOTES

- 1 J. van Campen, *De Haagse jurist Jean Theodore Royer (1737-1807) en zijn verzameling Chinese voorwerpen*, Hilversum 2000.
- 2 Craig Clunas has already stated that this classification was a simplification of the truth. Various elite groups co-existed, see C. Clunas, 'Ming and Qing Ivories: useful and ornamental pieces', in C. Clunas et al., *Chinese Ivories from the Shang to the Qing*, London (British Museum) 1984, p. 118. A fourth category, court art, is not described, see Yang Boda, 'Chinese Ivories of the Ming and Qing Dynasties', in *Chinese Ivories from the Kwan collection*, Hong Kong 1990, pp. 126-37.
- 3 The difference between objects that were and were not designed for scholars is rather arbitrary – it has to do with the degree of refinement – but there appears to be some consensus among experts in the field of Chinese art and culture.
- 4 Boda, op. cit. (note 2), p. 127.
- 5 C. Clunas, *Chinese Carving*, London 1996, p. 6.
- 6 Ip Yee and L.C.S. Tam, *Chinese Bamboo Carving*, Hong Kong 1978-1982, gives an idea of these objects.
- 7 Clunas, op. cit. (note 2), p. 121.
- 8 Clunas, op. cit. (note 5), pp. 4-5.
- 9 D. Gillman, 'Ming and Qing Ivories: figure carving', in Clunas et al., op. cit. (note 2), pp. 35-52. However they had also been made for the domestic market before then, as is revealed by a 1562 inventory of the enthusiast Yan Song; see Clunas, op. cit. (note 5), p. 14. For Taiyi see S. Little, *Taoisme and the Arts of China*, Chicago (The Art Institute of Chicago) 2000, no. 75.
- 10 1713: S.W.A. Drossaers and T.H. Lunsingh Scheurleer, *Inventarissen van de inboedels in de verblijven van de Oranjes* (RGP large series 147-49), The Hague 1974-1976, 1, p. 650 (Mary Collection), p. 667 (William Collection), pp. 684-87 (steward).
- 11 Later in the eighteenth century the numbers became larger. The stadholder's court in Leeuwarden is an example. See the inventory of 1764: Drossaers and Lunsingh Scheurleer, op. cit. (note 10), volume III, p. 34. The combination of porcelain and soapstone can also be found in countless less exclusive Dutch interiors. According to the inventory of 1771, the bookseller Pieter van Eck (1715-1769) had porcelain and soapstone arranged in combination in his house at 38 Rapenburg (see T.H. Lunsingh Scheurleer, C.W. Fock and A.J. van Dissel, *Het Rapenburg; geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht*, Leiden 1986-1992, 5a, p. 302), as did Leonard van Heemskerk, who lived at 59 Rapenburg (estate 1772), see Lunsingh Scheurleer, Fock and Van Dissel, op. cit., 6a, pp. 128-29.
- 12 E. Ströber, *Ostasiatika*, Braunschweig (Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum) 2002, p. 183, 400 figures and utensils remain.
- 13 M. Cassidy-Geiger, 'Changing attitudes toward ethnographic material: re-discovering the soapstone collection of August the Strong', *Abhandlungen und Berichte des Staatlichen Museums für Völkerkunde Dresden* 48 (1994), pp. 7-98.
- 14 Ströber, op. cit. (note 12), pp. 185-86 and Cassidy-Geiger, op. cit. (note 13), pp. 18-19.
- 15 See also Clunas, op. cit. (note 5), pp. 71-72. The fact that soapstone figures were offered for sale in the Netherlands in huge quantities emerges from the sale catalogue of Martha Raap's shop stock in 1778. Many of the lots related to soapstone objects, including a ship's chest with 'beelden en beesten', (figures and animals), (see *Catalogus van het ... groote ... en beroemde magazyn, nagelaten by wylen mejuffrouw Martha Raap ...*, sale Amsterdam, 24 August 1778 and subsequent days, no. 233 of the curios.) We seldom come across a description in estates or sale catalogues that alludes to an item of soapstone tailored to European tastes in shape and decoration. An exception is 'Een Heer en Dame van Speksteen in Hollands Gewaad' (A Soapstone Gentleman and Lady in Dutch Dress) in the catalogue of the sale of Joan Coenraad Brandt, director of the Zeeuws Genootschap, of 1792 (sold in Amsterdam 23 October 1792 and subsequent days, no. 26 under the heading of soapstone statues, p. 241).
- 16 There is no consensus on the dating of *blanc de Chine*, but in general restraint in movement and relief is seen as a reason to date a piece in the seventeenth century, since more movement, more relief and more details are typical of the eighteenth century. See, for example, J. Ayers, *Blanc de Chine; Divine Images in Porcelain from Dehua*, Richmond 2002. Professor Chen Jianzhong, curator of the Quanzhou museum, former curator of the museum in Dehua and pre-eminent expert in the materials and techniques of *blanc de Chine* objects, dates the Guanyin in fig. 8 to the end of the Qianlong period (1736-95).

- 17 Clunas, op. cit. (note 5), p. 69.
- 18 R.J. Lufrano, *Honourable Merchants; Commerce and Self-Cultivation in Late Imperial China*, Honolulu 1997.
- 19 At the age of ninety-one Jan was the second of the two to die on 5 March 1771.
- 20 *Catalogus van de beroemde kostbaarheden ... nagelaten door Jan Bisschop*, sold in Rotterdam on 15 July 1771 and subsequent days, 'wooden figure' section, p. 93. Arnout Vosmaer, director of the stadholders' collection, also had these figures in his own collection (sale cat. The Hague 17 March 1800 and subsequent days), as did the Leiden wool merchant and independently wealthy Allard de la Court, who in 1749 made an inventory of his own possessions, see Lunsingh Scheurleer, Fock and Van Dissel, op. cit. (note 11), 2, p. 464.
- 21 J.C. Bierens de Haan, *Rosendaal, groen hemeltjen op aerd; kasteel, tuinen en bewoners sedert 1579*, Zutphen 1994, p. 158. The figures are now in a private collection and it was not possible to see them during my research for this article. Restorer Willem Noyons observed that they were made from a type of softwood (e-mail to Frits Scholten 11 April 2005). In general Chinese figures are made from hardwood (boxwood, bamboo) and are smaller, usually between 10 and 20 cm. Larger figures in softwood were also certainly made, but these were then polychromed and were designed for temples and private altars. One of the figures from Rosendaal has an inscription in ink: 'M. ...sselberg en F.H. Thomas gebr. te Amsteld(am) thans te Arnhem – Junij 6 1741'. The date must refer to delivery of the figures and so they would have been placed in the niches later. Nothing can be found about this ...sselberg and Thomas. They could be the carvers who made these figures in Chinese style.
- 22 See the royal collections in Denmark and Braunschweig (B. Dam-Mikkelsen and T. Lundbaek, *Ethnographic Objects in the Royal Danish Kunstkammer 1650-1800*, Copenhagen 1980 and Ströber, op. cit. (note 12). For Dutch private collections see J. van Campen, *Vervolg op: de Haagse jurist Jean Theodore Royer (1737-1807) en zijn verzameling Chinese voorwerpen*, Amsterdam 2000, appendix 10 (pp. 47-81), esp. under Baart 1762 (p. 49), Sichterman 1764 (pp. 49-50), De Pinto 1785 (pp. 60-61), Rijke 1786 (pp. 61-65), Witsen 1790 (p. 66).
- 23 J. Kroes, *Chinese Armorial Porcelain for the Dutch Market; Chinese Porcelain with Coats of Arms of Dutch families*, The Hague/Zwolle 2007, cat. no. 62.
- 24 P. Quennell (ed.), *Memoirs of William Hickey*, London 1960, p. 140.
- 25 Quoted in N.J. Iröns, *Silver & Carving of the Old China Trade*, London/Hong Kong 1982, p. 133.
- 26 W.W. Roworth (ed.), *Angelika Kauffman; a Continental Artist in Georgian England*, Brighton/London 1992, p. 188, no. 274; D. Alexander, *Affecting Moments; Prints of English Literature made in the Age of Romantic Sensibility, 1775-1800*, York 1993, no. 21.
- 27 Clunas, op. cit. (note 2), no. 226, p. 187; the puzzle balls are mentioned in a text of 1388, but no old examples have survived.
- 28 'Vijf kostbaar gewerkte mandjes van ivoor, doorgebroken en georneerd met verheven velden ...', R.P. van de Kastele, *Handleiding tot de bezigtiging van het Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden ...*, The Hague 1824, p. 20.
- 29 The paintings of 1784 show scenes from a work by the Viennese court poet Metastasio and are in the Rosenbach Museum in Philadelphia. The prints were published in 1794 (see Roworth, op. cit. (note 26), pp. 137-38).
- 30 '2 Kunstig gewerkte Vaasen of Werkmandjes door de heer Swarth van de firma Insinger & Co.', Van Campen, op. cit. (note 22), p. 147.
- 31 J. Jonker, 'De vroege geschiedenis van de firma Insinger & Co.', *Jaarboek Amstelodamum* 94 (2002), pp. 11-131, esp. p. 128.
- 32 T.B. Arapova, 'The double-headed eagle on Chinese porcelain; export wares from imperial Russia', *Apollo* (Jan. 1992), pp. 24-25; Ibid., *Chinese Export Art in the Hermitage Museum; late 16th – 19th centuries* St Petersburg (Hermitage) 2003, no. 114; Na Chih-liang, 'Chinese Ivory Carving', *National Palace Museum Bulletin* 4/5 (1996), fig. 9, pp. 10-12.
- 33 Clunas, op. cit. (note 2), p. 175. In 1984 there were four known examples altogether in addition to this unpublished Amsterdam example, and as a result it is very tempting to assume that this is the last missing mat. According to later research there had probably been a few more in circulation. Wan Yi et al., *Daily Life in the Forbidden City; the Qing Dynasty 1644-1912*, Harmondsworth etc. 1988, no. 186. It mentions there that the mats were often given as gifts.
- 34 Letter to the director R.P. van de Kastele, Rijksarchief in Noord-Holland, Rijksmuseum archives, inv. no. 843, Bik had paid 300 guilders; too much according to Reinwardt.