

Study on plant patterns on Ming and Qing Dynasty famille rose porcelain and its auction market status

Rui Yang

Affiliation: Capital Normal University, Beijing, China

Email: 1909758486@qq.com

Abstract

Ming and Qing dynasty famille rose porcelain plant motifs, while inheriting tradition and incorporating foreign cultures and innovating techniques, developed a unique artistic form, becoming a tangible testimony to cultural exchange between China and the West. This study reveals its developmental trajectory through three perspectives: background, pattern types, and aesthetic connotations. The Maritime Silk Road and foreign cultures, improvements in enamel techniques, and innovations in traditional fine brushwork jointly drove the evolution of these motifs, while tribute trade and breakthroughs in pigment technology further enriched their forms. The motifs encompass traditional auspicious themes, patterns influenced by foreign cultures, and vessel types. Through symmetrical composition, symbolic metaphors, and famille rose techniques, these porcelains construct a triple system of formal beauty, cultural connotation, and craftsmanship, showcasing a diverse blend of Chinese and Western influences. Their market and auction performance confirms their cultural value and artistic appeal.

Keywords: Ming and Qing Dynasties; famille rose porcelain; plant patterns; cross-cultural integration; aesthetic connotation; auction status

1. Development Background

1.1 Origin of plant patterns on famille rose porcelain

1.1.1 The Maritime Silk Road and the Introduction of Foreign Culture

In the late Ming Dynasty, with the opening of new shipping routes, the Maritime Silk Road facilitated frequent trade with Southeast Asia, Europe, and other regions. A large number of merchants and missionaries from Islamic regions and Europe brought with them elements of foreign cultures. For example, geometric patterns and floral designs in Islamic art, as well as the Rococo art style, all blended with Chinese ceramic culture. ^[1]

1.1.2 Improvement of localized enamel color technology

During the reign of Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty, enamel pigments were imported from Europe and then refined for localization. This integration was reflected not only in the adjustment of pigment formulas but also in their adaptation to the Chinese porcelain body and firing atmosphere, blending the delicate realism of Western enamel pigments with the freehand and expressive brushwork of traditional Chinese fine brushwork.

1.1.3 Inheriting the traditional meticulous brushwork and innovating plant patterns

The "boneless method" broke away from the "outline flower and dot leaf" method used in previous dynasties. ^[2]The Taoye Illustrated Book states that painters should "first use glass white as a base, and then use foreign colors to render layer by layer" to create a visual effect of "flowers with dewdrops and leaves with yin and yang." ^[3]For example, the "Famous Rose Peach Tree Pattern Plate" from the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty in the Palace Museum shows the interest of flower and bird painting in its branches and trunks.

2. Factors influencing the development of plant patterns in the Ming and Qing dynasties

2.1 Tribute trade and porcelain export

In the design of plant patterns, it not only retains the connotation of traditional Chinese culture, but also incorporates exotic elements. For example, the "tulip pattern" that appears in Clark porcelain was changed from single petals to double petals

to cater to the European market; the pastel porcelain sold to Europe in the 18th century often used roses and other flowers loved by the West as themes, and incorporated European architecture, characters and other elements to form a unique "Chinese style" decorative style.

2.2 Institutional innovation of the Imperial Household Department

The establishment of the Imperial Workshop during the Qing Dynasty, particularly during the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong reigns, saw the establishment of large-scale imperial kilns, with dedicated supervisors ^①responsible for porcelain creation under the direct supervision of the emperor. This enabled the selection of subject matter, composition, and craftsmanship for plant motifs on famille rose porcelain to reach exceptionally high levels.

2.3 Breakthrough in color material preparation technology

The colors of Yongzheng famille rose porcelain are fresh, bright, soft and elegant, mainly due to the improvement of Yongzheng color material preparation technology. Chen Wanli once said, "The further improvement of Yongzheng white glaze meets the requirements of applying soft colors on the glaze, thus achieving a mutually beneficial effect." ^[4]Tang Ying's Taoye Tushu records: "The filling of colors needs to be divided into light and dark, with glass white as the base and foreign colors applied layer by layer." This shows that during this period, the patterns shifted from flat decoration to three-dimensional expression.

3. Pattern Types and Vessel Types

3.1 Local traditional auspicious plant patterns

3.1.1 Symbols of Confucian ethics

Influenced by Confucian culture, Ming and Qing dynasty famille rose porcelain featured numerous auspicious plants in its botanical motifs. For example, the "Four Gentlemen"—plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum—represent longevity, perseverance, purity, and elegance, respectively, representing the moral cultivation and pursuit of integrity advocated by Confucianism. These plants often appear in combinations, such as the "Three Friends of Winter"—pine, bamboo, and plum—symbolizing perseverance and purity, and were often seen on decorative porcelain from official kilns. For example, the "Famille Rose 'Three Friends of Winter' Covered Bowl" in the National Museum features pine, bamboo, and plum—these three main elements. Its rigorous composition emphasizes the vigor of the pine, the uprightness of the bamboo, and the unyielding spirit of the plum, symbolizing the noble character of a gentleman in the face of adversity.

3.1.2 Taoism and secular auspiciousness

As a symbol of Buddhism, the lotus is often presented on porcelain in various postures, either blooming alone to represent purity and holiness; or combined with religious elements such as Buddha statues and Bodhisattvas to create a sacred atmosphere. Plants such as Ganoderma lucidum and fairy peaches in Taoist culture symbolize immortality and ascension to heaven. They are often used in Taoist porcelain decorations, reflecting the spiritual sustenance and beautiful yearning of the people at that time for religious beliefs. There are also plant patterns with pomegranates, grapes, peaches, etc. Pomegranates symbolize many children and good fortune, grapes symbolize a good harvest and abundance, and peach patterns symbolize auspiciousness and longevity. These patterns reflect the people's yearning and expectation for a better life. ^[5]For example, the "Famous Rose Nine Peaches Picture Celestial Globe Vase" from the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty in the collection of the National Museum has nine peaches painted on the main body, embellished with dense peach branches and flowers. Peaches symbolize "longevity", and the number nine is "extreme yang", which means "long life"; the lush branches and leaves and abundant fruits imply the secular vision of "many children and good fortune" and "a prosperous family".

3.1.3 Rich flowers

The Qunfang Pu records that "during the Kaiyuan period of the Tang Dynasty, the world was at peace, and peonies began to flourish in Chang'an." Peonies have always symbolized grace, elegance, prosperity, and peace. For example, the Palace Museum's "Famous Rose Peony Patterned Flat-Mouthed Vase" from the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty features peony patterns painted in pink, orange, emerald green, grass green, and brown. The outer bottom is inscribed with a six-

^① Wang Jin, "On the Drawbacks of Qianlong Famille Rose Porcelain," *Chinese Ceramics*, April 20, 2009.

character inscription in regular script in blue and white: "Made in the Yongzheng Period of the Great Qing Dynasty." The lotus pattern, featured on the "First Rank Clean and Honest" lotus plate, was exclusively for officials of the Censorate. The petals are painted using the "single-line flat painting" technique. The heron feathers in the "One Road, One Success" pattern are painted using the "torn-feather technique," with each feather individually colored. This technique, known in Jingdezhen as "Thousand Feather Color," is a technique used for painting the petals.

3.1.4 Combining poetry and painting with plant patterns

The combination of flowers and poetry was a common innovation in Ming and Qing dynasty famille rose porcelain. For example, the Qianlong period "Gold-ground Famille Rose Opening with Poetry and Floral Design Vase" in the Palace Museum collection features a resplendent and luxurious gold ground. Within the opening, clusters of chrysanthemums, with their branches and leaves spread out, their petals smudged in a gradient of pink, yellow, and white, create a graceful gesture. On the other side of the opening, Tao Yuanming's famous line, "Picking chrysanthemums beneath the eastern fence, leisurely gazing at the southern mountains," is inscribed in ink and running script. The famille rose technique skillfully blends the elegance of the chrysanthemum with the richness of the gold ground, with the poetry and floral motifs complementing each other, embodying the graceful demeanor of imperial porcelain while hinting at the philosophical and reclusive spirit of the literati.

3.2 Plant patterns influenced by foreign cultures

Islamic geometric patterns were introduced to China through maritime trade, where they were combined with indigenous coiled floral motifs to create a unique decorative style. For example, the Qing Dynasty Daoguang "Green Ground Famille Rose Entwined Lotus Amphora" in the Palace Museum's collection features a pattern based on Islamic geometric motifs, with vines arranged in a hexagonal, continuous pattern. The lotus flowers are depicted in freehand ink brushwork, while the leaf veins incorporate the "crab claw" technique of Chinese calligraphy. The green glaze is painted using the "brocade ground opening" technique, with famille rose lotuses within the geometric framework. Arabic-style "tendrillas" can be seen at the junctures of the branches, and the glaze has a clam-like sheen.

3.3 Vessel Type Classification

3.3.1 Bottles

The patterns on the plum vase are mainly composed of entwined lotus, broken branch peony, pine, bamboo and plum. The whole body adopts a vertical multi-layer continuous pattern layout, which unfolds layer by layer from the neck to the foot, and has auspicious meanings; the celestial globe vase uses the round belly as the core decorative area, and the patterns mostly use broken branches of flowers and fruits (such as peach, pomegranate, lychee) and entwined lotus patterns. The composition is full and rich, symbolizing many children and harmony between heaven and earth; the appreciation vase is a custom-made vessel from the official kiln, and is typically decorated with a entwined lotus pattern combining blue and white outline and pastel filling. The neck is decorated with banana leaf patterns, and the lotus pattern on the belly echoes the meaning of "integrity", reflecting the political symbol of the imperial artifact.

3.3.2 Plates and bowls

Round plates often feature a central floral pattern (peony, chrysanthemum, lotus) with flowers of the four seasons painted in grids around the edges. The symmetrical composition is rigorous, and occasionally "flowers with branches" span the inside and outside of the vessel wall, such as an extended peach branch, which symbolizes longevity and good fortune. Covered bowls, on the other hand, emphasize a harmonious pattern between the lid and the body of the vessel. Entangled lotus, broken chrysanthemum branches, and melon vines are common on tea utensils, which are both elegant and imply the wish for prosperous descendants and longevity.

3.3.3 Pots and jars

The pitchers are often decorated with broken peach branches, grape vines and gourd patterns, with small flowers dotted on the spout and handle. The main pattern on the abdomen echoes the outline of the pot body with curves, and the characteristics of grapes with many seeds and gourds with many edges are used to symbolize fertility and good fortune; the general jar is characterized by the pearl pattern on the top of the lid and the dense twined peony or lotus eight treasure pattern on the abdomen. The glaze is rich and luxurious, and it shows majesty and solemnity through religious elements and images of wealth.

4. Aesthetic Connotation

4.1 Formally

4.1.1 Symmetry

Official kiln famille rose porcelain often employs axially symmetrical compositions, such as the Guangxu Mark Yellow Ground Famille Rose Floral Pattern "Longevity" Bowl from the Guangxu reign of the Qing Dynasty. Based on the vessel's central axis, auspicious inscriptions in seal script within the four openings face each other, while seasonal flowers and bats holding ribbons extend mirror-image along the axis, forming a "cross"-shaped symmetry. This composition, derived from the "Imperial Pattern Rules" of the Qing Dynasty Imperial Workshop, both demonstrates the supremacy of imperial power and alludes to the cosmological concept of "the harmony of the four symbols" in the Book of Changes. With gold outlines and enamel fillings, the vines ascend symmetrically in a closed loop, symbolizing "universal blessings." The bright yellow glaze, resembling a sun disk suspended in the sky, reinforces the metaphor of order and order through absolute symmetry, symbolizing the divine right of imperial power.

4.1.2 Balance

"over-the-wall branches" pattern extends from the vessel's exterior into its interior, creating a dynamic visual balance. For example, in the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty, the peach branches extend diagonally from the edge of the plate to its center. The S-shaped curves of the branches and the blank spaces create the artistic conception of "the interplay of reality and illusion" typical of literati painting, reflecting traditional aesthetics' pursuit of the natural way.

4.1.3 Rhythm

The entwined branch pattern originated from the Arabian vine pattern introduced via the Silk Road during the Tang Dynasty. For example, the Qing Dynasty Yongzheng period's "Pure Red Ground Famille Rose Bowl with Entwined Peonies" recreates the Arabian vine pattern on the bowl's curved surface, with an eight-way radial layout centered on the bowl. Within each quadrant, the peony units are connected by three golden section bends.

4.2 Implications

4.2.1 Symbolic fusion of nature and humanity

Plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum: The "Four Gentlemen" pattern is a classic theme on elegant Qing Dynasty scholar's porcelain. For example, the "Famous Rose Plum and Bamboo Cup" from the Daoguang period of the Qing Dynasty depicts the vigorous and sturdy plum branches with delicate ink lines, while alum-red accents create distinct layers of petals. Gradual shades of green paint the bamboo leaves, depicting the yin and yang. The plum and bamboo combination captures the scholar-official ideal of "purity and self-restraint."

4.2.2 Aesthetic tolerance that appeals to both the elite and the masses

The ultimate in palace craftsmanship: For example, the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty's "Famous Rose Hollow Cloud Dragon Pattern Kuifeng Ear Rotating Vase" combines openwork techniques with a rotating structure, and is carefully painted with auspicious cloud dragon patterns in enamel. The Kuifeng ears demonstrate the emperor's majesty. After multiple firings, the components are precisely matched and the craftsmanship is outstanding. It was only used by the imperial court and became a pinnacle symbol of power and skill.

Folk homophony for auspiciousness: gourd pattern is homophonic to "Fu Lu", which means blessing and fortune; litchi is homophonic to "Li Ji", which means auspiciousness and smoothness; and the "Famous-Glaze Bowl with Gourd Pattern" from the Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty echoes the shape of the vessel and the pattern, using the shape of the gourd and the sound of "Fu Lu" to convey the wish for a rich life.

4.3 Technology

4.3.1 Unique expression of pastel technique

Glass White Rendering: Pastel enamel uses a "glass white" base, creating a gradient of light and dark petals through wash-and-dye techniques. The "Famous Rose Peony Pedestal Bowl" from the Daoguang period of the Qing Dynasty features a panoramic peony pattern surrounding a perfectly rounded body. Glass white is layered at the base, and rouge red is blended along the curved sides, softening the glaze's gradation. The white space at the base contrasts with the intertwined peony

branches on the belly, creating a three-dimensional, rosy texture. The curved surface enhances the vessel's rich, velvety texture , giving it a fuller, more elegant appearance than a straight-walled bowl .

4.3.2 The color tension of the combination of Chinese and Western styles

Coexistence of light and strong colors: During the Kangxi period, Western enamel colors such as rose red and lake green were introduced and combined with traditional mineral materials, making porcelain colors both dazzling and brilliant due to the enamel materials and craftsmanship, while also retaining the subtle and restrained traditional colors .^[6]For example, the Qing Dynasty Yongzheng "Famous Rose Eight Peaches and Five Bats Pattern Plate" has peaches painted with strong Western rose red, branches and leaves painted with light stone green , and bat wings painted with light lake green enamel , with alum red outlining, which is both dazzling and subtle ^[7,8].

5. Market Auction Status

Table 1. Top 10 auction prices for Ming and Qing Dynasty famille rose porcelain with plant patterns in the auction market from 2002 to 2020

| Serial number | Auction Time | Auction Company | period | Lot Name | size | Transaction price (10,000 yuan) |
|---------------|---------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------|--|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | 2010.11.11 | London auction house | Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty | Powder-glazed hollowed-out "Auspicious and Abundant" revolving vase | Height 40cm | 55,413.24 |
| 2 | 2010.12.2 | Christie's | Jiaqing period of the Qing Dynasty | Yellow ground famille rose cloud-mouth vase with a longevity and good fortune | Height 28cm | 7,762.36 |
| 3 | 2011.10.5 | Sotheby's | Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty | Famille rose nine peach celestial globe vase | 51cm | 7,401.32 |
| 4 | April 7, 2015 | Sotheby's | Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty | A famille rose bowl with a pattern of longevity and good fortune (I) | 14.3 | 7,246.86 |
| 5 | June 19, 2018 | Beijing Poly | Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty | Pair of famille rose eight peaches and five bats depicting longevity and good fortune | Diameter 20.2cm | 5,060 |
| 6 | 2008.12.3 | Christie's | Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty | Imperial pink-ground famille rose butterfly vase | Height 45.7cm | 4,690.40 |
| 7 | 2017.12.20 | medieval pottery | Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty | A pair of famille rose vases with phoenix and peony patterns and lids | Height 135cm | 4,600 |
| 8 | May 7, 2002 | Sotheby's | Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty | Olive vase with famille rose bat and peach pattern and "longevity" | 40cm | 4,399 |
| 9 | 2011.10.5 | Sotheby's | Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty | with a pastel rose and plum blossom pattern | 50.2cm | 4,095.08 |
| 10 | 2020.12.5 | Beijing Poly | Yongzheng period of the Qing Dynasty | Large famille rose plate with eight peaches and five bats, depicting both good fortune and longevity | Diameter 50.5cm | 3,852.50 |

The core of the high prices famille rose porcelain famille roses fetches is fine pieces from the imperial kilns of the Qing dynasty, particularly those from the Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns. Collectors particularly favor themes embodying traditional auspicious culture, such as the peach and bat combination symbolizing longevity and prosperity, the peony, and the noble rose and plum blossom. Motifs with explicit meanings, such as "blessings and longevity" and "eight auspicious symbols," significantly enhance the value of the pieces, highlighting collectors' emphasis on spiritual connotations. Furthermore, unique shapes such as celestial globe vases and cloud-mouth vases, as well as pairs of fine pieces preserved in pairs (such as the famille rose plate with eight peaches and five bats on a branch), often attract fierce bidding due to their rarity, driving up prices [9,10]. Prices are driven by the official kiln context, the inherent meaning of the motifs, the number of pieces still in existence, and the presence of top-tier auction houses. Large-scale pieces or pieces with imperial significance (e.g., those crafted with the rolling technique) are particularly sought after, with market booms (such as those from 2010 to 2020) further driving up values.

The table shows that only a Qing Dynasty Qianlong famille rose hollowed-out "Auspicious and Abundant" revolving vase sold for over 100 million yuan, achieving 554.1324 million yuan. Nine pieces sold between 10 million and 100 million yuan, ranging from 38.5250 million yuan to 77.6236 million yuan. No pieces sold for less than 10,000 yuan. Regarding the regional distribution of the auction market, Qing Dynasty famille rose porcelain auctions were concentrated in Hong Kong, with Sotheby's (4) and Christie's (2). Mainland China (Beijing) dominated the market, with Beijing Poly Auction (2) and Zhonggu Ceramics (1), focusing on court art and high-net-worth collectors. In Europe (London), a London auction house achieved a high-priced revolving vase, but the overall proportion was low. Overall, high-priced famille rose porcelain pieces primarily ranged from 10 million to 100 million yuan, with only one piece exceeding 100 million yuan. In terms of regional concentration, Hong Kong is the core trading market, characterized by strong internationalization and capital liquidity. Beijing is a secondary center, with the rise of local auction houses, and occasional high-priced pieces in Europe.

6. Conclusion

Chinese ceramic art has a long history. Famille rose porcelain, with its profound cultural heritage and unique expressive forms, has been hailed as a "national treasure" by renowned artists both in China and abroad. The development of botanical motifs on Ming and Qing dynasty famille rose porcelain is the result of a combination of technological innovation and cultural exchange. The Maritime Silk Road and tribute trade facilitated the influx of exotic elements, while the integration of refined enamel techniques with traditional fine brushwork provided technical support for innovative motifs. Within motif types, the fusion of Confucian ethics, Taoist secularism, and foreign artistic elements has fostered a unique decorative language. Aesthetically, breakthroughs in compositional principles, symbolic connotations, and famille rose techniques not only showcase the essence of traditional Chinese aesthetics but also embody the creativity of cross-cultural integration. Furthermore, market auction performance is a crucial indicator of the enduring influence of its cultural value and artistic appeal in the contemporary world.

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