

Craftsmanship in Ancient China exhibition poster

The British
Museum

Craftsmanship in ancient China

A lacquer wine cup cradled in Han Empire

3 September

Free

Room 3

Objects in focus

britishmuseum.org



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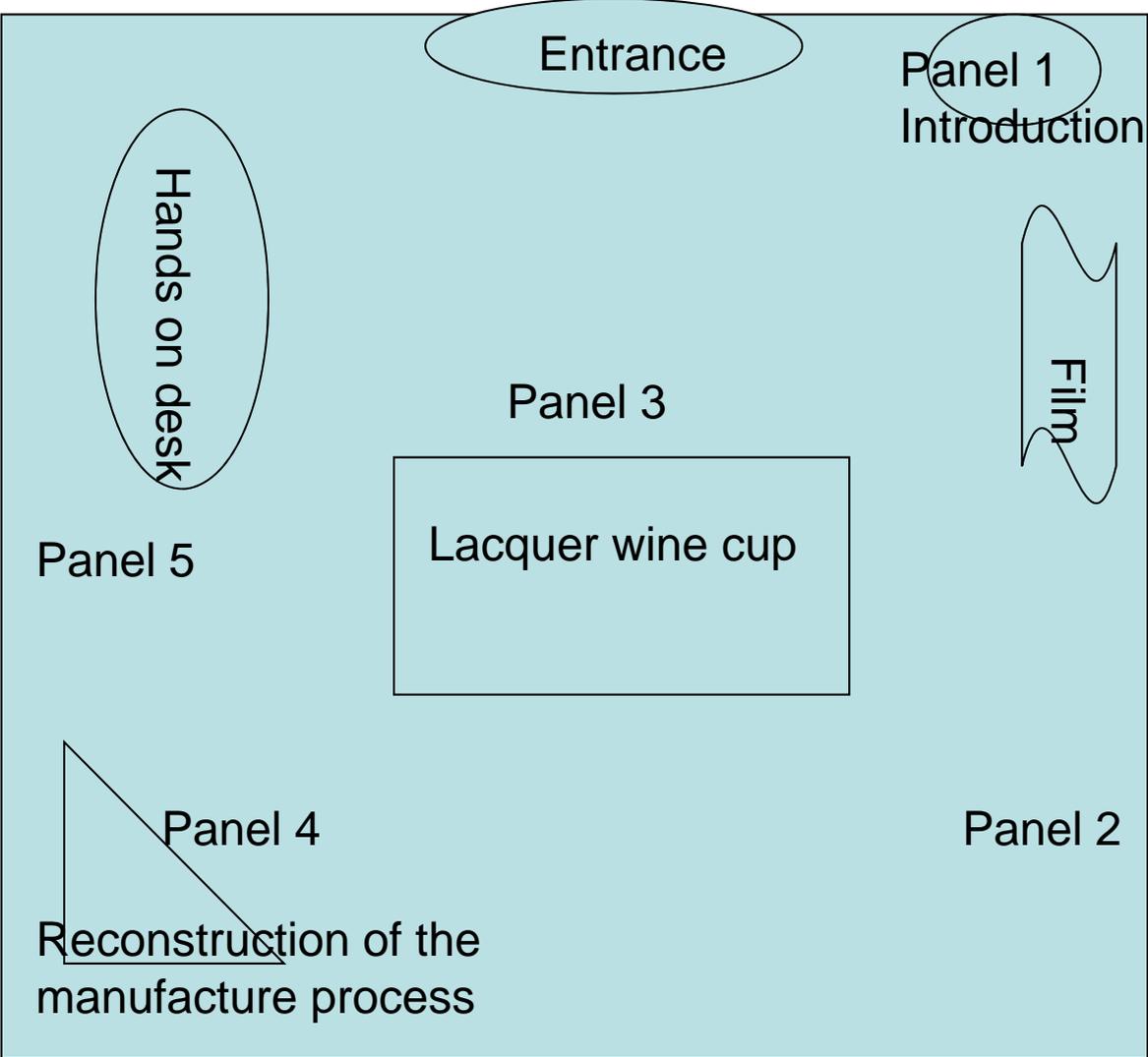
Come on a journey tracing
the story of skilled
craftsmanship in this elegant
lacquer wine cup



- Contemporary with the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, the Han dynasty (206BC-AD220), ruled an enormous empire, which at times embraced Central Asia, Korea and Vietnam. The Han had conquered the state unified by the First Emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi (259-210BC) who, by military force had subdued the kingdoms of the Warring States period. The Han developed the government institutions and laws set up by the Qin and created a centralized bureaucracy.
- In the Han state, utensils of all kinds, lacquers and bronzes, were manufactured on a large scale in state factories and distributed throughout the country. These vast enterprises made possible a high standard of material life for the elite officials who ran the huge state. There were a number of state-run workshops across the country mass producing the special gifts that only the Han emperor could give and only they are worthy to receive, the lacquer wine cup of this exhibition will guide us to the life of the people behind the scene!
- Discover more at britishmuseum.org/craftsmanship in ancient China
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Detail: Wine cup
Western Han Dynasty, 206BC-9AD
Found in Pyongyang, North Korea

Layout of the exhibition hall



Panel 1

Introduction

Contemporary with the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire, the Han dynasty (206BC-AD220), ruled an enormous empire, which at times embraced Central Asia, Korea and Vietnam. The Han had conquered the state unified by the First Emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi (259-210BC) who, by military force had subdued the kingdoms of the Warring States period. The Han developed the government institutions and laws set up by the Qin and created a centralized bureaucracy.

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Lacquer wine cup

Western Han dynasty (206BC-9AD)

Map of China



This lacquer wine cup is produced in Sichuan (Shu prefecture then)



A film of the background information of this lacquer wine cup

Film script

- Scene1 :It is the time of 4 AD in China, the Han empire is in a turbulent period, when at the centre the young Emperor Ping(1BC-6AD)is under severe threat and, at the edges of the Empire, he is struggling to keep control.
- Scene2: After years of conquer, the Han Empire's territory has been extended as far south as Vietnam, west to the steppes of Central Asia and north to Korea, and in each of these places the government set up military colonies. One of the military commander or governor in Korea is performing duty in this land, he is enjoying a luxurious life in his court.
- Scene3: Back to the Han Empire, the western workshop in Shu (now present Sichuan Province) is taking orders from the Emperor to produce high standard lacquer wares. The craftsmen here are working day and night to meet the needs of the Emperor.
- Scene4: A exquisitely crafted lacquer wine cup is brought to the inspector, who will send it to the court, where on some occasion, the Emperor would bequeath it to the commander in Korea. When the commander receives this special gift, he would be much more loyal to the emperor.
- Scene5: In 1955, BM's staff, funded by the merchant banker Perch Thomas Brooke Sewell have the rare opportunity to purchase this rare object and keep it in BM's collection ever since then. It is also enlisted in the "A history of the world in 100 objects", telling the story of Han Empire.

Panel 2

The development of lacquer ware in China

To date, the earliest lacquer found in China was made around 7000 BC. Excavations have unearthed lacquer vessels with sophisticated inlays from the Shang period (about 1500-1050 BC) and high quality lacquers were produced in large quantities in the Warring States period (475-221 BC). By the Han dynasty, the lacquer industry was organised under government control and using early processes of mass production.



Panel 2-1

What is lacquer?

It is a resin made from the highly toxic sap of the Chinese lacquer tree(the scientific name being *Rhus verniciflua* tree). It is native to Asia. It has the characteristics of natural plastics, which is resistant to water, acid, and, to a certain extent, heat.



Collect the sap from the tree

Panel 2-3

How to make lacquer wares?

Step 1: Notches cut into the Chinese lacquer tree will produce viscous sap, every one year, people come to extract the sap out of it.

Picture 1

Step 2: Heat the sap gently to remove excess moisture and impurities.

Picture 2

Step 3: Cover a wooden core, or ceramic core with the sap which has undergone the step 2 to produce a lacquer ware.

Picture 3

Step 4: after step 3, place the object in a warm, humid, draft-free cabinet to dry.

When this layer of coat is completely dry, repeat step 3 to get the ideal thickness of the lacquer ware.

Picture 4

Time-consuming

Costly

Elegant

Exquisite



Panel 3

Label

Excavated in North Korea, with 65 Chinese inscriptions around the base, the oval-shaped cup is decorated with two handles on the long sides, gaining its name ear cup (耳杯). Coated with lacquer, mounted with bronze gild on the handles, according to the inscription, this wine cup is a product of mass production by six craftsmen at the Year of Yuanshi Reign (4 AD) of Han Empire. (68words)



Panel 3-1

Inscriptions on the base (for academic visitors)

元始四年蜀郡西工造乘輿髹漆月畫木黃耳栴,容一升十六龠,素工□髹工立,上工當,
銅耳黃塗工古,畫工定,漆工豐,清工平,造工宗造,護工卒史章,長良,丞鳳,掾隆,令史
□主

(English translation version) In the fourth year of the reign period Yuan Shi [AD 4], the Western Factory workshop of the Shu prefecture manufactured this lacquered, polished and painted, wooden-cored cup with yellow [i.e. gilt bronze] ear-handles for imperial use. Capacity one 'sheng' 16 'yue'. Manufactured by: the wooden core by Yi, lacquering by Li, top-coat lacquering by Dang, gilding of the ear-handles by Gu, painting by Ding, final polishing by Feng, product inspection by Ping, supervisor-foreman Zong. In charge were [Government] Head Supervisor Zhang, Chief Administrator Liang, his deputy Feng, [their subordinate] Executive Officer Long and Chief Clerk Bao.

Panel 3-2

Is it a motto or dedication, or something else?

It is a powerful document of the link between craft production and state administration; bureaucracy as a guarantee of beauty.



Roman warren cup



Wine drinking vessel (Jia)

Shang Dynasty,(circa.1500 BC-circa 1050 BC)

China

Panel 3-3

Comments by scholars

“Lacquer-ware in cups such as these would have been the equivalent of silver plates for the Romans, or blue and white porcelain in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.”



Roel Sterckx, Professor of Chinese History at Cambridge

Panel 3-3

Comments by scholars

“Lacquer was much more prized and expensive than bronze, and records of the time relate that you could buy ten bronze cups for the price of one in lacquer.”



Jessica Rawson, professor of Chinese Art and Archaeology at Oxford

Panel 3-3

Comments by scholars

“I mean what you have here is a very high standard both of craftsmanship and of technology - exquisite artisanship, exquisite decoration with simple lines, very beautiful, combined in this one intriguing object.”



Isabel Hilton, Journalist and China Expert

3-4 Interactive panel (targeted audience: children)

Can you draw these figures in this lacquer wine cup?



Panel 4

The production of this lacquer cup

"Lacquer ware takes an enormous amount of time to make. It's a very labour-intensive and a very tedious process, because there's the extraction of the sap of the lacquer tree, followed by all sorts of procedures, mixing with all sorts of pigments, letting it cure, applying successive layers on to a wooden core, to finally produce a beautiful piece. And it would have involved several sets of artisans."

Roel Sterckx, Professor of Chinese History at Cambridge

Reconstruction of the mass-making procedure of the lacquer wine cup

Panel 4-1 Who are artisans?

Artisan is another word for a craftsman, or someone in a skilled trade who makes things by hand. These ancient Chinese were highly skilled, but had little social status despite their skills and hard work.

Artisans could be:



Carpenters



Potters



Stone carvers

4-2 The life of artisans (craftsman) in ancient China

In ancient China, there is a strict social hierarchy about the occupations. The social classes of ancient China can be classified into four major categories. These were shi(师), nong(农), gong(工) and shang(商).



The Gong class consisted of Artisans and craftsman. They were higher in position than that of the merchants. They also had a significant role for the country. They worked in either the government sectors or the private sectors. Many artisans also worked on their independent businesses. They were valued because of their specific skills.

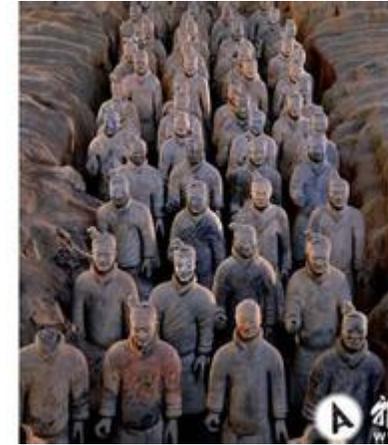
Panel 4-3

The six craftsmen

- 1.making the wooden core by YI
- 2.undercoat lacquering by LI
3. top-coat lacquering by DANG
- 4.gilding the ear handles by GU
5. painting by DING
6. final polishing by FENG

The seven product supervisor

- 1.product inspection by Ping
- 2.supervisor-foreman Zong
- 3.in charge were [Government] Head Supervisor Zhang
- 4.chief administrator Liang
5. deputy chief administrator Feng
- 6.subordinate Executive Officer Long
- 7.subordinate Chief Clerk Bao



Mass production of terracotta warriors



Mass production in modern factory

Panel 4-4 A touch screen with a headset

Dialogue between different craftsman in Chinese are recorded, visitors can put on the head phone to hear it, while they are hearing it, there will be written script shown on the digital screen in any language, and the visitors just choose the language.



Panel 5 Conclusion

It is ordinary people who create history for us to remember. While we are appreciating these exquisite, elegant and breathtaking objects, please walk to the side of ordinary people who created all these brilliant artifacts!



Programs on the hand-on desk

This is a drop-in interactive session, objects on the desk would be a lacquer wine cup in good condition and similar decorative technique.

Visitors are encouraged to touch it and to tell whatever they could deduce from this object.

Visitors can also try the carving of a wooden plaque to have a taste of how to make the designs on this cup.



Hands on desk

Lecture and interactive programs

- Gallery big draw program for kids based on the design of the cup;
- Lecture on the mass production in Qin and Han empire, such as the terracotta warriors of Qin and these lacquerwares of Han.
- Redefine the beauty of the cultural artifacts by finding the stories of those craftsmen.