

## William Lever's collecting of *Famille Noire* porcelain

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The Lady Lever Art Gallery's collection is very rich in *Famille Noire* porcelains, a prominent type of Qing dynasty (1644-1912) porcelain that featured significantly in many British art collections around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Famille Noire* can be described as a sub-group of *Famille Verte*, which developed from the *wucan* palette (meaning *five-colour*) in the late Ming dynasty. The terms were coined by the French Jesuit and ceramic collector Albert Jacquemart in 1873 and *Famille Noire* can generally be defined as bearing a copper-green lead-based enamel over an unfired coating of Chinese cobalt 'émail sur biscuit' (on the biscuit). During enamel firing, the two combined to give an intensely black effect, with a hint of green. The technique was first used at Jingdezhen in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, but it disappeared again until the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, when it was taken up once more at the court of the emperor Kangxi (1662-1722).<sup>1</sup>

Owing to this circumstance, *Famille Noire* has generally been regarded as having been produced in the Kangxi era of the Qing dynasty and, in literature around the turn of the past century, even been mistaken as late Ming (1368-1644). Many pieces bear a Chinghua (1465-1487) reign mark on the base, for which reason many experts were misled at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into believing that these pieces originated from the Ming period.

This misconception gave impetus to the author's further investigating this type of ware; during a personal examination of *Famille Noire* in the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection that houses the Salting collection, it could be established that due to their general appearance most of the pieces inspected were unlikely to date to the Kangxi period, and that from today's standards they could even be considered 'fakes' of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in imitation of Kangxi wares.<sup>2</sup> The Lady Lever Art Gallery, in comparison, includes a considerable amount of similar pieces to the

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<sup>1</sup> For a technical definition of *Famille Noire* compare for example Wood Nigel, *Chinese glazes. Their origins, chemistry and recreation*, London/Philadelphia 1998, pp. 235-238

<sup>2</sup> This handling session was carried out together with an expert on Chinese Ceramics, Gordon Lang, the Keeper of the Asian Department, Beth Mc Killop, and Dr Luisa Mengoni, Curator, Asian Department. I am very grateful for their help and support in this research.

Salting Bequest and due to that apparent similarity, this essay will look into the question of collecting *Famille Noire* and the authenticity of the 'black ground' wares, as they were also referred to at the time.

Before taking a closer look into the actual *Famille Noire* objects from the Lever collection, and their stylistic analysis, it will be a necessary step to explain why these wares had become so popular during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and how scholars and connoisseurs have perceived them in the past 100 years.

### ***Famille Noire* and its discussion in literature**

As early as 1881, O. du Sartel presented some *Famille Noire* vases within the section of Ming dynasty porcelains in his publication on Chinese porcelain. Although they bear Chenghua marks, he assessed them to be copies or imitations (of Ming ware), and he dated them towards the very early years of the Kangxi period. In addition, he illustrated some more *Famille Noire* vases, which he definitely assigned to the Kangxi.<sup>3</sup>

Cosmo Monkhouse's standard work from 1901 on the history of Chinese porcelain confused some of the *Famille Noire* objects as Ming originals, which was not an uncommon error, owing to the deceptive marks on some of the objects' bases.<sup>4</sup>

An early calling into question of *Famille Noire* is however reproduced by W.G. Gulland in the second volume of his two-volume book *Chinese porcelain*, in quoting the American collector Thomas Lindall Winthrop who mentioned two categories of *Famille Noire*.<sup>5</sup> First, he linked the category 'over the glaze' to pieces from the Salting collection, in particular to one vase illustrated by Gulland on p. 164 and then he compared this object to one vase of the art dealer Siegfried Bing in Paris. After careful examination of such an object, Winthrop was convinced that the decoration had been added to a white ground by being painted first and then filled with the black ground. Bing's piece displayed a rather mat black enamel with the edges washed

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<sup>3</sup> Du Sartel O., *La porcelaine de Chine*, Paris 1881, pp. 168, 183, 192 and 194

<sup>4</sup> Monkhouse Cosmo, *A history and description of Chinese porcelain*, with notes by S.W. Bushell, London 1901; compare for example p. 124

<sup>5</sup> Gulland, W.G., *Chinese porcelain*, Vol. II, London 1902, pp. 325-326

with a delicate fawn colour. Winthrop's explanations are not entirely clear in terms of dating those vases, but he definitely regarded them as being of inferior quality than those of his proposed first category. He called pieces from the second category *modern*, which were covered with black enamel and painted with muddy colours with the design of flowers and butterflies. Those pieces were regarded worthless by Winthrop, having been imported to England by officers about the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The description of thick and muddy colours painted on top of the glazes certainly applies to several of the Lever pieces, as we will see later on.

There is no further evidence in contemporary literature that this ware should have been anything else than of the Kangxi reign, since even the renowned scholar and author of *Chinese art*, Stephen Wooton Bushell, assigned *Famille Noire* to that very period.<sup>6</sup>

It is highly likely that Lever had studied some of the mentioned publications with regard to *Famille Noire* and Chinese porcelains in general, and at the time, hardly anything could have indicated a fault in those objects.

On the contrary, about 20 years later, Robert Lockhart Hobson, who also compiled the catalogue of the Lady Lever Art Gallery, published in 1928, spoke of the same ware as possessing the best Kangxi potting, truth of form and elegance of line.<sup>7</sup> But exactly those characteristics make them doubtful as genuine Kangxi period pieces. Neither shape, nor decoration or colour lives up to original documented Kangxi examples.

Only a few decades later, long after William Lever's death, the authenticity of many *Famille Noire* wares was questioned when Soame Jenyns concluded that this particular group had occupied a place entirely out of proportion to its interest or aesthetic value. According to Jenyns, the pieces were costly to produce as the repeated firing often destroyed them in the kilns and consequently they commanded prices higher than other Chinese porcelain had been able to secure. This particular

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<sup>6</sup> Bushell Stephen Wooton, *Chinese Art*, London 1906, Vol. II, p. 36

<sup>7</sup> Hobson Robert Lockhart, *The later ceramic wares of China*, London 1925, p. 28; for the Lady Lever catalogue compare Hobson, [Chinese Porcelain & Wedgwood Pottery, with other works of ceramic art, etc.](#), London 1928

desirability has produced many imitations, made not only in China and Japan, but also in Europe. Jenyns also mentioned the interesting aspect of having used blue and white pieces of which the design had been ground away in order to be repainted in the *Famille Noire* palette.<sup>8</sup>

The major publication which expressed profound scepticism towards the authenticity of *Famille Noire* large scale vases was John Alexander Pope's catalogue of the Chinese porcelains in the Frick collection.<sup>9</sup> Pope believed that all of the large scale objects were fakes of the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. He supported this theory with various examples of serious collectors of Chinese porcelain, who mainly bought in the Far East and who did not possess any of those pieces (such as Charles Lang Freer and Alfred Hoppisley). Apart from a stylistic analysis that led Pope to believe that these pieces were fakes, he mentioned the inventory of Augustus the Strong's collection in Dresden of 1779, which had only listed five small cups and saucers with black enamel decoration and which seem to be true Kangxi porcelain. As a Far Eastern collection, Pope referred to the National Palace Museum in Taiwan which had never seen an example of a large scale *Famille Noire* vase before it was presented with one piece in 1950. Pope very much expressed his regret about the uncertainty that surrounded the *Famille Noire* large scale type, and in his discussion of the Lady Lever's Chinese collection, Oliver Impey, went even further in stating that no documentary evidence has yet been found for the Kangxi period of *Famille Noire*, in contrast to those of the Yongzheng and Qianlong periods, where pieces are documented.<sup>10</sup>

### **The aesthetic and monetary value of *Famille Noire***

Now, after reviewing the different approaches and views from the literary sources one has to pose the question why one would have wanted to fake *Famille Noire* ware in the first place? One possibility might be found in the type of decoration found on those objects.

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<sup>8</sup> Jenyns Soame, *Later Chinese porcelain: the Ch'ing dynasty, 1644-1912*, London 1951, p. 34

<sup>9</sup> Pope John Alexander, *The Frick Collection: an illustrated catalogue. Vol. 7 Porcelains, Oriental and French*, Washington 1974, pp. 87-90

<sup>10</sup> Impey Oliver, "Lever as a collector of Chinese Porcelain", in Morris, Edward (ed.), "Art and Business in Edwardian England: The Making of The Lady Lever Art Gallery", *Journal of the History of Collections*, Vol.4, Nr. 2, 1992, pp. 235-236 in particular for the discussion on *Famille Noire* wares.



**Fig. 1 Square *Famille Noire* vase with tapering sides, LL 6724, copyright National Museums Liverpool**

This square shaped vase with tapering sides from the Lady Lever Art Gallery's collection is a typical example of a *Famille Noire* style with the decoration of flowering prunus blossoms, plants and a bird on a black ground, with the inclusion of *Famille Verte* enamels. In general, this type of decoration is not uncommon on authentic Kangxi wares, but the way in which it is arranged does not conform to the high quality decoration of original Kangxi.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *Aesthetic* movement was in vogue in Britain, promoted by artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1881) and James Abbot McNeill Whistler (1834-1902). Both artists appreciated Blue and White porcelains and purchased high quality pieces themselves. Consequently, the hype for porcelain decorated with prunus blossom on a blue crackled ground very much complied with the aesthetic value of *Famille Noire* vases decorated in a similar style.<sup>11</sup>

*Famille Noire*, as a matter of fact, eventually turned out to be the most expensive porcelain sold in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1880s, the market was dominated by collectors such as George Salting (1839-1909) in Great Britain and James Albert Garland (1840-1902) in the United States of America. Salting acquired the most interesting of those porcelains for reasonable prices ranging from

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<sup>11</sup> Compare LL72 of the Lady Lever Art Gallery's collection for an example of a Prunus Blossom Jar of the Kangxi period (1662-1722)

£60 to £300 in the 1880s.<sup>12</sup> James Garland, on the other hand, would often pay considerably more, if he had set his mind on it.<sup>13</sup> Both collections were on loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art respectively, where they could be visited and admired by the general public, and experts, collectors and connoisseurs in equal measure. Garland took the first interest in this porcelain and possibly because of his influence the *Famille Noire* style became 'Millionaire's taste' in America after 1910, so much so that a vase bought by the dealer Frank Partridge, who also supplied William Lever in a major way, was sold to the American James D. Rockefeller in 1919 for £ 12.000.<sup>14</sup>

### **William Lever's purchase of *Famille Noire* porcelains**

At first sight, William Lever's collection of *Famille Noire* porcelain is no more unusual than any other collections of this ware, since a lot of comparable pieces can be found in several contemporary British collections; however, it is an interesting facet of Lever's accumulation of this particular ware that it commenced at a slightly later stage than that of his fellow British collectors. Around the turn of the past century, the collections most renowned for *Famille Noire* in Britain were the Gow, Davies, Franks, Salting and Trapnell collections, most of whom produced representative catalogues.

The pieces in the Salting collection were acquired mainly between the 1870s and 1890s, and were displayed in the South Kensington Museum, later to become the Victoria and Albert Museum, from the 1880s onwards. The collection from George R. Davies was first illustrated in 1882,<sup>15</sup> Alfred Trapnell produced his catalogue in 1901<sup>16</sup> and the collection of the scholar and Keeper of Antiquities in the British Museum,

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<sup>12</sup> Compare Guildhall library MS 19473 (1) and (2) *P.W. Flower and Sons. - George Salting's receipted bills for purchase, packing, photographing and re. for Salting's purchases*

<sup>13</sup> Compare Reitlinger Gerald, *The economics of taste*, Vol. II, London 1970, pp. 210-215

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 328

<sup>15</sup> *Catalogue of a collection of Chinese porcelain lent for exhibition to The Liverpool Arts Club by George R. Davies, Esq.*, compiled by Charles T. Gatty, London 1882; compare also Gorer Edgar and Davies George R., *Collection of Old Chinese porcelains formed by George R. Davies*, New York 1913

<sup>16</sup> Trapnell Alfred, *An illustrated catalogue of Chinese pottery and porcelain, forming the collection of Mr. Alfred Trapnell*, Bristol 1901 and Gorer, S. & Son, *The Trapnell Collection of Old Chinese Porcelain*, exhibition sale catalogue, 1906. In the introduction the exhibition is described as 'the collection formerly belonging to Alfred Trapnell...[who] spent over thirty years in forming this collection'.

Augustus Wollaston Franks was published early in 1876.<sup>17</sup> The Leonard Gow collection, which was also comparably rich to the Lever collection in the *Famille Noire* type, was compiled as a catalogue only in 1931, which corresponds more accurately to Lever's time of collecting.<sup>18</sup> Apart from Franks and Salting, who were a scholar and an eccentric collector and connoisseur respectively, the other three men were successful businessmen, George R. Davies being a merchant of cotton goods, Alfred Trapnell owned a metal smelting business, and Leonard Gow was a shipping magnate and Glasgow businessman.<sup>19</sup>

It is claimed in the existing literature that Lever enjoyed buying from well-known collectors,<sup>20</sup> and the reason for building his own collection of *Famille Noire* might have resulted from the fact that he had studied the catalogues and pieces from the collections of Davies, Gow and the like. That these fellow collectors were successful entrepreneurs like Lever himself, could have spurred such an interest further. It can also be assumed that William Lever had seen the magnificent display of the Salting collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum at some point, which might have set off his curiosity towards *Famille Noire* and given him an incentive to buy those black wares himself.

His first documented purchase of a *Famille Noire* vase is acknowledged for the year 1907, significantly late in comparison to the other collectors; Lever started collecting Chinese porcelain only from 1894 onwards, at a time when most major collections of *Famille Noire* in Britain were already well-established.<sup>21</sup> Most of his significant purchases in Chinese porcelain were made from 1913 onwards, when a general drop in prices was occurring, of which he could take advantage.<sup>22</sup> Lever seemed to have been initially cautious in accumulating black wares, when it is revealed in a letter to a certain Mr. Fox '*...but as I am unable to see the China it is not possible to avail*

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<sup>17</sup> Catalogue of a collection of Oriental Porcelain and Pottery lent for exhibition by A.W. Franks, London 1876

<sup>18</sup> Hobson, R.L., [Catalogue of the Leonard Gow collection of Chinese porcelain](#), London 1931

<sup>19</sup> For biographical details on the collectors compare the website CARP (Chinese Art – research into provenance) on <http://www.hatii.arts.gla.ac.uk/admn/php/carp/credits.php>

<sup>20</sup> Compare Impey Oliver, "Lever as a collector of Chinese Porcelain", 1992, p. 234

<sup>21</sup> Compare *Index to early invoices 1894 – c. 1905* (AC Tait) in the Lady Lever Art Gallery archive; according to that index Lever bought a pair of Old Nankin Ginger Jars, each with wood cover, for £ 105 on 12 April 1894, from Agnew's.

<sup>22</sup> Medley Margaret, "Chinese Art in the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight", in: *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramics Society*, Vol. 44, 1979-80, p. 3

myself of it in this case owing to the fact that Black Ground Porcelain is difficult to decide upon without personal inspection...'<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless he eventually acquired 26 pieces altogether, the bulk of which was purchased 'wholesale', together with the majority of the Chinese collection of Mr. Richard Bennett in 1911.

It was mentioned by the dealer James Henry Duveen that William Lever, or Lord Leverhulme, was an extremely clever and cool-headed businessman, and that he bought expensive things to get publicity. However Duveen himself contradicted this assumption in revealing that to his personal knowledge Lever passionately loved beauty of form and colour. He was said to have made mistakes in purchases after having realised that some dealers were making great profits out of him, for that reason he had to rely on his own judgement which often resulted in the purchase of doubtful objects.<sup>24</sup>

If Lever relied on entirely on his own judgement when purchasing *Famille Noire* we do not know. It is however an unwritten fact that the dealers he was predominantly buying black vases from, Edgar Gorer and Frank Partridge influenced and advised him extensively on general purchases and especially in Frank Partridge's case it seems that he knew what type of ware Lever wished to complement his collection with.

At the time when Lever collected the majority of his black ground porcelains he had become much more systematic towards collecting as well as in recording the provenance of his pieces, which resulted in detailed inventories and files on his accounts and correspondence with dealers.<sup>25</sup>

When returning to his first documented object bought in 1907, we discover the tendency towards aesthetically pleasing objects.

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<sup>23</sup> This quotation was reproduced by Margaret Medley in her contribution to *Lord Leverhulme, founder of the Lady Lever Art Gallery and Port Sunlight on Merseyside: a great Edwardian collector and builder: paintings, sculpture, ceramics, furniture and architecture*: 12 April-25 May 1980: an exhibition/presented by Unilever to mark their Golden Jubilee, 1930-1980, p. 86

<sup>24</sup> Duveen, James Henry, *Collections and Recollections. A century and a half of art deals*, London 1934

<sup>25</sup> This idea is recorded by the former Curator of the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Lucy Wood, in: Wood Lucy, "William Hesketh Lever, 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Leverhulme. The collector", in: *The Catalogue of the Leverhulme collection sale held by Sotheby's at Thornton Manor, Wirral, Merseyside, 26-28 June 2001*, Vols. I & II, Vol. I, p. 24



This vase is a typical example to be found in many collections with a wide range of *Famille Noire* porcelains, such as the Salting and Franks collections, or the Frick collection in New York. It is one of those pieces that can be with most certainty be categorised as not being of the Kangxi period. First of all, the shape, called a *yen yen*, although originally Kangxi, lacks the substance of a Kangxi piece and the balance between upper and lower body is not convincingly carried out. In comparison to documented pieces of the period, the whole decoration is far too crowded and the rocks look unnaturally flat.



**Fig. 2 Trumpet-Shaped *Famille Noire* Yen Yen vase with prunus blossom, rocks, trees and birds, LL 6120, copyright National Museums Liverpool**

On the whole, the image does not evoke the idea of being alive and the composition misses the elegant flow of authentic Kangxi. Colour is another aspect to bear in mind when investigating the authenticity of *Famille Noire*: the black ground on later *Famille Noire* items is usually very glossy and thick such as in this case, and differs from the originals in that respect. Many further pieces in the collection reveal similar features.

In terms of further purchases of *Famille Noire*, and of other items of porcelain, Lever bought the majority of pieces from the Richard Bennett collection wholesale. Bennett (born 1849) was also a Merseyside businessman, managing a company for bleach and chemicals called John Smith Jun. & Co. in Little Lever near Bolton, also known

as the *Great Lever Bleach works*, in production from 1836 to 1961. Bennett was an interesting character in that he tended to dispose of his collections once he had completed them. Amongst those were a collection of manuscripts and fine violins.<sup>26</sup> Richard Bennett is a rather mysterious character, as no details on his motives for buying Chinese porcelain and selling it again are known.

The art dealer Edgar Gorer (1872-1915) bought the Bennett collection of porcelain and produced a catalogue with splendid pictures in order to attract a buyer.<sup>27</sup> He found a suitable client in William Lever who agreed to buy the collection in instalments. During this business transaction, several misconceptions and misunderstandings between buyer and seller occurred that even led to a lawsuit, leaving Lever to buy only a portion of the Bennett collection, retaining about 51 pieces.<sup>28</sup> The transactions of the sale were finally completed in 1913, and Lever was said to have spent the sum of £ 275.000 on it. (This was the original total – Lever only spent a fraction of this in the end.) The pieces from the Bennett collection also included ten of the *Famille Noire* pieces that are now in the Lady Lever Art Gallery.

Deriving from this purchase, most unusual in comparison to other collections of *Famille Noire* is probably the following object:



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<sup>26</sup> Impey, "Lever as a collector of Chinese porcelain", 1992, p. 234

<sup>27</sup> Gorer Edgar, Catalogue of the collection of Old Chinese Porcelain formed by Richard Bennett, Esq., Thornby Hall, Northampton, London 1911

<sup>28</sup> Compare the file LLAG 4691, 1968 for correspondence between Lever and Gorer and sale details, Lady Lever Art Gallery archive

**Fig. 3 Saucer-shaped *Famille Noire* dish with five-clawed dragons in the centre, LL31, copyright National Museums Liverpool**

This saucer-shaped dish with an everted rim bears the central composition of five-clawed dragons, chasing a pearl in clouds and flames. The decoration of the rim is reminiscent of the pieces seen before, as it displays blossoming flowers. The black ground on this piece is not as lustrous as in the already shown examples, but what strikes about this dish is the colour green which is presented in various shades.

The green does not correspond to the well-known hue of the original *Famille Verte* type as it is much more washed out and translucent. This one factor does not necessarily mean that the object is not originally Kangxi, however it seems to be one of very few examples of a large scale dish produced in the *Famille Noire* palette, which somehow singles it out, and enhances its uniqueness in terms of its authenticity. Roger Fry commented on the beauty of this plate comparing its matte quality to a Greek vase. Balance and rhythm of the design would show impeccable taste, and Fry further remarked that the plate was said to have belonged to the emperor Kangxi himself. From where Fry obtained that information we unfortunately do not know.<sup>29</sup>

In his catalogue to the Bennett collection, Gorer also categorised the piece as Kangxi and he remarked on its extraordinary size, being the largest dish of *Famille Noire* known at the time.<sup>30</sup> The dish furthermore bears a Chenghua mark, which is not an uncommon feature of many black ground pieces and it was suggested by Jenyns that the potters tried to say '*This vase is so good that it might have been the production of the Hsüan Tê or Ch'êng Hua.*'<sup>31</sup> For certain, these marks led to many misconceptions amongst dealers, and Gorer often made the mistake in believing that he dealt with an original Ming piece, apparently unaware of the fact that pieces of such composition were not being produced during the Ming period.

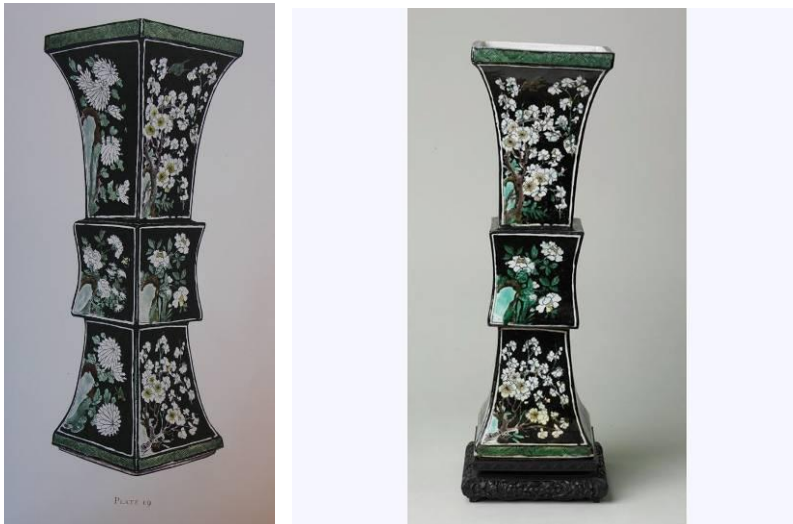
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<sup>29</sup> Fry Roger, "Richard Bennett Collection of Chinese Porcelain", in: *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Vol. 19, No. 99, June 1911, p. 134

<sup>30</sup> Gorer, *Catalogue of the collection of Old Chinese Porcelain formed by Richard Bennett*, Nr.

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<sup>31</sup> Jenyns, 1951, p. 36



**Fig. 4 Bronze-shaped *Famille Noire* beaker with blossoming flowers, left: Catalogue Nr. 19, in Gorer and Blacker (eds.) *Chinese porcelains and hardstones*, Vol. II, London 1911; right: LL 6729, same object, copyright National Museums Liverpool**

The above object, for example, bought from the Bennett sale and now in the Lady Lever Art Gallery's collection was considered unique to Gorer, and he classified it as a Ming piece, although there is no evidence presented as to what led him to this assumption. Again, a very shiny black ground was achieved in this piece and the whole composition is untypical for a Kangxi piece. The shape originally derived from an ancient bronze *gu* and although this form was reproduced in the Kangxi reign, the whole object does not appear convincing, due to its shiny glaze, repetitive motifs and crowded surface.

Many more objects of *Famille Noire* in different shapes were purchased from the Bennett sale, and at one point Lever was asked by Gorer to return to him a vase for selling it on to another buyer. Letter from Gorer to Lever, on 16<sup>th</sup> of March 1914:

*...Dear Sir William,*

*Possibly you have heard that whilst in New York this year I sold the entire collection of my Black porcelains to Mr. Rockefeller. He, of course, was greatly interested in the Bennett catalogue, particularly observing the Black Vase with dragon which I sold to you, ...*

*I am therefore writing to enquire if you will do me the real service of selling me this vase, as it means more to me than the actual transaction. I know you have one that somehow balances it, but it is not really a pair, and no doubt you would find that you could use your original one as a centrepiece with other vases. If you will agree to help me in this direction I shall take it as a very great condensation on your part, and shall be prepared on all occasions to show my appreciation. ...<sup>32</sup>*

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Letter from Edgar Gorer to William Lever on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 1914, file LLAG 4691

Lever answered him on the 17<sup>th</sup> March 1914, stating that he was pleased for Gorer about his successful visit to New York, but:

*...You will readily understand that it is not possible for me to sell any of the pieces out of my collection. I thank you all the same for writing me and giving me the opportunity of considering the matter. ...*<sup>33</sup>

If nothing else, this correspondence reveals again the growing curiosity of this type of ware in America after 1910 and it can also be proof of the assumption that art and antiques dealers had their share in this development, in promoting certain porcelains that had become fashionable in Britain to the American market.



**Fig. 5 Baluster shaped *Famille Noire* vase with clawed dragons amongst clouds, LL6733, copyright National Museums Liverpool**<sup>34</sup>

It is possibly this baluster-shaped vase Gorer was referring to, which leads to another interesting point regarding the authenticity of *Famille Noire*. The original trumpet was in all likelihood reduced in this vase and it might have been the case that the original Kangxi ground (presumably blue and white) was skinned in order to apply a new decoration with a black ground.

If we compare this vase to fig. 2, we can observe that the baluster shape in fig. 5 is much more in proportion. We must therefore introduce a new category, namely that of objects being ground in order to coat it with the black ground enamel. This

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<sup>33</sup> Answer Letter from W. Lever to E. Gorer on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 1914, file LLAG 4691  
<sup>34</sup> This piece was also exhibited in Gorer and Blacker, 1911, pl. 18

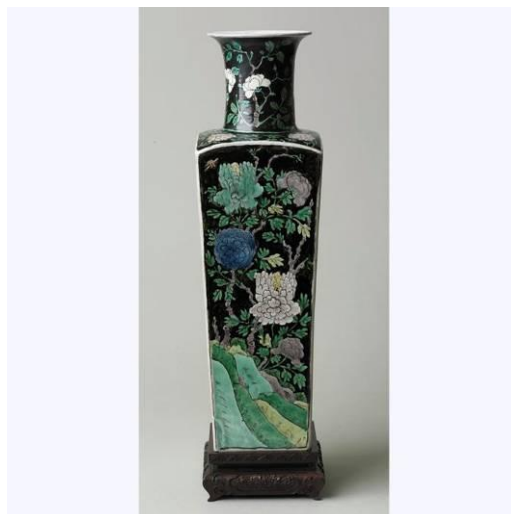
procedure has most likely happened in the saucer-shaped dish in fig. 3 as well, and the result of the washed-out green colour might have resulted from that re-application of a new layer of enamels and glaze.

Because of the desire to feed a continuing and buoyant American market with *Famille Noire*, a similar incident occurred between Lever and Frank Partridge early in 1910. In a letter of 14<sup>th</sup> February 1910, Partridge asked if Lever was inclined to dispose of some of his 'Black Chinese porcelain' for an American client. The following day Lever answered:

*In reply to yours of the 14<sup>th</sup> inst. I should not be willing to dispose of my black Chinese vases except at such extreme prices as I feel confident would make you unwilling to entertain the purchase. ...*<sup>35</sup>

It is apparent that the craze for those wares had started in America and that American clients were willing to pay high prices in order to obtain the popular and highly esteemed *Famille Noire*.

Lever's purchases of *Famille Noire* continued over the years until 1920 when a majority of pieces came from Frank Partridge, whom he not only considered a dealer but an adviser to his collection.



**Fig. 6 Square *Famille Noire* vase with straight sides, with flowers of the four seasons, LL6728, copyright National Museums Liverpool**

<sup>35</sup> LLAG file 3959 Partridge correspondence, 1904 – 1915

This object is a square vase with tapering sides and it displays flowers of the four seasons – lotus, peony, chrysanthemum and prunus. Objects such as this one are most difficult to place, because the shape existed in the Kangxi period. The fake examples however tend to be more conical in shape. In this vase, the colours seem fairly pale again and the outlines are blurred, which should not occur in an authentic Kangxi piece.

Generally speaking, the whole work of art evokes a ‘wallpaper’ effect rather than a balanced composition. The author therefore suggests this piece is a complete invention of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as figures 1, 2 and 4, which can also be classified as ‘revival’ pieces of a Kangxi style, but fabricated in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Lever bought the object from Partridge in 1920 for the amount of £2,500, which was high for the British market, but considerably low still if compared to the prices paid in the United States about a year earlier.<sup>36</sup>

There are a few more pieces acquired through Partridge; in 1915 Lever bought a bowl and a square bottle together for only £44. 1s 0d, which are of a different type.



**Fig. 7** Pair of *Famille Noire* bottles with straight sides, decorated with paeony and chrysanthemum scrolls in *Famille Rose*, LLAG 6735 & 6736, copyright National Museums Liverpool

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<sup>36</sup> See LLAG invoice file 99 in the Lady Lever Art Gallery archive

This pair of bottles is very different in style in comparison to the ones seen before. First of all they are much smaller in shape, and their decoration includes the *Famille Rose* palette. In addition, the foliage which covers the whole ground is an indicator for a later date, namely the Yongzheng (1723-1735) and Qianlong (1736-1795) periods. *Famille Noire* wares continued to be produced after the Kangxi, and this type is a representative authentic example of its form in a later period.

Owing to the circumstance that the vases display stylistic features of the Yongzheng and Qianlong periods, they consequently cannot be classified as 'fakes', and they belong to a different category altogether. This aspect is also reflected in their low price of £44. 1s. 0d in comparison to the alleged Kangxi pieces.

The purchase of *Famille Noire* seems to have ceased in 1920, when Lever expressed his thoughts also in a letter to Partridge, who advised him on another black object. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 1920, Lever wrote to Partridge that with regard to the black vase he would endeavour to arrange a visit, *...but I am not at all in a buying humour at present. ...*<sup>37</sup>

He explained this by stating that at the present position of finances, all his funds were required in business. With this letter, Lever's acquisitions of *Famille Noire* came more or less to an end.

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<sup>37</sup> See LLAG file 3959, Partridge correspondence 1919-1922



## Conclusion

In review of the pieces of *Famille Noire* porcelains in the Lever collection discussed above and previous observations in the more recent literature we can identify several categories of *Famille Noire* porcelains.

1. *Famille Noire* small scale pieces (e.g. small bowls in Augustus the Strong's collection in Dresden, based on the inventory of 1779); original Kangxi porcelain and decoration <sup>38</sup>
2. *Famille Noire* vases that are a complete invention of the (late) 19<sup>th</sup> century, in terms of composition, shape and decoration (Fig. 1, 2, 4 & 6)
3. *Famille Noire* vases that are composed of an original Kangxi porcelain body, but which were altered and re-decorated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 3 & 5)
4. *Famille Noire* vases that were of a later period than the Kangxi, namely the Yongzheng or Qianlong period (Fig. 7)

Consequently, many pieces in the Lever collection should be attributed to the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> Century rather than the Kangxi period (1662-1722). Another supporting argument could be that these kinds of wares initially were not even reflected in Chinese textbooks. According to Gerald Reitlinger, this type of porcelain had been sought after by Ci Xi, the Empress Dowager who virtually ruled China between the 1860s and early 1900s. As her natal colour was black, everything that was suitable was hunted for purchase and since the supply of original wares was short, large scale *Famille Verte* were blacked in to fulfil the demand and, later on, were deliberately forged. <sup>39</sup> This argument seems plausible; however, with regard to the enormous prices black wares achieved on the American market, the European dealers who supplied those wares might have been responsible for the pushing of prices once they had realised what *Famille Noire* could fetch on the European

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<sup>38</sup> For a discussion on these bowls compare for example Ströber Eva, *La Maladie de Porcelaine, ostasiatisches Porzellan aus der Sammlung Augusts des Starken*, Leipzig 2001, p. 64, Nr. 25

<sup>39</sup> Reitlinger, Vol. II, 1970, p. 212

market. Furthermore it was suggested that *Famille Noire* was produced in both Europe and Japan to continue the craze for Aesthetic-style pieces.<sup>40</sup> The shortage of *Famille Noire* large scale objects in Imperial Chinese porcelain collections further sustains these arguments.

In terms of documentary evidence, one final example of black ground porcelain needs to be examined.

Two vases from the Rijksmuseum, very similar in style to Fig. 1, but with the inclusion of red enamel, were acquired in a Christie's sale of 1888, from Burghley House, Lincolnshire. Although they fetched no more than £341.15s 0d at the actual sale because of the conception that they could be works of Samson in Paris, the dealer Joseph Duveen, in believing them truly Kangxi, would have been willing to pay £20,000 for them in the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, this transaction never happened.<sup>41</sup>

In a visit to Burghley House, where the actual inventories were examined by the author, it could be established that those vases did not appear in any inventories that would temporally correspond to the Kangxi (1662-1722) period. (Such as the inventory of 1728, where they are not listed) They only appear in the last inventory of 1854 where they are catalogued as *A pair of Black (with painted flowers) quadrangular jars*.<sup>42</sup> Although this documentary evidence is not necessarily proof that those pieces are fake, since they could have been housed elsewhere before, their striking stylistic similarity to pieces in the Lever and the Salting collections leads to the assumption that they are most likely new inventions with a black ground dating to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Owing to their entry in the Burghley House inventory of 1854, they could consequently be one of the earliest fakes of *Famille Noire* produced in imitation of original Kangxi ware.

In summary, there is no evidence to suggest that the majority of *Famille Noire* in the Lever collection actually date to the Kangxi period. One way to investigate their authenticity would be to undertake a scientific, technical analysis that would look into

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<sup>40</sup> Compare again Jenyns, footnote 7

<sup>41</sup> Reitlinger, Vol. II, 1970, p. 212

<sup>42</sup> Inventory of 1854, housed by Burghley House in Lincolnshire

the different layers of composition in order to arrive at a more accurate attribution. However, this is a time-consuming and costly undertaking; in order to carry out such an examination, the changes in manufacturing processes will have to be considered and several surface analysis techniques will have to be employed. It will need much time for preparation before such an analysis can be conducted, but the author is optimistic that this assessment will be taking place in the near future in order to refute or confirm the attribution of large scale *Famille Noire* porcelains to the Kangxi period.