When History Involves in Contemporary Dialogue: Craftmenship and Design

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The Quest for Originality: Contemporary Design and Traditional Craft in Dialogue, Hong Kong Palace Museum, Hong Kong, permanent.

The exhibition *The Quest for Originality: Contemporary Design and Traditional Craft in Dialogue* in the newly opened Hong Kong Palace Museum (HKPM) shows an endeavor to connect the past and the present, crafts and designs, by juxtaposing ancient art relics borrowed from the Beijing Palace Museum with Hong Kong local designers' responses. However, there is no clear definition for *design* and *craft* when this exhibition tries to bridge them together, and the exhibition's narration dubiously links *design* to the contemporary and *craft* to the tradition. As a result, the whole exhibition narration conflates the usage of both terms and generates the following issues: the definitions mix *design* and *craft* as long-existing activities with their modern appellations, and some artifacts are decontextualized to fit the exhibition's narration. As a result, while the exhibition intends to equally evaluate craft and design, only the latter becomes the focal point, showing no vital connection with ancient crafts.

As an opening to elicit the whole narrative, the first room does not provide coherent definitions of craft and design in their textual and conceptual division. The introduction text first points out that the etymology of *design* comes from eighteenth-century Europe, but long before the invention of the word *design*, Chinese craft had been maturely developed. Later, this exhibition mainly uses *craft* to describe objects from the past, even though sometimes its intent is to refer to the ancient *design*. This inappropriate wording seems to be the default mode of this exhibition to which design has a modern connotation, while craft belongs only to the tradition or the past. Such an impression is the result of an intermixing of the two terms as both practices and theoretical terms. It should be noted that not only *design* as a word has its modern origin, but also *craft*, describing a category or discipline, only became widely used after 1888 in Britain.[2] Ultimately, both *design* and *craft* as human activities should not be limited to a certain period, given that the actual action they describe existed long before these words emerged. Rather forcibly, this exhibition uses *design* as a modern word while using *craft* as a practice from ancient times, attempting to justify its intention to highlight the difference between periods.

Apart from this problematic binary temporal relationship, the first room also fails to give a precise definition of how the exhibition sees *craft* as a practice. Instead, it begins to illustrate four important creative principles of contemporary design in the wall text, such as modern design needs to value the beauty of nature. Then the curators place several showcases exhibiting ancient crafts in the shape of mythical beasts and waterfowl next to this part of the text to visualize this point (Fig. 1), indicating that contemporary design principles have long been present in craft-making. However, this comparison is not based on a clear definition of craft. According to the art historian Larry Shiner, there are two different sets of definitions for craft as a practice today. Some institutions and art critics, such as The American Craft Museum who changed its name to the Museum of Arts and Design, regard craft as a lower-ranked abject of art because it is considered a means-ends process.[3] On the other hand, some celebrate craft as it absorbs young craft-makers' innovative "do-it-yourself" attitude into the field.[4] The first (and the most common) idea sees craft-making as a repeatable process that can be separated from the design, whereas the second treats craft-making as creative studio work that acknowledges the artisans as both designers and producers. Paradoxically, the exhibition uses the second definition of craft as creative work to compare the crafts' *design* to contemporary design principles but regards craft and design as two separate parts from the beginning.

Carrying the confusion made by the first room and

1 Special thanks to the editors, Lan Chang, Wang Ding Ocean, and Ye Xinyi, for their good comments and dedicated editing.

2 Larry Shiner, " 'Blurred Boundaries'? Rethinking the Concept of Craft and Its Relation to Art and Design," *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 4 (2012): 232–233.

3 Shiner, "'Blurred Boundaries'," 230–231.

4 Shiner, "'Blurred Boundaries'," 231.

continuing the trip, the second room imitates a "time tunnel," visualizing the genealogy of Chinese craftsmanship tradition. However, this display method risks the original historical contextualization, as it takes one of the displayed objects out of its original historical context and forces it to fit into the exhibition's narration. With walls covered with excerpts from ancient literature from Western Zhou Dynasty (1047–772 BCE) to Qing Dynasty (1636–1911), the room presents the achievements and inventions made by Chinese artisans. Overall, the wall text tries to impress viewers with the continuing historical narrative of Chinese craft-making, which leaves precious practical experiences forming a rich treasury for contemporary designers to explore. In the center of the tunnel, the most significant work, *The Mixed Glass with Flaring Mouth* 攪玻璃撇口瓶 (Fig. 2) was a masterpiece produced by the Imperial Glass Workshop 玻璃廠 in the Qianlong 乾隆 period (r.1736–1796).[5] Unlike traditional Chinese patterns with auspicious decoration such as dragons and phoenixes, this glassware has a geometric design, reminding us contemporary viewers of a barber's pole. Together with the wall text, this glassware reiterates the artisans' mastery at the pinnacle of ancient Chinese craft-making and expresses the influence of the long-inherited design ideas generated by the intelligent Chinese ancestors. Yet, the history behind this work puts a question mark on the attempt to present it inside this narration. In fact, this craft was based on modern Western design and glass-making techniques. The birthplace of this glassware, the Imperial Glass Workshop, was established with the help primarily of German missionaries.[6] They arrived in China shortly after the ease of *haijin* 海禁 policy, with international trading recovered in 1684.[7] Later, Venice-originated filigrana glass 纏絲玻璃 was introduced to China, which transformed into a new type of glassware called mixed glass 攪玻璃.[8] Nevertheless, the second room omits the rich historical context behind this modern-looking object. Although mixed glass was modified in China, its pattern is doubtful to reflect anything related to the ancient design, but more like exotic foreign curio to please the emperor. Curators now try to surprise the audiences by using this work without unveiling its historical background.

After the tunnel, the largest chamber of the exhibition demonstrates how material culture flourished in ancient China, and how contemporary Hong Kong local artisans respond to this craft-making tradition. The strength about this part is that some glass cases in the corridor holds the raw materials, semi-finished pieces, and craft-making tools (Fig. 3 & Fig. 4). By showing the often-invisible process, this area attracts the audiences by demystifying the production of the flawless final products. Next to these glass cases are clips of recorded interviews with local artisans who provided these tools for this exhibition.[9] Though in different life stages, these artisans all become supportive narrators to illustrate the traditional way of making crafts by hand, and their intimacy with materials does not change. For instance, Law Chi Kwong and Kwan Hung Fai, the older generations working in the Hong Kong craft industry for decades, modestly remark that they do not consider themselves as artists, but merely successors to inherit craft-making techniques. Altogether, the artisans address mostly practical issues, such as a sense of duty to develop the industry and cultivate newcomers, worries about the inheritance of traditional craft-making techniques during the recession in the craft-making industry.

The exhibition ends with a colossal screen that occupies a whole wall (Fig. 5), playing interview videos of four representative contemporary designers in Hong Kong.[10] This final room hits a weak note to end its narrative. While interviews with the artisans in the previous room highlight the inheritance of techniques, designers in the last room rise to stardom by illustrating their connection with the traditional interest of Chinese literati and how they borrow and adjust ancient visual elements to their designs. Their voices fail to echo with the artisans' and make this part somewhat isolated. Each video inside is conceptual, using visually pleasant images, elegant music, and highly abstract but vague terms such as "beauty" and "harmony," which make the presentation mysteriously eulogizing, as designers are closer to a superior kind of "art." Those who stick to craft making shown in the previous room are instead presented as antiquarians, though not intentionally. This hidden and obscure comparison reminds us of the first attitude Shiner observed in many art institutions, that is, to see craft as the inferior, which seems to conflict with the original intention of this exhibition.

In conclusion, although this exhibition tries to present its arguments in a conversation between ancient crafts and contemporary design rather than passively juxtaposing all the artefacts, it fails to generate a cogent narration to demonstrate their exact interrelation. There is never a clear and coherent definition of the two essential terms, *craft* and *design*. Instead, this exhibition only uses *design* as a modern term and *craft* as a long-existing activity to prove their temporal attribution to different periods. The incoherence in definition makes the subsequent narration

5 Zhang Rong 張榮, *Luster of Autumn Water: Glass of the Qing Imperial Workshop* (Beijing: The Forbidden City Publishing House, 2005), 24.

6 Zhang, *Luster of Autumn Water*, 14.

7 Shi Zhihong 史志宏, "China's Overseas Trade Policy and Its Historical Results: 1522–1840," in *Intra-Asian Trade and the World Market*, ed. A.J.H. Latham and Heita Kawakatsu (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 9.

8 Zhang, *Luster of Autumn Water*, 14.

9 They are Dr. Sunny Wong, Ho Lok, Law Chi Kwong, Kwan Hung Fai, and Wong Hoi Cheung.

10 They are Kai-Yin Lo, Kan Tai-keung, Lo Chi Wing, and *anothermountainman*.

even more confusing, as the second room neglects the cross-cultural background of the central exhibit as a craft. Although the exhibition generates an effect celebrating its unconventional design and quality, it does not trace the whole historical context of how this design appeared. The final room eventuated as celebrating or advertising Hong Kong's local "star" designers, which makes this section unnaturally forced in its connection with the whole exhibition. Altogether, the exhibition consists of many high-quality and attractive ancient crafts, but its narrative has a strong sense of patchwork, and the emphasis on localization is somewhat deliberate.

Bibliography

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Figures

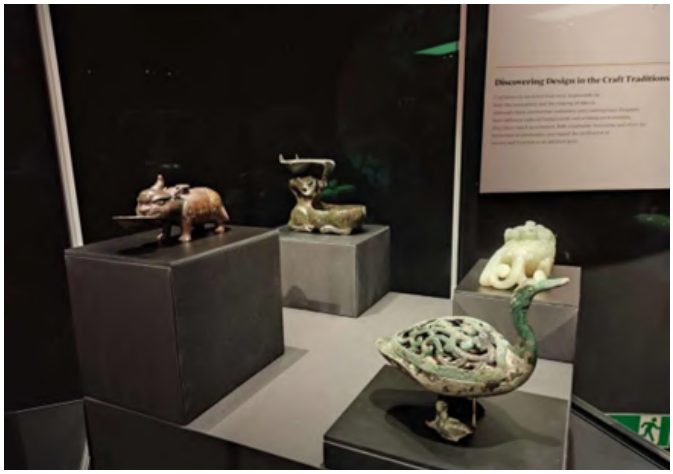


Figure 1
Some of the crafts in the first chamber that imitate animals. Photo by Zheng Jingwen.

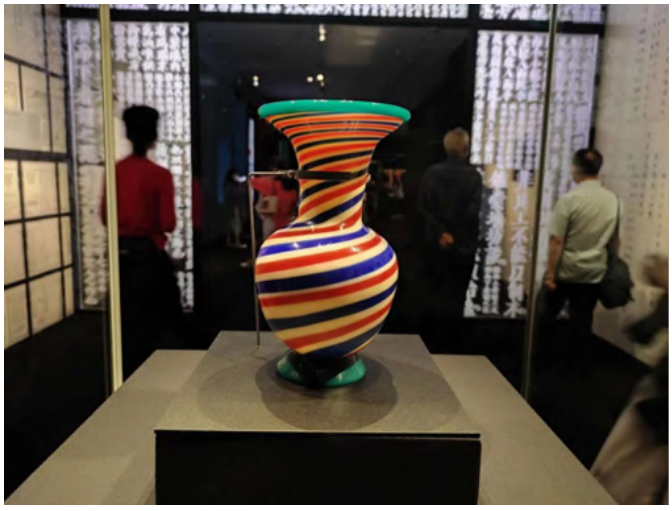
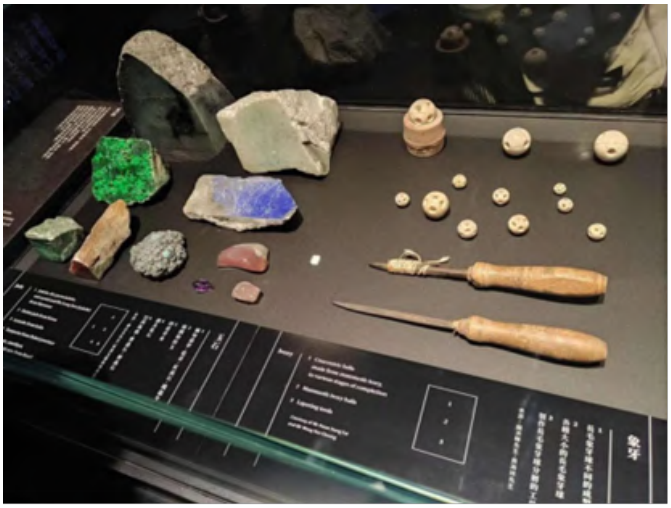
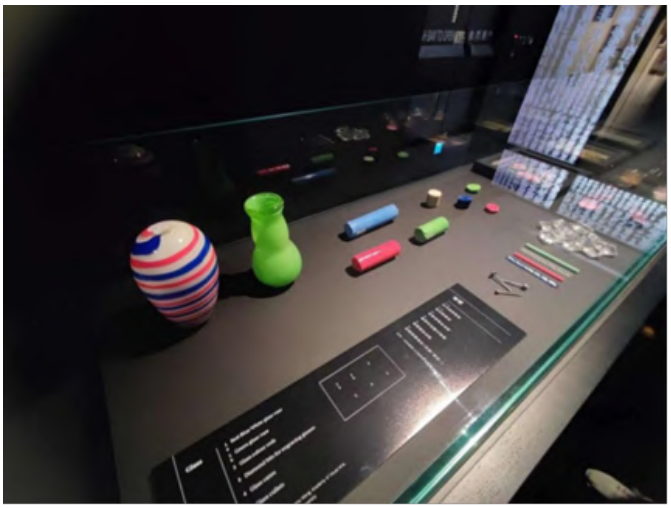


Figure 2
The Mixed Glass with Flaring Mouth in the "time tunnel"connecting the first and the second chambers. Photo by Zheng Jingwen.





Left
Figure 3

Right
Figure 4
Raw material, semi-finished products and tools used in the production of glass and sculpture, borrowed from the artists who also introduced the craft-making technique in the related videos, with an introduction. Photo by Zheng Jingwen.

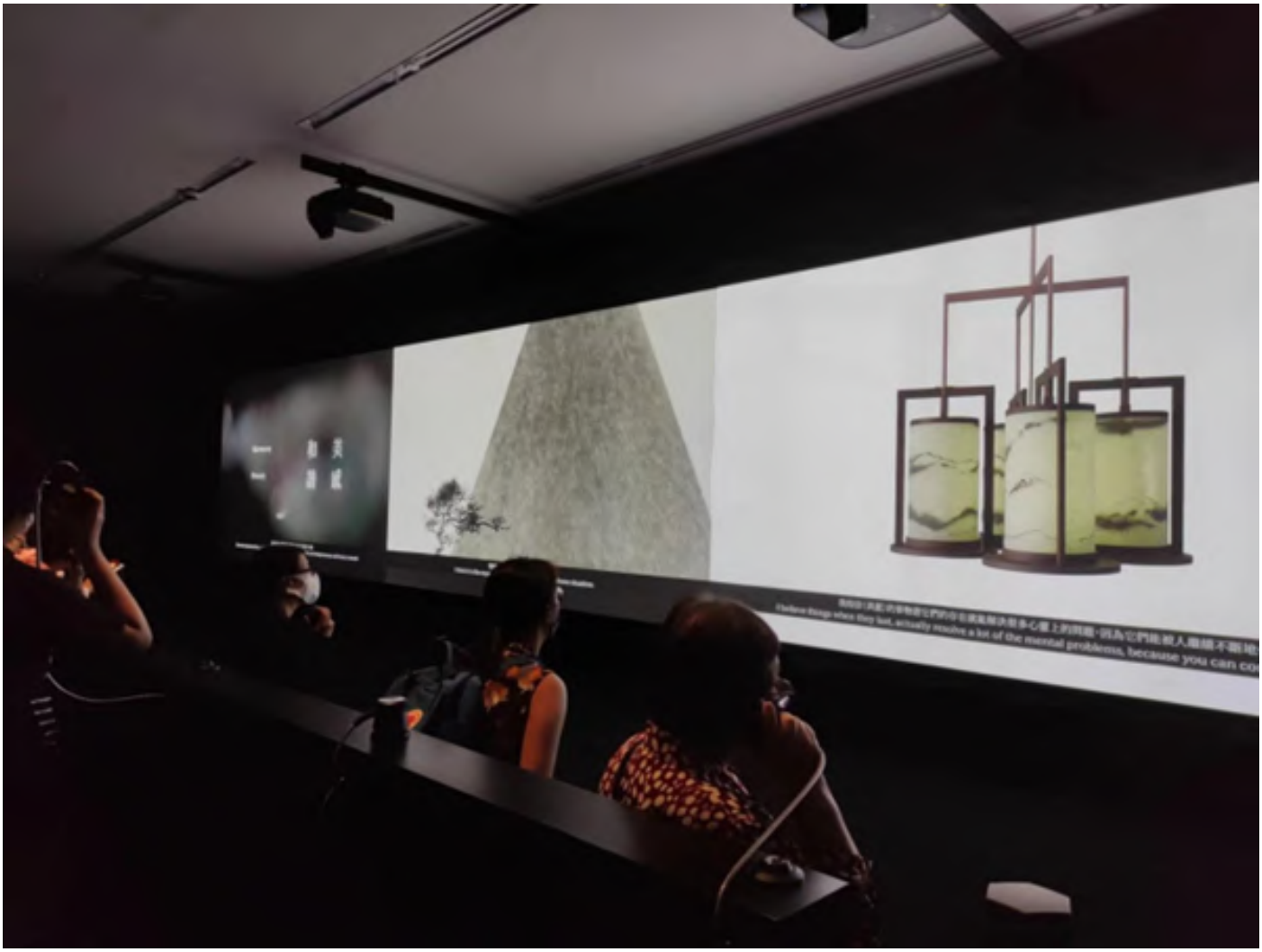


Figure 5
In the last room, audiences are listening attentively. Photo by Zheng Jingwen.