



The famous David Vases – ‘the most important in existence’ – now in the British Museum.

The art of acquisition

AFTER MORE THAN 50 YEARS IN THE SHADOWS, ONE OF THE WORLD’S GREAT COLLECTIONS HAS FINALLY BEEN GIVEN CENTRE STAGE

Words • Alan Harper

Percival David had an eye for Chinese ceramics like few collectors before or since. He also had money, connections and, most important, unrivalled opportunities to study and acquire rare and beautiful pieces.

His collection of Chinese pottery and porcelain is the finest ever assembled by a private individual, surpassed only by the Imperial collections in Beijing and Taipei. Yet he was always determined to share it with fellow scholars and enthusiasts. Now, after more than 50 years on display in a London townhouse owned by the University of London, these priceless objects have been moved to their own, purpose-built gallery for the first time – in the British Museum.

The curator, Jessica Harrison-Hall, describes the arrival of the 1,700-strong collection as the most important addition to the museum since the Sutton Hoo treasure in 1939. Specialist London dealer Robert McPherson agrees: “They already had a good collection, but now with the Percival David pieces, it’s unbeatable,” he says. “And the new gallery is wonderful.”

Who you know

Percival David was born in Mumbai in 1892, and brought up in England. His family, wealthy Baghdadi Jews, were related to the Sassoon dynasty of Eastern traders and bankers. He became Sir Percival on the death of his father in 1926.

David bought his first Chinese ceramics in London in 1914. Western connoisseurship had naturally focused on ‘export’ porcelain, but from the start David showed more eclectic taste, patronising dealers such as Sparks and Bluett’s and corresponding with experts at the Victoria & Albert Museum.



By the time of his first visit to China, a business trip in 1924, he was already a respected collector with some knowledge of written Chinese. Thanks to his sponsorship of a gallery in the new Palace Museum, he was granted unprecedented access to the national collection, and was able to study many objects first-hand. In 1927 he made the purchase that would underpin his entire collection: 50 pieces from the former imperial household which had been lodged with a bank as collateral by the departing royal family. Sir Percival set about their acquisition.

Writing about these events years later, David’s wife Sheila – the collection’s first



curator – recounts a tale of suspicious bank officials, death threats, Japanese middlemen and coded messages. What she doesn’t mention, perhaps because she didn’t know, was that the bank in question was owned by the Sassoon family. Stacey Pearson, a more recent curator, puts it succinctly: “The bank’s sale of imperial goods was not a public sale... it would have been necessary to be well connected.”

He was back in China in 1930-31 – working with palace officials on further exhibitions, according to Lady David’s account, but at the same time acquiring more pieces from local antiques dealers. There were rich pickings to be had.

Open season

Unlike many collectors, Sir Percival left virtually no records of his acquisitions, but it had long been open season in China for wealthy Western collectors. As early as 1910 the director of the Victoria & Albert Museum had noted: “Railway making in China has caused the opening up of the early graves and it is vessels found in these that have been coming into the market... the present opportunity is a good one for acquiring an admirable series at a very modest price.”

While David’s taste seemed naturally

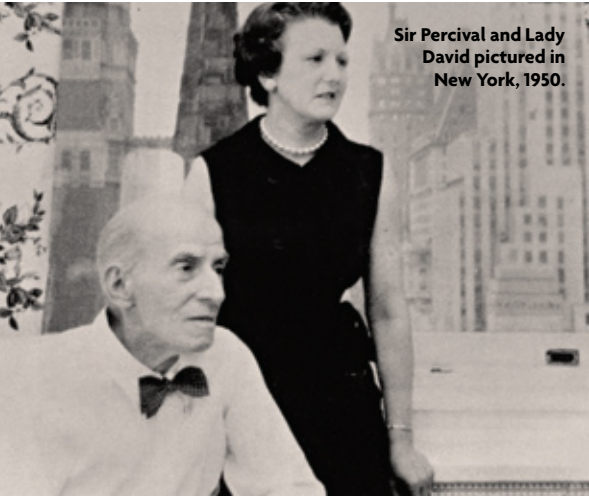
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inclined towards highly refined pieces made for the imperial palaces, especially those with inscriptions by the great emperor-connoisseur Qianlong, he was also careful to pick up good, representative objects from other eras and traditions. The Song Dynasty ‘black’ wares of Jian, for example, were never favoured by the court but have been revered by Oriental collectors for centuries. David’s group, though small, is regarded as especially fine. “There is very little black ware,” admits Jessica Harrison-Hall. “But what there is, is wonderful.” From the same period the beautiful blue Jun pieces, too, with their purple glaze splashes, are of superlative quality and variety, as are the olive-green Yaozhou bowls.

“The collection is a reflection of both his own taste, and the collecting tastes of the time,” she explains. Like all collectors, he fell victim to the occasional fake. Two ‘Song’ pieces – both stoneware headrests – Harrison-Hall diplomatically describes as “not right”. “We’re going through the collection very carefully to get the dates correct,” she says. “There have been some surprises – but very few.”

One attractive pear-shaped vase was offered to the Englishman in the 1930s by a Paris dealer, who felt it would ➤



In 1935 he found the vase’s missing twin, paying the equivalent of £40,000. The pair have been of inestimable value to scholars

complement a similar vase in the collection. David was apparently not convinced but, intrigued, bought the piece anyway. It is indeed a superb match for the original, but is only decorated on one side – because, it transpired, the forger had copied from the David collection catalogue, where only one side is shown.

The David Vases

When his latest acquisitions from China arrived in London in 1931, the collection had outgrown its rooms in the Mayfair Hotel, where it had been on permanent display. So it was moved to bigger galleries in the newly-opened Dorchester.

One of his largest pieces was a blue and white temple vase more than two feet (60cm) tall, which David bought from his friend Mountstuart Elphinstone in 1927. In 1935 he found its missing twin, paying £360 – the equivalent of £40,000 today – in a Sotheby’s sale. This priceless pair have been of inestimable value to scholars in dating other objects from this very early period of blue and white porcelain, because not only are they dated – 1351 – but they also feature most of the important decorative motifs of the era. “There are a lot of pieces it would be very difficult to date without them,” asserts Robert McPherson. “And they are of amazing quality – they’re the most important pieces of blue and white in existence.”

It seems to have always been David’s intention to use his collection to further the study of Chinese ceramics, and he led by example. He was already the author of several articles and monographs, a respected contributor to the *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramics Society*, and a scholar of Chinese who would go on to translate the 1388 text *Gegu yaolun* (‘A discussion ➤

THE CURATOR’S CHOICE

RU WARE BOTTLE

Northern Song dynasty, 1086-1125

Height: 24.8cm

Ru is the rarest, and some say finest, of all Chinese ceramic wares. “The British Museum had five examples before the David collection arrived with its group of 12,” says Jessica Harrison-Hall. “Only 65 Ru pieces are known worldwide.” The glaze is a jewel-like blue-green with a luminous crackle, as if made from some precious stone. Contemporary collectors wrote of ‘powdered agate’ in the glaze, but they might have been victims of early marketing hype: in fact its qualities are owed to a combination of iron and titanium. The Ru kiln only operated for about 30 years.

BOTTLE WITH BIRD AND FLOWER DESIGNS

Yongle period, 1403-24

Height: 34cm

“This is special because it marks a break with traditional decorative styles,” according to Jessica Harrison-Hall. “It’s extraordinary – and much more beautiful than anything later in the Ming.” Earlier styles were much more crowded – this new look contrasts the decoration with the white, porcelain body. The Jingdezhen kilns in Jiangxi province were supervised by court officials, who brought paintings for the potters to copy. This was 400 years before shading became easier with imported Western enamels, but they have achieved the same effect by piling and overlapping the colour.



GUAN WARE LOBED DISH

Southern Song dynasty, 1127-1279

Diameter: 16.8cm

When the imperial court was forced south by invading armies in 1127, production ceased at the official Ru kiln, and a new one was started up by the emperor at Hangzhou, to continue producing imperial ware. However, different clays and glaze materials meant that Ru could not be successfully imitated, but the new Guan (‘official’) stoneware had its own character, with thick, glassy, blue-grey glazes on a thin body, and a prominent crackle. “This dish carries the potter’s fingerprints in the glaze on the base – a wonderful glimpse of the craftsman’s hand,” says Harrison-Hall.

DOUCAI JAR

Chenghua mark and period, 1465-87

Height: 91cm

“An unusual and very rare piece – the camellias are enormous, and the butterflies are rather clunky,” says Jessica Harrison-Hall. The ware is known as doucai, which means ‘interlocking colours’. An outline design was painted on before firing, and then coloured enamels were applied afterwards. The piece was then fired a second time, at a lower temperature. This rare little ovoid jar is perfect – literally. “We know from waste piles excavated at Jingdezhen that they operated at this time with total quality control – anything with the slightest flaw was broken and discarded.”



BOWLS WITH PRUNUS FLOWERS

Yongzheng mark and period, 1723-35

Diameter: 12.7cm

The grey and black enamel plum trees are like an ink painting, as is the inscribed poem with red seal marks on the other side. “These were potted at Jingdezhen, but they were then painted in the imperial palace – so here we are

seeing the emperor’s personal taste,” explains Jessica Harrison-Hall. Poems are notoriously hard to translate – this one talks of moonlight, moving branches, an inky-black reflective pool, and the ‘secret fragrance’ of the plum blossom. The porcelain is of an exceptional quality, rarely seen outside the Palace Museums in Beijing and Taipei.



Wealth and influence opened doors. When the Chinese authorities expressed concern for the safety of their priceless objects, Sir Percival called the Admiralty and had the artworks shipped by the Royal Navy

of the essential criteria of antiquities’), under the title *Chinese Connoisseurship*. Now he financed a year-long lectureship at the University of London, which so encouraged the authorities that they set up a permanent department of Chinese Art and Archaeology, the first of its kind in the world, at the University’s Courtauld Institute.

“He was a very serious scholar,” says Jessica Harrison-Hall. “He is highly rated even today. The early connoisseurs really did know their stuff.”

The Royal Academy exhibition

Enlisting the help of wealthy fellow collectors, and in consultation with his friend Robert Hobson of the British Museum, David now began to plan a major exhibition in London. Its core would be his own ever-expanding collection, which by this time numbered well over 1,000 objects. But he also borrowed significant works from collectors and museums around the world, including many from Beijing. Wealth and influence opened doors. When the Chinese authorities expressed concern for the safety of their priceless objects, David called the Admiralty and had the artworks shipped by the Royal Navy.

The Chinese Exhibition opened at the Royal Academy in November 1935, to enthusiastic reviews: “A revelation to the



West of the full splendour of the artistic tradition of China, and an inspiration to students to explore it in depth.”

Still David added to the collection. Between 1936 and 1938 he spent £466 – the equivalent of £52,000 today – just at Bluet’s.

In 1939 he moved his collection to his country house, away from German bombs. His voluntary war work involved researching the aircraft industry (for which it would appear he had no qualifications whatsoever) and with his wife he travelled to America in 1940 to visit aeroplane factories. But he couldn’t keep away from China for long. By 1941 they were in Shanghai, and interned by the Japanese until a diplomatic exchange could be arranged. They occupied their time scouring antiques markets for new pieces, picking up some important ancient texts.

It was during the war years that David was diagnosed with motor neurone disease. His condition degenerated progressively until his death in 1964. But he had made plans for his collection, agreeing in 1950 to present it wholesale to the University of London – provided it was given its own space, and exhibited in its entirety.

And so it was, for more than 50 years. But only now, in the British Museum, can it finally be admired in the surroundings it deserves.