

Tang Ying's Supervision of the Making of Revolving Vases and Related Issues

Yu Pei-Chin
Department of Antiquities
National Palace Museum

Abstract

This study investigates revolving vases in historical records to look at differences in what the Qianlong Emperor and Tang Ying, superintendent of the Imperial kilns, understood by “novel” porcelain works. The study will also discuss the styles, decorations and manufacturing techniques of revolving vases, how this type of vase evolved over time and how it was influenced by and in turn influenced Western craftwork.

Revolving vases have two broad categories of rotating mechanism: a simpler type which can easily be rotated, and a more complex type which has to be operated by professionals. According to historical records, most of the revolving vases made under the supervision of Tang Ying were of the former type. The records of the Portuguese ambassador's visit suggest that the development from simple structures to more complex and ingenious mechanisms in rotating vases stemmed from the Qianlong Emperor's desire to showcase the Qing Empire's prowess in craftwork.

The double-layer structure and openwork decoration of revolving vases can be traced back to the Song Dynasty and share a similar design concept with the rice-pattern decorated porcelain works which had been circulating in the West since the 17th century. The rotating function and the use of the “celestial and terrestrial union” joint (a type of ball and socket joint) were undoubtedly Tang Ying's creative response to the Qianlong Emperor's demand for “novel” porcelain works.

Keywords: Tang Ying, Qianlong Emperor, Revolving-Vase, openwork Jiaotai-vase

(Translated by Shih-han Huang)