

## **From the Hands of Spirits, Conveying the Quality of Immortals: Ivory “Immortal Works” from the Qianlong Court**

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### **Abstract**

This study takes a closer look at phenomena related to the numerous references for “immortal works” that appear in the archives of the workshops for the Imperial Household Department at the Qing court during the Qianlong reign (in related records from the previous Yongzheng reign are extremely few references for “immortal works”). In contrast to the previous custom of placing “immortal works” of ivory within the scope of carving bamboo, wood, ivory, and rhinoceros horn as well as taking technique, stylistic analysis, and related background information as the focus of research, this study builds on the foundation of previous research to take into consideration the results of studies on Qing court art in the last few years to propose a new theoretical framework leading to further meaningful observations. In this reexamination and reappraisal for the appearance of “immortal works” of ivory at the Qing court, documents, images, surviving objects, and displays are all used to determine the status of these objects within the overall situation of works produced by the Qing Imperial Household Department as well as related issues concerning their collection and display. By doing so, “immortal works” of ivory can be assigned to their appropriate place in an attempt to gain a more complete and deeper appreciation of this group of artworks. Finally, by combing through ideas on “intriguing” and “marvelous” works in traditional Chinese culture, we can observe the attitude and understanding of the Qianlong emperor with regards to these so-called “immortal works” and see the turning point of how they appeared at the Qing court.

Although the term for “immortal works” at the Qianlong court is not restricted to ivory works, ivory carving is the most numerous and evident in this trend. For this reason, the present study takes ivory carvings as the main topic for discussion. The works of the Imperial Household Department at the Qing court forming the topic of this

study, however, were not part of the mainstream and therefore not discussed very much in previous studies on Qing court art. In fact, compared to mainstream visual arts, crafts, and large productions at the Qing court, these small and delicate works appear relatively insignificant. Although we may not be able to explain exactly why the Qianlong emperor was so fascinated with this type of craft, at the same time we can fairly assess that “immortal works” were highly favored and emphasized at the time. They were ranked as representative works of court art and became one of the important links in the achievements of art and culture during the Qing dynasty. This is something that cannot be denied. And with the Qianlong emperor, who described them as “from the hands of spirits, conveying the quality of immortals,” we can see how the term “immortal works” appeared and resolved the dichotomy between “human wishes follow Heavenly principles” and “human ingenuity is like the Heavens,” which raised the status of this type of art. What is more, the Qianlong emperor also perhaps reckoned using the term “immortal works” like the Heavens itself to package this fascinating art he admired with a theoretical underpinning, giving this product of culture an orthodox status.

**Keywords:** Qianlong, immortal works, ivory, intricate works, spirit works, marvelous objects

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)