

A Discussion of Baishijian Curio Boxes in the National Palace Museum Collection: Using the Qianlong Reassembled Baishijian Curio Boxes of 1743 as Example

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Abstract

In the collection of the National Palace Museum are many cases for holding curios and small artifacts, the collective term now used for them being *duobaoge*, or “curio boxes.” Among them is one given the name *Jiqiongzao* in the Qianlong reign. However, in the archives of the Qing imperial workshops, this type of case is called a *baishijian* (“hundred-fold items”). Hence, the first goal of the present study is to differentiate between this term for curio boxes and that of *duobaoge* (“multi-treasure divider”).

After comparing archival records and surviving works to understand the meaning of *baishijian*, the study proceeds to focus on nine *baishijian* curio boxes that the Qianlong emperor ordered to be reassembled in the eighth year of his reign, 1743. Five of them, judging from their names, are currently in the National Palace Museum collection. This point in time not only provides a specific date for the re-assembly of the *baishijian*, it also is important for dating its nomenclature. Judging from the immediacy of reassembling the *baishijian* due to insect damage to a request to inspect it every five days, the Qianlong emperor evidently paid considerable attention to every related aspect, a fact confirmed by the meticulous refinement and detail of the production in these *baishijian*. At the same, evidence reveals the appearance of a Qianlong court style of *baishijian*, including both the exterior of the box and the choice of curios placed inside as well as the stands and compartments made to display or hold them. Various booklets and smaller cases were also designed, testifying to the effort and determination of the Qianlong emperor. The various requests made by the emperor in the reassembly process had a definite impact on the production of *baishijian* curio boxes.

Study of the five abovementioned *baishijian* curio boxes from inside out show how the Qianlong emperor organized them early in his reign, even serving as criteria for dating. By presenting basic information on *baishijian* in the National Palace Museum, others can be understood more clearly, demonstrating the production standards adopted, reproduced, and imitated to create these amazing works. Furthermore, the process of

reassembling these *baishijian* in their various manifestations reveals the history and fundamental appearance of their production in the Qianlong period. The present study thus offers a clearer picture behind the making of this fascinating art form known as the *baishijian* curio box.

Keywords: Qianlong, *duobaoge*, *baishijian*, Qianlong court style

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