IMPERIAL SPLENDOR:
CHINESE CLOISONNÉ
AT SUNNYLANDS

With an essay by Béatrice Quette
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imperial splendor: chinese cloisonné at sunnylands

In 1963, Walter and Leonore Annenberg, a prominent Pennsylvania couple, looked to the western desert as a location for a family winter retreat. They sought to create a modern estate on a grand scale harnessing the excitement and freedom of the California Modernist movement. In imagining the possibilities for the project, they partnered with William Haines, a self-taught furniture and interior designer. Haines’s trailblazing Hollywood Regency style often paired antique Chinese decorative elements with modern décor. This design was popular with the trend-setting Hollywood and Los Angeles elite, many of whom were the Annenbergs’s friends. Correspondence between Haines and the Annenbergs informs us that they shared a strong affinity for Chinese cloisonné and together pursued fine examples to be used as an important decorative element at Sunnylands.

Cloisonné enamel work was a natural fit for the approach to interior décor at Sunnylands. The Annenbergs researched material culture and sought best-in-class, technically exquisite examples when pursuing objects or paintings for their collections. The finest examples of Chinese cloisonné are awe-inspiring in their precision and detail. The level of difficulty in executing flawless work is extremely high. Technical merit aside, the Annenbergs also shared a penchant for beautiful, tranquil art expressions which often depicted natural themes. Their various collections often contain imagery of birds, flowers, and landscapes. The cloisonné collection is no exception, containing twelve bird figures. The works in the collection are charming in their design, providing the family and visitors with tranquil, lovely objects to contemplate.

The collection was assembled with the same strict discipline that the Annenbergs applied to all of their collecting activity: they researched the subject and targeted specific works. In this case, they focused primarily on the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). More specifically they attempted to identify works dating to the Qianlong period (1736–1796) when decorative arts flourished in China. The high level of quality from this period is attributable to a favorable political atmosphere providing a robust support of the arts at the imperial level, advances in technique, and an expansion of available enamel colors.

The Annenbergs assembled a collection of thirty-seven pieces which were originally designed for various purposes. These include utilitarian objects for the elite class, religious and ritual objects, and decorative objects and furniture for palaces or houses. The Annenbergs’s first acquisition of fine Chinese cloisonné was in 1966, the year Sunnylands was completed. At Frank Caro Chinese Art Gallery in New York, they purchased a pair of ten-inch tall, tabletop crane figures (pages 50–51). While the first acquisition occurred in New York, most of the collection was acquired from London galleries between the years 1967 and 1979.

Walter and Leonore Annenberg both served their country in ambassadorial roles at various times. Leonore was called upon by President Ronald Reagan in 1981 to act as Chief of Protocol. Walter was asked by President Richard Nixon who appointed him as the Ambassador to the Court of Saint James’s. He served in this capacity in London from 1969–1974. Approximately thirty percent of the collection was acquired from London galleries during this time period. According to Michael Comerford, (butler then house manager for forty years), the Annenbergs would occasionally go antique shopping on Saturdays while in London given that the embassy was closed that day. They would have lunch together at the embassy and then visit the fine antique shops. These included Spink and Son; John Sparks, Ltd.; Hugh Moss, Ltd.; and Mallett at Bourdon House, Ltd.

Cloisonné objects placed near and upon the tabletops throughout the living room provide an important unifying theme to the interior design at Sunnylands. The entire collection was installed in the most formal and public of spaces with the exception of the wall-hung panel in the gallery hall near the Steuben glass collection and two large cloisonné vases-cum-lamps which William Haines designed for the Room of Memories.

The collection was removed from the house for public exhibition at the Sunnylands Center & Gardens from January 20, 2013 through January 12, 2014. Following the exhibition, the collection will continue to enhance Sunnylands’ interiors in its original placement.

Thanks to the generosity of Walter and Leonore Annenberg in preserving Sunnylands and its collections in a public trust, the cloisonné collection will be enjoyed by generations of visitors to Sunnylands.

Anne Rowe
Director of Collections and Exhibitions
Cloisonné furnishings and decorative objects with a special interest in objects from the Qianlong period (1736–1796). The Sunnylands objects depict the wide range of colors available at this time and reflect the Qing preference for pairs. These attributes align with the Annenbergs’ general taste for symmetry and strong colors as evidenced in their Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings and in the Chinese ceramics also incorporated in William Haines and Ted Graber’s interior design. The second direction reflects the Annenbergs’ interest in birds—cranes, egrets, ducks and geese play a significant role in the Sunnylands Collection of Chinese cloisonné where and when they were acquired, the names of the London or New York galleries where the pieces were purchased, and the purchase prices. Notes by Michael Comerford, the Annenbergs’ long-time butler and house manager, contributed illuminating information about the intimate relationship between the Annenbergs and this collection. His comments support the interpretation that most of these pieces were simply considered familiar objects within the family home.}

**Cloisonné** is one of five techniques that combine enamels and metal. The others are champlevé enamel, painted enamel, translucent or basse-taille enamel and the so-called plique-à-jour enamel. Only the first four techniques reached China where they flourished long after they had been invented in Europe. The term cloisonné derives from the French word cloison which means “partition”. These cloisons, also called wires, are strips of metal, bent according to the design of the motif, then soldered or glued perpendicularly on the surface of the object made of the same metal. The thin wires (between one to several millimeters wide) create the outlines of the motifs and a network of empty cells that are then filled with enamel powders. Once all the cells are full, the object is placed in a low heat kiln (between 1256°F and 1328°F) for a short period of time. The enamels fuse within the cells and shrink. After cooling, the cells are packed again with enamel paste and the object is re-fired. For larger objects this needs to be done repeatedly until the cells are completely filled with fused enamels. The surface of the object is then rubbed with pumice stone and polished with charcoal until it is as smooth as possible. The final steps consist of gilding (applying a thin layer of gold to an object) and burnishing (rubbing an object to polish it) the metallic portions that are not covered by enamels. This would include the feet, borders, handles, and wire edges still visible between enamels.

In addition to cloisonné, the collection includes examples of the champlevé technique where the cells are hollowed in the metal that forms the object and the core of the object is cast with grooves and then filled with enamel paste. The following stages are identical to those for cloisonné. The one step that is unique to champlevé is that the metal does not become continuous until after the enamels fuse within the cells. The final step consists of gilding the object. The term champlevé derives from the French word champlevé from the Latin word chamos, meaning “a marsh or swamp” which is perhaps a reference to the marsh-like appearance of these objects. The technique is sometimes also called basse-taille, meaning “low relief” in French.

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There are two examples of the technique of painted enamel in the Sunnylands Collection that were not included in this exhibition and remain on view in their original location in the atrium of the historic home (left). In this technique the metal surface (generally copper, but also gold for a few imperial pieces during the Qianlong reign) is first covered with white enamel on which the motifs are painted with colored enamels. No hollows are created and no wires are added to the surface of the metal.

The technique of cloisonné first appeared somewhere around 1500 BCE in the Mediterranean. The most extraordinary production in Europe was done during the Byzantine Empire, between the eighth and fourteenth centuries. A limited number of significant objects made in Asia Minor during the first half of the twentieth century share some characteristics with the oldest pieces produced in China during the late Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) and the early Ming dynasty (1368–1644). These characteristics include the use of copper or copper-alloy for the body of the object and a common palette of enamel colors including dark blue, turquoise, yellow, white, and red. How the technique reached China and the early Ming dynasty (1368–1644) is still a matter of research. Some scholars believe the technique reached China during the late Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), but the production of cloisonné in Asia Minor increased continuously from the mid-sixteenth century to the Wannian reign (1573–1620) as a result of the political, economic, and demographic landscape. This reign produced a large amount of cloisonné that is recognized by its technical characteristics. Cloisonné from this period features a new color spectrum which is relatively low in contrast: sky blue, turquoise, lapis-lazuli or dark blue was now replaced by a dark turquoise. This change of colors corresponded to the new taste also visible in the enamels used on the five-color (wucai) porcelains on which green and red are dominant.

Imperial pieces bearing marks are distinctly heavy. On the other hand, a large number of objects from this reign have a very thin layer of enamel with poor quality. With some parts of the surface covered by a repetitive motif such as curly or diamond-shaped wires, the metallic body was very thin and generally made of copper alloy. These technical changes were probably introduced to reduce costs and to make the objects more accessible to a wider audience. As a result, the objects are very light in weight, even the larger ones. The designs were either simple motifs on archetypal shapes or more sophisticated designs on archetypal shapes such as large basins, tea pots, and incense burners. Because these pieces were more fragile, they suffered
Incense burning has a long tradition in China and was linked with ritual ceremonies in temples, but it was also used in homes to deter insects such as mosquitoes. The smoke of the incense escapes through the open work, a motif of these earlier Chinese bronzes.

During the Ming dynasty, scholars considered bronze and copper to be the perfect material for incense burners and cover in the shape of an antique bronze from the Han dynasty (206 BCE–CE 220, previous page, top) is an example of cloisonné from the Warring States period. The cloisonné work was most likely reset in new mounts during the Qing dynasty. The body in the shape of a bronze lion and the two rings of the handles held by a taotie mask evoke the Han dynasty style. The smoke of the incense escapes through the open work decoration on the side and on the top of the cover which features a phoenix and a dragon chasing the flaming pearl among clouds—traditional motifs symbolizing the emperor and empress.

Another tripod and covered incense burner from the early Qing dynasty in the collection has a very different shape and decoration (above left). The piece is a reinterpretation of an antique bronze vessel in a duiform dating to the Warring States period (481–221 BCE) on which the motifs are inlaid with silver. Here the yellow designs on the body recall the antique cicada motif of these earlier Chinese bronzes. The imperial tradition of Chinese emperors collecting and commissioning the finest art started during the Ming dynasty. Emperor Kangxi decided to recreate imperial porcelain workshops in Jingdezhen and to establish imperial workshops in the Forbidden City. Cloisonné and painted enamel workshops were dedicated to producing objects for the court as tributes, imperial patronage, temples, or gifts. The production of cloisonné during this period is quite important even though the range of colors used was still limited to ten or less. Unlike his father, Yongzheng (1723–1735) who preferred porcelain, and painted enamel to cloisonné, Qianlong (1736–1795) was particularly fond of cloisonné.

The imperial tradition of Chinese emperors collecting and commissioning the finest art started during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1125) and reached an apogee with the three Qing emperors. After his grandfather and father, Qianlong was undoubtedly the greatest collector of Chinese art and the greatest promoter of artistic production in Chinese history. Over one thousand cloisonné objects in the Forbidden City, in other palaces, and in the Palace Museum of Taipei reflect his particular taste for cloisonné. They were created in the imperial workshops in the Forbidden City and were supplemented by enamels produced in the Guangdong province in southern China. The bright colors commemorated with the gift bronze made cloisonné an attractive medium for large palace furnishings and for imposing ritual vessels and paraphernalia. The imperial court, scholars, and the rich elite sponsored the temples. Decorative art techniques improved significantly during this period; huge objects were created incorporating the best technical quality ever made in China. The designs, often featuring lotus or flower scrolls or motifs taken from antique bronzes and jades, were enhanced by new colors available in a range of more than twenty colors. The pink enamel that was created during the Yongzheng period (1722–1735) is often seen on these objects. Black, lilac, orange, and different shades of green complete the decorative effect of these cloisonné pieces and enhance their glorious nature making them favorites of the imperial court.

The large vase in the Sunnylands Collection (above right) is modeled after an early bronze prototype and illustrates the typical high-quality ritual vessel made during the Qianlong reign. The decoration is composed of cicadas around the neck and tactile masks on the shoulder of the vase—both archaic motifs taken from antique bronzes. On the shoulder of the vase, lions hold green jade bi disks in the Han dynasty style. The bi disk is one of the most ancient objects in China, dating to the Neolithic Liangzhu culture. The high quality of the enamels and gilding as well as the
Greek fret that separates the different horizontal sections of the decoration are typical of the Qianlong period. The ceremonial wine vessel in the shape of a bird bearing on its back a zun vase (top left), originated in bronze during the Western Zhou period (circa 1050–771 BCE). Originally the bird stood on two feet rather than as a chariot form on wheels. An illustrated catalogue from the Qing dynasty shows the same vase on wheels as a prototype for objects made in bronze and for cloisonné objects created under this last imperial dynasty.

During the Qing dynasty, and especially during the Qianlong reign, large commissions for cloisonné resulted in altar objects in the palaces or in the favorite temples whose patron was the imperial court. The shrine in the shape of a pagoda (center left) could have been commissioned for a temple or as a private altar. The Loyal General, one of the Seven Treasures together with the golden wheel, elephants, dark swiftd horses, the divine (or beautiful) pearls, able ministers of the Treasury, and jewels of women is depicted within Chinese objects. In this case, the characters of Blessings indicating peace in the universe. This is an example of a visual and homophonic pun also found in the catalogue from the Qing dynasty Collection (opposite, bottom right). A similar if not companion pair remain in the collection of the Forbidden City. Beginning in the Song dynasty, cranes were generally designed in pairs. One crane was positioned on each side of the throne as an auspicious motif symbolizing immortality. The exquisite colors of the flowers on the stands and the grey enamel color of the feathers evident in the tail Sunnylands cranes are typical of the Guangxu reign (1875–1908) when cloisonné work improved again in color technique.

Cloisonné furniture is quite rare. The pair of small tables dating to the Kangxi period is exceptional (above). The tables are constructed of enamel sections mounted on a wooden structure which provided support mitigating damage. The motif that covers the surface is typical of the Kangxi period and was influenced by a textile design.

The large panel is the second object dating from the Ming period in the Sunnylands Collection and is exceptional for its size and the quality of the enamel (right). Large panels could be ordered by the emperor’s son and the future Yongzheng emperor. One of these paintings shows similar boxes on a chess-board. The Sunnylands boxes are decorated on all sides with blue dragons over the sea and waves around rocks. They feature a red zhou character, meaning longevity, in archaic seal script. Their “harmonious cloud and wind” shape is a poetic name given to stylized hibiscus whose spiraling petals look like they are being churned by the wind. The style, motifs, and colors of the enamels are typical of the Kangxi period and similar to the tables and tripod incense burner in the collection. Walter Annenberg expressed better than anyone else one of the reasons for his interest in cloisonné objects when he discussed the large Ming era panel the Annenbergs acquired in London in 1973: "The vigorous movement of the colors, the bold forms reminded me so much of van Gogh.”

Note: The Chinese Pinyin transcription of Chinese words has been adopted for use in this publication.
Pair of tables
CHINA, QING DYNASTY (1644-1912), KANGXI PERIOD (1662-1722)
Cloisonné enamel, oak wood
Height: 20.0”; Width: 24.0”; Length: 24.0”
Annenberg purchase: New York, 1972
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.110 & 2009.1.111
Vase
CHINA, QING DYNASTY (1644-1912), QIANLONG PERIOD (1736-1796)
Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy, gilt bronze
Height: 13.75"; Width: 8.75"
Annenberg purchase; London, 1979
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.118
Ceremonial wine vessel
in the shape of a bird holding a vase, on wheels
CHINA, QING DYNASTY (1644-1912), QIANLONG MARK AND PERIOD (1736-1796)
Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy, gilt bronze
Height: 13.75”; Width: 5.75”; Length: 12.75”
Annenberg purchase: London, 1973
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.119
Vase with cover

CHINA, QING DYNASTY (1644-1912), QIANLONG PERIOD (1736-1796)
Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy, gilt bronze
Height: 15.5"; Width: 13.5"

Annenberg purchase, London, 1972
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.130
Panel

CHINA, MING DYNASTY (1368-1644), LATE 16TH CENTURY
Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy
Height: 15 5/8", Length: 23 25/32" (in frame)
Annenberg purchase, London, 1973
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.132
Pair of candle stands in the form of cranes

CHINA, MIDDLE TO LATE QING DYNASTY (1644–1912)
GUANGXU PERIOD (1875–1908)
Cloisonné enamel and champlevé enamel on copper alloy
Height: 55.0", Width: 15.0"

Annenberg purchase: London, 1967
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.188 & 2009.1.189
Shrine

CHINA, MIDDLE TO LATE QING DYNASTY (1644-1912)
Céladon enamel and champlevé enamel on copper alloy, gilt bronze
Height: 17.75"; Width: 8.625"

Annenberg purchase, London, 1971
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.198
Double incense burner with cover
CHINA, MING DYNASTY (1368-1644), WANLI PERIOD (1573-1620)
Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy, gilt bronze
Height: 6.5”; Diameter: 8.0”
Annenberg purchase: London, 1973
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.199
Pair of joss stick incense burners

CHINA, QING DYNASTY (1644–1912), QIANLONG MARK AND PERIOD (1736–1796)
Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy
Height: 1.375”; Diameter: 4.25”
Annenberg purchase: London, 1979
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.200 & 2009.1.201
Pair of boxes with covers
CHINA, QING DYNASTY (1644-1912), KANGXI PERIOD (1662-1722)
Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy
Height: 3.0"; Diameter: 4.5"
Annenberg purchase: London, 1974
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.222 & 2009.1.223
Pair of incense burners in the shape of cranes

CHINA, LATE QING DYNASTY (1644-1912) OR REPUBLIC OF CHINA (1912-1949)

Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy, gilt brass, gilt silver

Height: 12.5"; Width: 4.0"; Length: 10.0"

Annenberg purchase: New York, 1977
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.230 & 2009.1.231
Pair of cranes

CHINA, LATE QING DYNASTY (1644-1912)
Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy, gilt bronze
Height: 17.0"; Width: 4.25"; Length: 10.0"

Annenberg purchase: New York, 1977
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.234 & 2009.1.235
Pair of cups  
CHINA, EARLY TO MIDDLE QING DYNASTY (1644–1912)  
Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy  
Height: 1.75”, Diameter: 3.0”  
Annenberg purchase: London, 1979  
Incense burner with cover
CHINA, QING DYNASTY (1644-1912), KANGXI PERIOD (1662-1722)
Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy, gilt bronze
Height: 4.75” Width: 4.5”
Annenberg purchase: London, 1979
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.248
Pair of dishes
CHINA, MIDDLE TO LATE QING DYNASTY (1644-1912)
Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy
Width: 3.5"; Length: 6.0"
Annenberg purchase: London, 1976
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.236 & 2009.1.237
Pair of vases

**Object**
- **Country:** China
- **Dynasty:** Qing Dynasty (1644-1912)
- **Period:** Qianlong period (1736-1796)
- **Material:** Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy
- **Dimensions:** Height: 5.0”; Width: 2.25”
- **Provenance:** Annenberg purchase: London, 1979
- **Collection:** Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.258 & 2009.1.260

**Vase**
- **Object**
- **Country:** China
- **Dynasty:** Qing Dynasty (1644-1912)
- **Period:** Qianlong period (1736-1796)
- **Material:** Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy
- **Dimensions:** Height: 4.0”; Width: 1.75”
- **Provenance:** Annenberg purchase: London, 1979
- **Collection:** Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.249

**Vase**
- **Object**
- **Country:** China
- **Dynasty:** Qing Dynasty (1644-1912)
- **Period:** Qianlong period (1736-1796)
- **Material:** Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy
- **Dimensions:** Height: 3.25”; Width: 1.5”
- **Provenance:** Annenberg purchase: London, 1979
- **Collection:** Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.250
Pair of cranes

CHINA, MIDDLE TO LATE QING DYNASTY (1644-1912)
Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy
Height: 10.0"; Width: 2.5"; Length: 4.5"
Annenberg purchase: London, 1966
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.261 & 2009.1.262
**Box with cover**

**China, Qing Dynasty** (1644-1912), **Qianlong Period** (1736-1796)

Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy

Height: 1.438"; Width: 2.5"; Length: 2.5"

Annenberg purchase, London, 1979

Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.263
Box with hinged cover

CHINA, REPUBLIC OF CHINA (1912-1949)

Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy

Height: 3.188"; Width: 4.813"; Length: 8.0"

Annenberg purchase: unknown

Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.3961

IMPERIAL SPLENDOUR: CHINESE CLOISONNÉ AT SUNNYLANDS
Pair of candlesticks in the form of ducks
CHINA, QING DYNASTY (1644-1912)
Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy, gilt bronze
Height: 10.0”, Width: 5.6”
Annenberg purchase: London, 1973
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.267 & 2009.1.268
Snuff bottle with stopper

CHINA, QING DYNASTY (1644-1912), JIAQING PERIOD (1796-1820)
Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy, gilt metal
Height: 3.0”, Width: 2.438”
Annenberg purchase: London, 1979
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.3966
Duck
CHINA, LATE QING DYNASTY (1644-1912)
Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy
Height: 5.0”; Width: 2.563”; Length: 3.75”
Annenberg purchase: unknown
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.3965
Pair of vases mounted as lamps
CHINA, LATE QING DYNASTY (1644–1912)
Cloisonné enamel on copper alloy
Height: 20.0" Width: 9.0"
Anonymous purchase: unknown
Sunnylands Collection 2009.1.3967 & 2009.1.3968
Acknowledgements

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The exhibition was the result of a collaborative effort among many professionals. The curatorial committee at Sunnylands included Janice Lyle, Ph.D., Center Director; Anne Rowe, Director of Collections and Exhibitions; Kathy Carr, Tour Manager & Programs Coordinator; Michaeleen Gallagher, Director of Education and Environmental Programs; and Mary Perry, Deputy Director of Communications & Public Affairs. The collections and exhibitions department’s efforts included those of Mary Velez, Senior Art Handler; Irma Alonzo, Art Handler; Daniel Modlin, Photo Archivist; and Frank Lopez, Librarian and Archivist. Michael Comerford, who worked as a butler and then house manager to the family for more than forty years, contributed to the understanding of the acquisition and placement of the collection in his role as consulting historian; and Virginia L. Bower, Adjunct Associate Professor, The University of the Arts, Philadelphia, generously provided information derived from a 2009 evaluation of the collection.

Kamil Beski of Beski Projeks in Los Angeles and exhibition designer Karina White conceived, designed and installed the exhibition. Amy Green and Linnea Dawson of Silverlake Conservation in Los Angeles conserved the collection in preparation for installation. Mark Davidson of Mark Davidson Photography photographed the collection. This catalog and other collateral materials supporting the exhibition were designed by John Crummay and Robin Rout of JCRR Design.

The curatorial committee at Sunnylands extends special thanks to Chinese art historian Béatrice Quette, Head of Education for Students and Adults at Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris. Ms. Quette evaluated the collection, validated the authenticity of the individual objects, and refined date attributions. Dating cloisonné work is particularly challenging given that marks can be unreliable. Ms. Quette is at the forefront of the field of dating Chinese cloisonné. In evaluating the collection she analyzed provenance, marks, enamel color, design, form, symbols, materials, and technique. In addition, Ms. Quette’s knowledge about the original usage of the various types of objects in the Sunnylands Collection has facilitated our understanding of the cultural practices in China during the dates that the collection spans. This knowledge will enable museum educators at Sunnylands to enhance the Sunnylands visitor experience for generations to come and for this, we are greatly appreciative.