

A Dip of Blue: The Chinese Art of Kingfisher Feather Inlay

By Uta Weigelt

For over a thousand years the blue feathers of kingfisher birds have been used in China to adorn jewellery and daily accessories using an inlay technique known as *diancui* (dotting with kingfisher).

There are more than 90 species of kingfisher birds to be found around the world. Known for their spectacular hunting style and often bright and colourful plumage, they vary in size from the four-inch-long African dwarf kingfisher (*Ceyx lecontei*) to the 18-inch-long Australian laughing kookabura (*Dacelo novaeguineae*). Chinese craftsmen used the blue feathers of the common kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*), the white throated kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*) and the oriental dwarf kingfisher (*Ceyx erithaca*). Historical documents report that kingfisher birds and feathers were brought to China as import goods and tributes from what are today South China, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Sri Lanka. The Chinese preferred the feathers that came from Cambodia since they were of the highest quality and featured the most striking blue hues, from ultramarine to turquoise. The high value of kingfisher feathers derives from the very fact that they were hard to obtain since the tiny birds could not be bred and were hard



Drawing of a kingfisher, William Farquhar Collection of Natural History Drawings, early 18th century, courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore



Headdress with dragons, phoenixes, female figures and auspicious characters such as shou (long life), and also kingfisher feathers, augmented with gems and pearls, 18th century, courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum

to catch. The trade in highly prized kingfisher feathers was therefore a major contributor to the wealth of the Khmer empire and played a significant role in the construction of many temples near Siem Reap.

The use of kingfisher feathers as adornment is first mentioned in the *Zuo Zhuan*, an ancient Chinese narrative history that was compiled by an unknown author during the Warring States period (481–221 BCE). Here the Thane of Chu is described wearing a “halcyon cloak and leopard slippers” on a cold winter’s day. In the following centuries, items decorated with kingfisher feathers were frequently referred to in famous Chinese novels and poems and were depicted in Chinese paintings. In the Song dynasty (960–1279), extravagant objects and jewellery embellished with kingfisher feathers were so much sought after that many an emperor banned the import of feathers and prohibited the hunting of the birds. Some even gave the order to destroy all items adorned with kingfisher feathers. In the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911), objects made in the *diancui* technique were highly valued and played an important role in the fashion of the times. Elaborate headdresses, ear adornments and hairpins that were often augmented with gems, while pearls denoted feminine beauty, status and wealth. Until the 19th century only the empresses, concubines and wives of high-ranking officials were granted the privilege of wearing kingfisher jewellery. During the Qing dynasty, kingfisher inlay jewellery became popular also among the wealthy Han and Manchu populations. Actors playing female roles in Chinese opera favoured elaborate headdresses inlaid with kingfisher feathers. The art of kingfisher inlay died in the 1940s and was revived only in recent decades. Today only a few craftsmen can master this art. In order to protect the kingfisher population, once so reduced in numbers that it

was close to extinction, craftsmen now use coloured goose feathers or ribbons instead of kingfisher feathers.

The making of *diancui* requires a lot of patience and time, a good eye and steady hands. First, a base of gilt metal, paper mâché or wood is made. Partitions in the form of a thin lip or gallery define the shape of the ornament, which could be a phoenix, butterfly, bat, flower or the Chinese characters for long life (*shou*) or happiness (*fu*). The cleaned and trimmed kingfisher feathers are then carefully applied or dotted onto the base with a thin layer of fish or bone glue. Finally, these ornaments are assembled to form an often three-dimensional piece of jewellery.

The blue colours of the kingfisher feathers do not come from pigments in the feather itself, but from the inner honeycomb structure of the barbs that bend and reflect the visible light. Thus the feathers' colours do not fade, as



An example of a Qing Dynasty period brooch made of gilt, pearls and kingfisher feathers. From the Forbidden City collection of concubines' jewellery. Photo courtesy of Patricia Bjaaland Welch

the beautiful headdress dating to the 18th century in the ACM collection shows.

Only a few early examples of kingfisher inlay have survived because the feathers are favoured by mites and other insects. One of the most stunning archaeological finds with kingfisher embellishments was unearthed in 1956 in the Dingling mausoleum near Beijing, the last resting place of the Wanli emperor (reigned 1573–1620) and his two empresses. Among over 3,000 burial goods, there were four phoenix crowns (*fengguan*) found in the tomb. Known since the Tang dynasty (618–907), phoenix crowns were worn by Ming noblewomen on special occasions. The most spectacular one of the four Dingling crowns belonged to Empress Xiaoduan (1572-1620). Featuring golden dragons roaming above clouds and phoenixes flying among flowers and leaves, it is beautifully adorned with kingfisher inlay, 57 rubies, 58 sapphires and 5,449 pearls.

The Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) possesses its very own two phoenix crowns with kingfisher feather inlay. They are not as stunning as Empress Xiaoduan's famous headdress and were not worn by an actual royal, but by an 'empress for a day', a Peranakan bride. One of them, a wedding crown from Penang dating to the late 19th/early 20th century was exhibited in the Peranakan Museum until its temporary closure and is featured on page 7 in the July/August 2014 issue of *PASSAGE* magazine.

Not only jewellery was adorned with kingfisher feathers but also clothes, fans, screen panels, lanterns and other daily utensils. Rare examples are a beautifully crafted silver snuff bottle of the late Qing, which is held in the British Museum, and two golden wine cups inlaid with kingfisher feathers, from the Wallace Collection. The cups were made for the Qianlong emperor (reigned 1736–1795).

Currently, only the two female Chinese nodding head dolls in the Trade Gallery of ACM wear jewellery with kingfisher inlay. You might mistake the adornments as enamel, but when you look closely you will see the beauty of the kingfisher. You might then want to remember the lines in the *Ballad of the Beautiful Ladies* written by the famous poet Du Fu (712–770), "On their heads, what do they wear? Kingfisher glinting from hairpins that dangle by side lock borders."



Top image, a pottery mannequin of a Chinese lady, courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum. Bottom image, a close-up of her head showing the kingfisher feather earring, collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, photo by the author

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