

# Elegant Artifacts of the Ding Kiln

## -- Analysis on the Cultural and Art Standards of Fine Artifacts of the Ding Kiln of the North Song Dynasty

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What kind of qualities and forms should a fine artifact have? How good the craftsmanship should be to meet the cultural and art standards? The Ding Kiln of the Song Dynasty provides me sufficient answers to the questions on fine artifact standards. Its matching the certain standards catches our attention and leads us into conclusions. Collectors, especially those who collect artifacts of the Ding Kiln of the Song Dynasty, often ask questions on standards of identifying fine artifacts. In this article, I try to analyze the cultural and art standards according to my nearly thirty years of experience.

### 1. Quality standards of fine artifacts

Fine artifacts should be qualified comprehensively like in the beauty contest in TV shows, several aspects like the body shape, elegant connotation, presentations should be qualified. The beauty should be comprehensive. Fine artifacts and beauties follow the same rule and are of the same connotation. The difference lies in that one describes objects and the other human. Quality standards mean that the porcelain owns congenital factors as beauty is inborn for human, without which, other standards cannot stand. Besides these, workmanship and other standards are also of great importance.

#### 1.1 Material and purification

The white porcelain, the main material used in the Ding Kiln, is impossible to hide any stains on the artifact body. The whiter it is, the clearer stains show. The method of preparing raw material used by the Ding Kiln of the Song Dynasty is original but effective. That is precipitating method, which means to wash and filter the mud layer by layer in the precipitating pool to sort out the contented iron and mica with the “sinking” and “floating” technique. The mud becomes purer step by step. At last, the highly-purified mud comes out and is stored for later usage. That is the method for preparing mud material, and the material determination depends on whether the raw material quality meets the requirement, whether it is the first-class. If not, even the most careful elutriation and filtration is not able to change the class of the contents of the mud.

According to the analysis, iron and mica are two kinds of impurities usually seen on the Ding artifacts of the Song Dynasty, which can be gotten rid of easily via different methods since the comparatively heavier iron sinks and the lighter mica floats in the precipitating process. It is necessary to keep a high purification of raw materials by prohibition of manufacture and limitation of non-staff when producing. In this case, the Song craftsmen must have followed the rules strictly, or no fine artifacts would have been left for today. The material quality is the basic criteria to make fine artifacts of the Ding Kiln. The material should be the first-class raw material collected in the finest material yard with highly pure quality of the best white and only after the purifying process can it finally be the ideal material for the Ding Kiln. For the rest, those in gray or in white but with some stains is less qualified or disqualified.

## 1.2 Proportion of clay and stone

The subject about the proportion of clay and stone mentioned here refers to the clay and stone proportion in raw materials, which belongs to raw material engineering but is mentioned here for our better judgment and understanding towards fine artifacts' quality criteria. In the utilized raw material list, the main material used is clay and stone. No matter how many kinds of raw materials, there is no exceptions other than clay and stone these two categories. A higher proportion of clay makes the mud of larger cohesion force and with stronger calving ability; a higher proportion of stone makes it loose and a skeleton to support the artifact body under high temperature. The two different contents share the same white level and the color variance is little if it does exist. The white level would be lower if a material with the containing clay and stone of different white levels.

The proportion of clay and stone makes the porcelain identifiable after firing. For an authentic white porcelain of the Song Dynasty, the light weight can be felt when being hold on hand. The white porcelain artifacts of the Ding Kiln are generally much lighter than those with the same thickness made in other kilns . This indicates that a large proportion of clay in the material is the key point of identifying the Ding Kiln of the Song Dynasty by judging from the weight. If an artifact is hold on hand and felt almost as heavy as those of the other kilns, the proportion of stone it contents is larger. This kind of material was not used due to the limitation of preparation for raw materials in the Song Dynasty, thus the clay material was primarily used. According to the textual research on refractoriness of firing, the refractory point of clay material is lower than that of stone material. No wonder the refractoriness of the ancient Ding Kiln is 30°C to 40°C lower than that of the newly-built Ding Kiln nowadays.

## 1.3 Workmanship

An excellent workmanship is emphasized to define a fine artifact of the Ding Kiln. A good workmanship makes the artifact full of spirit and elegant; it creates a clear texture and a challenging beauty. It brings people delight and enthusiasm to hold on hand. This compulsive excitement develops from the understanding of the charm of the Ding Kiln and from the admiration of the excellent craftsmanship. We can judge the craftsmanship by two aspects: the first is to see whether the design fits the shaping rule. From ancient time till now, porcelain artifact making follows a proper rule, from the rim to the body then to the bottom, no matter for a vase or a bowl. Seen from the section, beginning with the rim, the thickness gradually changes from thinness to thickness then back to thinness at the bottom, which presents us a proper thickness changing return -- the thick part is to support the weight from the top; the top is thin and light to reduce the pressure towards the body; the everted rim avoids distortion. The Ding Kiln of the Song Dynasty is of no exception to follow this rule, which means people at that time have known this scientific principle(see Picture 1). A regarded fine artifact should be discounted if not following this rule, at least it may not be made by a master but by an apprentice, or it may be made by a master, but cannot be a masterpiece.

The second is to see the inner and outer texture of the artifact. Whether the natural texture made by throwing can be seen clearly? Is the texture effect worn out? The texture should be well-organized and clear if the artifact is good. For example, the slight finger trail under the glaze layer, the carving line on the outer surface and the glaze forming should be naturally retained and be proper in frequency and area. It is pleasant to see sparse lines on the outer surface but unpleasant that too much glaze is formed in the floral decoration area. The slight hand trace should only be seen at the bottom and on the rim where the glaze flows to. Close attention should be paid on the above craftsmanship rules.

## 2. Art standards of fine artifacts

The charming art that the Ding Kiln displays makes people have a sudden enlightenment. Multiple aspects should be considered to judge a fine porcelain artifact of the Ding Kiln as only one advantage is not sufficient enough. After analyzing a great amount of artifices of the Ding Kiln of the Song Dynasty, in my opinion, the art standards should be the three aspects bellow:

## 2.1 Perfect form

First of all, to judge whether a porcelain is good, we should see its form. The form should meet the art standards, and a proper partial comparison makes the form look good, no matter it is in what category, utensil, vase or figure art-ware. We may think it would be more perfect if it meets the Golden Proportion, but surely there is no Golden Proportion or art standards for reference in the manufacturing of the Ding Kiln of the Song Dynasty. But human have already known the aesthetics of form, especially the porcelain shape, and also have deduced to other different areas. The Song Dynasty is a glorious period in Chinese porcelain history and people's understanding and utilization of aesthetics has reached a high proficiency and a profound level, which can be told by a large sum of historical treasures.

Besides the whole body shape, a perfect form should also be focused on the effects of three parts -- the rim, the bottom and the body. The rim should not be broken or with too much glaze, the bottom not broken or damaged, the line of the body smooth and the lower part near the bottom not swell or drop. Every part needs to be perfect. Problems are most frequently found in the above three parts when manufactured in the Ding Kiln in the Song Dynasty and even today, thus they are called the three factors of form appreciation of fine artifacts.

## 2.2 Fine decoration

Fine decoration mainly refers to the decorative effect. Lots of decoration methods are used by the Ding Kiln of the Song Dynasty, among which, main methods are carving and printing and others are engraving[1], decal[2], embossing, etc. Each expresses different aesthetic concept and decorative effect. But by summary and analysis of each decoration method, it is found that even a same decoration method can also make very different art effect, and can show the craftsmanship is good or bad. Take the carving of the Ding Kiln as an example. An excellent carving artist skillfully carves smooth lines on the ware creating vivid flowers and leaves patterns. No matter curves or straight lines, he can express them as he likes. The ware he creates is a fine work of art.

Sometimes an excellent carving artist makes bad artifacts, for every one has his emotions. When he is irritated or upset, his works would be lack of spirit and vividness. So the artist usually work when he is in a good mood. The calligrapher and the painter spread the paper to write and paint "when the weather is good and friends gather together" [3] , and the carving artist also does the same.

It is unavoidable that some artifacts were made by ordinary carvers in the Ding Kiln of the Song Dynasty. The disadvantages of their works are improperness of the decorative layout, improper handling of the density of patterns, miscontrol of line carving like a kid learning to walk, and also bad organizing of patterns. Even if they have any achievement, their works are cautious and reserved. I think these works should not be called fine artifacts.

## 2.3 Firing temperature

Firing is the key point for porcelain producing. Mastering the firing temperature is absolutely essential in the kiln firing process. I sigh every time I go to the ancient Ding Kiln site, and I feel sad when pick up piles and piles of porcelain fragment and waste caused by kiln firing. Our ancestors made too much effort on mastering the firing temperature.

In contemporary time, the Ding Kiln firing process is modernized, and is well controlled by instruments. Coal is replaced by coal gas and liquefied gas. The noises of pulling coal by roaring cars and paving stoves and spreading coal are vanished by utilizing the gentle and quiet high-

temperature instruments. Firing temperature can be easily controlled by the firing workers now. Thus the lost and the frustration caused by the poor control of the firing temperature has gone and never return.

The significance of firing temperature is still clearly shown in the relics of the Ding Kiln of the Song Dynasty. When an artifact is fired at perfect temperature, its surface is smooth and clear as crystal, the glaze white with a bit yellow, and patterns clear and vivid. It can be called a fine artifact. If an artifact is fired at a lower temperature or under firing temperature, the glaze layer would look dry and patterns are just lines without spirit, and the surface is dry and rough if slightly touched. Some think that their porcelain are of very high white level, so they should be fine artifacts. But if the firing temperature cannot be reached, the artifact is not good though of high white level. Thus, firing temperature is essential to identified a fine artifact of the Ding Kiln.

### **3. Cultural standards of fine artifacts**

Cultural standards of fine artifacts are abstract because the culture is a big concept. All products more or less have their cultural function, without which they cannot exist or develop. Some products represent the culture while others reflect it. Developing on a great national culture, the porcelain of the Ding Kiln is an integration of science, art and culture. Specifically speaking, it displays through science and art an epitomized culture built on a great natural culture base.

#### **3.1 Spiritual and jade-like**

The beauty of the Ding Kiln artifact can be tasted. It is a bit like the poetry, from which one gains insight by from reading the words to reading between the lines. A wonderful verse brings readers dreamy imagination by presenting a full picture but not plain description. The porcelain of the Ding Kiln also brings people the same feeling through the special glaze of the Ding Kiln. For the first sight, the artifact is in milky white with a jade-like surface. When slowly tasting the thin and crystal glaze, one may suddenly feel like having a peaceful and pure dream, in which he is traveling through mountains and rivers, wandering among willows and flowers. The fairyland in the literature seems being displayed in the artifact of the Ding Kiln. Illusions appear when one is appreciating the spiritual beauty of the artifact of the Ding Kiln. I suddenly realize that the glaze of the Ding Kiln is transparent, especially when under high temperature. It is clear as water and ice and flows smoothly. How beautiful it is.

The spiritual beauty of the Ding Kiln is from the invisibility of the transparent glaze and the structural beauty is from the visibility of the nontransparent body. Patterns decorate the form and display the connotation. The nontransparent clay and the transparent glaze each creates a specific effect for the other. The invisible glaze forming upon the visible patterns is like a bright light flooding on the surface. The two converse sides reflects one another to create a spiritual feeling as “The elegant spring wind tolerants everything; the pure water-like article would not taint with dirt.” The white porcelain of the Ding Kiln rose to content such a cultural connotation, which is an annotation of the spiritual beauty of the Ding Kiln.

#### **3.2 Reposed and noble**

Repose is about the taste. A cultivated man is gentle while a reposed artifact is elegant. Here may I use the word “repose” which is usually for human being, to describe an artifact. The Ding Kiln is reposed in that first of all, it produces white porcelain. The primary connotation of white is noble and clear, thus it brings people elegant feeling. More than 2,000 years ago, Confucius admired white as the most brilliant color. Maybe because of Confucius’s preference that strengthen and lengthen the connotation of white, people began to respect elegance and become more and more admired of it.

White gives an artifact the connotation of peaceful and noble as a verse describes “a lotus rooted in the dirty mud yet is clean” and as a great poet Qu Yuan composed, “all are drunk but only me is sobered”. In the dazzling world, only the white lotus is so clear and holy. When Emperor Huaiwang of Chu was living a befuddled life with so many intellectuals flattering him, only Qu Yuan composed to awaken people. This is also called noble.

In the market economy today, so many mercenary merchandises disobey business ethics and banish memory of the doctrine of Taozhugong, the commercial patron of Chinese. They make exorbitant profit by treating or scheming against each other. If compared to human, the white porcelain of the Ding Kiln which has a noble form and a pure character, would always represent the goodness and would never treat; it would face the nature and the life with grace and repose. I think the character of the Ding Kiln agrees with a man's character. Though a man is mortal, his fine artifact is not. Repose and nobleness which our ancestors lived with is highly praised all the time. Thus we always try to infuse them into artifacts around. This cultural transfer function is the representation of people's understanding towards culture.

### 3.3 Vigorous and elegant

Spirit and noble mentioned above belongs to the beauty of the body and glaze of the Ding Kiln and represents the characters of the artifact through its form and its connotation, and the spirit of the porcelain is agreed with human characters. In this section, vigorousness and elegance is introduced and analyzed as the other cultural and art standard of the Ding Kiln of the Song Dynasty, which is a standard found upon the forming style of artifacts of the Ding Kiln. Forming style and the body and glaze are two different aspects in one unitary culture. Because of the partial display, it effectively expresses and presents the entire cultural background of the Ding Kiln. Thus vigorousness and elegance has already become a principle of forming style of the Ding Kiln of the Song Dynasty.

The vigorousness and elegance of the Ding Kiln artifacts roots in the north where it founds. And the masculine is the basic feature to show its connotation. From the artifact relics we can tell that the porcelain style is massive and diverse before the Tang Dynasty, yet tiresomely redundant after the Yuan Dynasty, and artistically accomplished only during the Song Dynasty period. In conclusion, the artifact style is historically determined for arts and crafts' development relies on the surrounding culture. Every artistic handicraft represents the nature and the cultural phenomenon of that period.

It is masculine and elegance that represent the environment and regional features of the northern nationalities. The raw material used by the Ding Kiln is different from those used by the Southern kilns. The former is dry and powerful while the latter is wet and mild. The difference between the dryness and the wetness and between the powerfulness and the mildness makes a clear division on characteristics. Thus people in the Northern and the Southern areas has developed different porcelain characteristics when they are making full use of their raw materials.

The unchangeable geographic characteristics enables folks in the Northern and the Southern areas to live, to express their thoughts unrestrainedly with the eternal theme and to make crafts in some certain styles. Thanks to the unique vigorousness and elegance and the mind of Yan and Zhao folks, miracles are created on artifacts of the Ding Kiln. The white porcelain is as clear and reposed as water and ice, expressing the feeling of “the blowing wind and the freezing river water”. Thus a vigorous and elegant culture of the northern nationality is established. Artifacts of the Ding Kiln of all categories follow the same rule.

The Ding Kiln of the Song Dynasty is a historical product and the gathering of human wisdom. It lies as an incomparable famous kiln and creates an extraordinary grace and it speaks silently of a history of hardships. The success it achieves in every history process should be undoubtedly remembered and treasured for when the limited economy vanishes, the eternal culture would be more

shining and valuable.

## Notes

[1]White Porcelain of the Ding Kiln. Tokyo: The Nezu Museum, 1983:8.

[2]Chinese Ceramic Editorial Board. The Chinese Porcelain • the Ding Kiln. Shanghai:Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1983:42.

[3]Wang Xizhi. Lantingxu (At the Pavilion).

Picture 1

The Section of Porcelain Form of the Ding Kiln (collected by cultural relics preservation office of the ancient Ding Kiln site of Quyang County)

Picture 2

White Porcelain Peony-patterned Vase (with carving and incised floral design)

Picture 3

Decal Figure Stove ( the early North Song Dynasty, height 4.9cm, caliber 10.8 cm, collected by Ding County Museum of Hebei Province)

