

CHINESE WHITES

by Alan Thornton

Many paperweight collectors have one or two Chinese White paperweights in their collection - or have at least picked one up and examined it at a glass fair, or in an antiques shop! But how many people stop to think when they were made, or how they were made, or where they were made? Or what the images might represent?



Boats, sea, the sun, mountains - just a landscape, or does it mean more?

We have collected Chinese Whites for nearly 10 years, and now have over forty of them, but it was not until recently that I started to ask some of these questions, and discovered how difficult it was to find any answers. A few books mention Chinese Whites - but they say little about them.

One question that came to mind was 'Are these original designs, or copies' - the Chinese being well known for copies in the paperweight world. The more I looked into it, the more convinced I was that these were original Chinese 'folk art'.



A typical Chinese White design with flowers and a bird (here, a swallow)

The idea of using a white ground in a paperweight is not new, of course. Clichy, for instance, used 'sodden snow' grounds as backgrounds for their millefiori canes around 1850. And 'painting' a design onto a white base layer was also tried around that time, by Baccarat in France, and by other makers in Bohemia.



A Bohemian paperweight, with flowers painted in enamel colours on a white ground

However, the Chinese have a long history of painting images on white grounds -

with their porcelain. It is a simple step to move from painting a piece of pottery before glazing, to painting a white glass disk before it is encased in clear glass. The great majority of the Chinese Whites

birds and landscapes. Somewhat rarer are individual creatures such as pandas, fish, or crickets, and even less common are weights with a 'bus', a person, or even a poem!



A Chinese bowl from the 18th Century, with flowers painted on a white ground



A Chinese White with a pair of carp, indicating 'Wealth'.

that one finds are of 'standard' size, around 3 inches in diameter. But there are a few magnums (4 inches or more) and miniatures (around 2 inches) to be found.



A Magnum and a Miniature, together with a Standard sized paperweight. A paperweight with



A paperweight with a poem. The translation is:

*"The moon shines through the bamboos;
The fresh spring water flows over the stones."*

The designs on Chinese whites are very varied, but commonly include flowers,

The images on the paperweights are not just 'pretty' or 'interesting' scenes. Although they were made for export - mainly to the USA - the designs are rooted in the pictographic culture of the artists, and represent well known (to the Chinese artists!) groupings of elements. These appear on pottery, scrolls, and other decorative work, and pre-date paperweights.

Standard pairings include:



Hérons or cranes and pine indicate 'Long life'.. Here they appear on an ashtray.



Swallows and Apricot blossom indicate 'Good fortune'.



A butterfly and peonies, indicating 'conjugal fidelity'.

What is not certain is when the first Chinese Whites were made - or even the last. From my studies I believe that the earliest examples are probably the 'Clipper Ship' paperweights.



The Clipper Ship design.

This design is not common, but the few examples I have heard of have all originated in the USA. The ship is a good representation of a 19th C clipper rigged ship, many of which sailed the Pacific, trading between ports such as Shanghai and San Francisco. The weights are painted in black (no

colours), the glass is usually of poor quality with dirt and bubbles, and there is no noticeable dome: they have a flat top. I think it likely that these were made towards the end of the 19th C as mementoes for the sailors who manned the last of the clippers.

Chinese Whites are found in the USA and in Europe, and were probably exported to both regions. A few are scratch signed 'China' on the base, or carry a 'Made in China' label - probably as a result of the American demand in 1930 that imported goods be labelled with their country of origin. The majority of the Chinese Whites probably date to the 1920 -1940 period.

That said, there are a few examples that probably date to the late 1940s. The clue to this is another 'Clipper' design: oddly, this refers not to a ship but to the 'bus' that appears in some paperweights.

The design of the bus is very distinctive,



A 'Flexible Clipper' bus with a background of limestone karst hills, typical of certain regions of South West China.

with the sloping front, rounded rear, and roof ventilators. On some example of the paperweight one can even count the number of windows, and match all these features exactly to a specific design of long distance coach called a 'Clipper' made in the USA by the 'Flexible Coach Company'. The particular model was made from 1944 onwards, and used by various American companies including Trailways. A restored Trailways version is shown below: it is too close to the design in the paperweights to be accidental.



So what was a 1944 American coach doing in that particular area of South West China - and why did it end up as a design on a paperweight? The US Army was present in considerable numbers in South West China in 1946-47, helping the Chinese to handle large numbers of Japanese prisoners of war. They probably commandeered a range of vehicles from within the US, including some coaches from major transport companies such as Trailways.

Local glass and pottery factories, who had lost their export market during the war, probably took the opportunity to make some mementoes for the US troops to take home with them!

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