

Objects of Contemplation

Natural sculptures from the Qing dynasty

As to rocks, Lingbi rocks are the best, with Ying rocks coming second. But these two varieties are extremely expensive, and it is rather hard to buy them. Large ones are particularly hard to obtain, and those which attain a height of several feet are indeed in the category of rarities. Small ones can be placed on a table, those with a surface like lacquer and a sound like jade being the finest. Horizontal stones with a substance the colour of wax, with close and vigorous peaks are best; the common sayings that 'Lingbi rocks have no peaks' and 'Ying rocks have no slopes' is, going by what I have seen, not entirely the case. Other rocks have large and coarse markings, and they totally lack involutions, protuberances, summits and loftiness. Recently there have been large lumps of cinnabar, azurite or malachite used for mountain-shaped brushrests or as rocks in dishes, which is extremely vulgar.

On the Connoisseurship of Rocks

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The account above, published in an early-seventeenth-century Chinese guidebook on how to live an elegant life through 'things', contains an uncomfortable paradox. It deals with those objects of connoisseurship which are perhaps closest to 'nature', in the form of small unworked pieces of valued mineral, accessible to the eye and the hand and the ear of the male member of the elite who is the imagined audience of the text. And yet it starts by talking about expense, and about the novelty of the marketplace. It draws attention right away to the troubling fact that 'elegance' is only accessible through engagement with the stigmatised world of commerce. And it draws attention to another paradox, that there are 'new' types of stone, and that they are part of the mobile world of fashion. So we are faced with the fact that the rock as an object of connoisseurship in China is never a found object, always a purchased one, and has been a commodity since its inception. We have no evidence that in the past the Chinese lovers of stones picked them up as today we might pick up pebbles on the beach, or as artists in the twentieth century (with Henry Moore himself as a particularly prominent example) were drawn to *objets trouvés*.

This is a paradox we continue to feel acutely today. The internet now contains over five million references to 'scholar's rocks', a term which has no exact equivalent in the Chinese language prior to recent times and was probably not coined in English until the 1980s. The name came into use at the point that these rocks first entered the art market outside of China itself, a market which was emerging from the long period during which Maoist China strictly limited the export of 'cultural relics' - a category in which rocks have an interestingly borderline status. The name *scholar's rock* could arguably be said to be there to draw attention away from the crude facts of commerce (a high proportion of the websites found show rocks for sale), and to direct the attention towards the fantasy of the disinterested Chinese *litteratus*, a lover of nature and poetry and art, a person of taste, inhabiting a sphere of calm and detachment. You too can be like him.

In truth, all we can know about the owners of most rocks like the ones in this exhibition is that their Chinese owners in the past (and how far back into the past individual pieces go is a highly debatable point) were richer than the vast majority of

the population. Their level of scholarship is indeterminable, and where they were placed by their peers on the spectrum of 'elegance' or 'vulgarity' is equally unknowable. But it is precisely this indeterminacy which makes the objects themselves such potent vessels of modern fantasy and imagination. Like pictures in the fire, we will look into them and see what we want to.

Nineteenth-century British commentators on the garden art of the Chinese saw such distinctive features as the 'artificial mountains' of perforated rocks, and the manipulation of plant matter (particularly in the dwarfing of trees), as signs of Chinese artificiality, as remoteness from and perverse hostility to 'nature'. The Chinese were not 'primitive', they failed by being *too* civilised. By the mid-twentieth century, these very same horticultural features were commonly spoken of as signs of a holistic closeness to that same 'nature', which an industrialised West could learn and refresh itself. The single rock, such as we have here, is largely absent from that writing, and comes into the consciousness of western audiences only much more recently, at a time when we should have learned to be more wary of such total understandings of the complexities of culture across China's long and complex cultural history. Collected by foreign institutions and individuals only from the 1980s, rocks may well be the 'last' kind of Chinese cultural object to come into consciousness as part of 'Chinese art'. Apart from the fact that you buy them from art dealers and not garden centres, what makes them cultural objects (and not just 'rocks' or even worse 'stones' - the Chinese language does not differentiate) is their wooden stands, so clearly worked by human hand. The rocks themselves may also be worked with tools - in fact it has been argued convincingly that most are - but they occlude that fact instead of drawing attention to it. In premodern China, other sorts of artefact like porcelain and bronzes were also displayed on wooden stands, but western museums mostly junked theirs in the twentieth century, as not being part of 'the object'. To throw the stand of a rock away is unthinkable now. It is like the frame, the *parergon* to which Jacques Derrida drew attention in writing *The Truth in Painting*, the supplement 'outside the work' which by its secondary nature completes 'the work itself'. Perhaps rocks as objects of collection and display, of commercial transaction and aesthetic contemplation, themselves function as a supplement for our view of Chinese culture as a whole, setting limits and boundaries. Our neglect of them in the past is what guarantees their authenticity as markets of that difference we seek, beyond 'the West', beyond culture itself.

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