

**Detail of  
Rouleau Vase**

#1931.160, PORCELAIN  
HEIGHT 75 CM (29.5 IN.)  
QING DYNASTY, KANGXI  
REIGN, CA. 1700-1722



# MARTIAL THEMES ON KANGXI PORCELAINS IN THE TAFT MUSEUM

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When the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* began publication in 1992, I was contacted by David T. Johnson, Assistant Director and Chief Curator at the Taft Museum. He wanted to inform me of their noted Chinese ceramics collection, which he felt had special significance for Qing dynasty (1644-1911) martial traditions. Johnson's verbal descriptions presented vibrant images of these works of art and their scenes of generals and warriors. Mental images remained in my mind, as did Johnson's insightful analysis of their historic importance. Nearly five years later, I had the opportunity to visit the museum and see the collection first-hand.

In March of this year, the seventy-third annual meeting of the Central States Anthropological Society was held in Covington, Kentucky. Papers were presented on various topics, including a symposium on martial arts that was highlighted with demonstrations. Dr. Michael Davis, Associate Editor for our journal, headed the panel in which I participated. The symposium's atmosphere added to my eager desire to see the Taft collection.

The Taft Museum is located in downtown Cincinnati on the north shore of the Ohio River. The strong economic foundation of the city is a direct result of its waterway location, which remains evident today in the bustling river traffic. Approaching Cincinnati via Covington's historic Mainstrasse Village, one is overwhelmed by the sight of riverboat cruises, the Riverfront Coliseum, and an aesthetic panorama of bridges and city landscape. Highways cut through a relatively quiet city center where many corporate headquarters are based. Among the clean crisp lines of modern office buildings sits the Taft Museum. It appears dwarfed in size by nearby structures. However, when one first sees this Federal-period building, one knows that an architectural gem survives in this prime location for good reason. Built in 1820 as a residence for the successful merchant/banker Martin Baum, the building and its collection were bequeathed to the people of Cincinnati by the last private owners of the villa, Anna Sinton and Charles Phelps Taft.

*All illustrations courtesy  
of the Taft Museum.*

*Photography by Tony Walsh,  
Cincinnati, OH.*

Although enticed to wander into galleries on my own, I decided to keep my appointment with David Johnson. As Assistant Director and Chief Curator, his familiarity and knowledge with each piece in the Chinese collection would add to my appreciation of the making and meaning embodied in each art work. After we met in his office, Mr. Johnson graciously escorted me through the galleries. We viewed all of the Chinese collection together, discussing each item in detail.

### THE CHINESE COLLECTION

There are approximately two hundred works of art comprising the Chinese collection. Among these are porcelain objects made for use on scholars' desks (in particular, items used for calligraphy, e.g., water coupe, brush washer, seal ink cases), vases, pots, statuary (gods, goddesses, children, foreigners, animals and mythical figures), ewers, plates, jars, cups, and teapots. Representing the comforts of the Chinese upper-class, there is even a ceramic pillow.

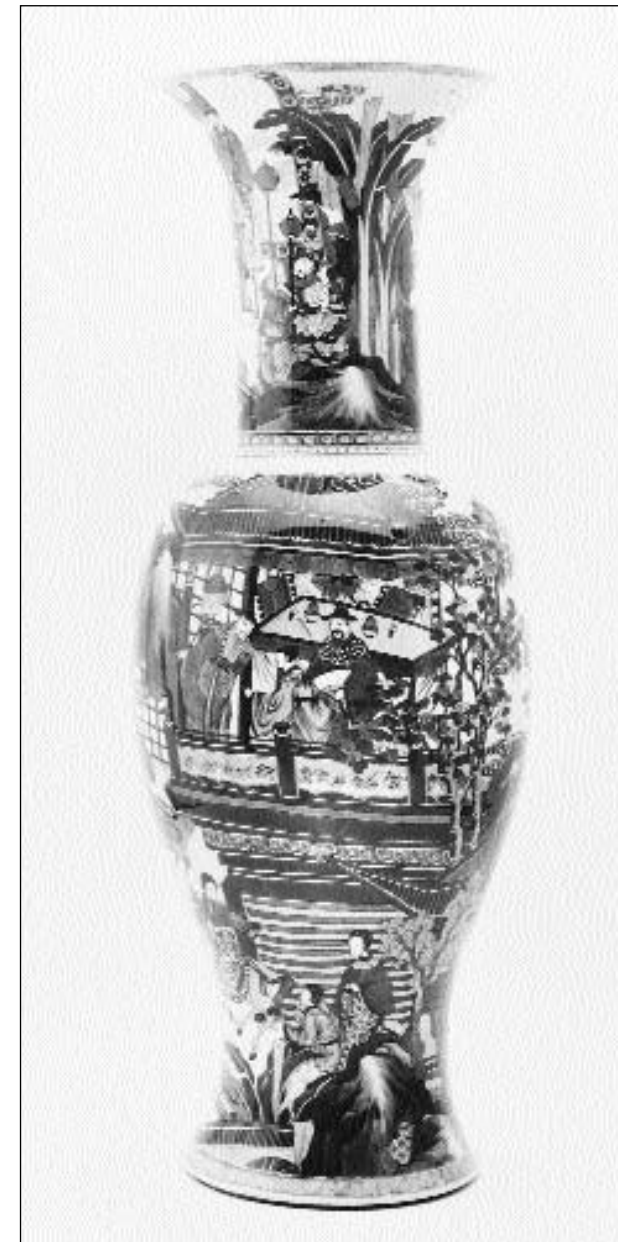
The earliest pieces are a couple of figurines from the Tang dynasty (618-906), but most pieces are polychromes, blue-and-white, and monochromes from the Qing dynastic period. Over half are dated from the Kangxi emperor's reign (1662-1722). Of these, the major portion are decorated with overglaze enamels in colors known as *famille verte* (green predominating), *famille jaune* (yellow predominating), and *famille noire* (black predominating). Although not extensive, the Taft peach-bloom glaze collection is one of the finest in the world. Another object of particular historical importance is a porcelain ewer in the form of a phoenix. It is one of the earliest figural pieces to be recorded in European inventories, identical to one that appears in the Saxon royal inventory which dates before 1640. There are also some decorative art examples of enamel, jade, amber, and rock crystal.

All objects within the Taft Museum are arranged to retain the atmosphere of a private residence, tastefully displayed within the various rooms of Federal design. The overall effect is that of one visiting, not a museum, but a home—albeit a home of exceptionally rich, exquisite taste. Items of the Chinese collection can be found in most of the rooms, with one particular room dedicated solely to porcelains. Located off the Dining Room is the "China Closet," which contains a spectrum of the porcelain collection in an educational display arranged according to shape, glaze, and decoration. The room itself follows a "show-piece" tradition set in great palaces and stately homes of Great Britain, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands.

### ARTIFACTS ILLUSTRATING MARTIAL THEMES

After I viewed all the works in the Chinese collection, seven pieces stood out as having special significance for a martial arts historian: five vases, a statue and a lantern. The following photographs show these items. Accession numbers and descriptions are also provided for reference.

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### Baluster Vase

#1931.138  
 BLUE-AND-WHITE PORCELAIN  
 HEIGHT 77.5 CM (30.5 IN.)  
 QING DYNASTY  
 KANGXI REIGN, CA. 1700



DESCRIPTION: This massive blue-and-white baluster vase most likely represents a story from *The Generals of the Yang Family (Yang Jia Jiang)*, written by Yong Damu during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). The story takes place during the Chinese Northern Song dynasty (960-1127), when many men died fighting against Khitan invaders from Manchuria. Because of the resulting shortage of male warriors, women trained for combat. Here, Yang family women are shown in equestrian training while scholar-officials observe from behind a second-floor trellis screen.

**Guandi,  
God of War**

#1931.33  
PORCELAIN AND HAIR  
HEIGHT 26.6 CM (10.5 IN.)  
QING DYNASTY  
KANGXI REIGN, CA. 1700

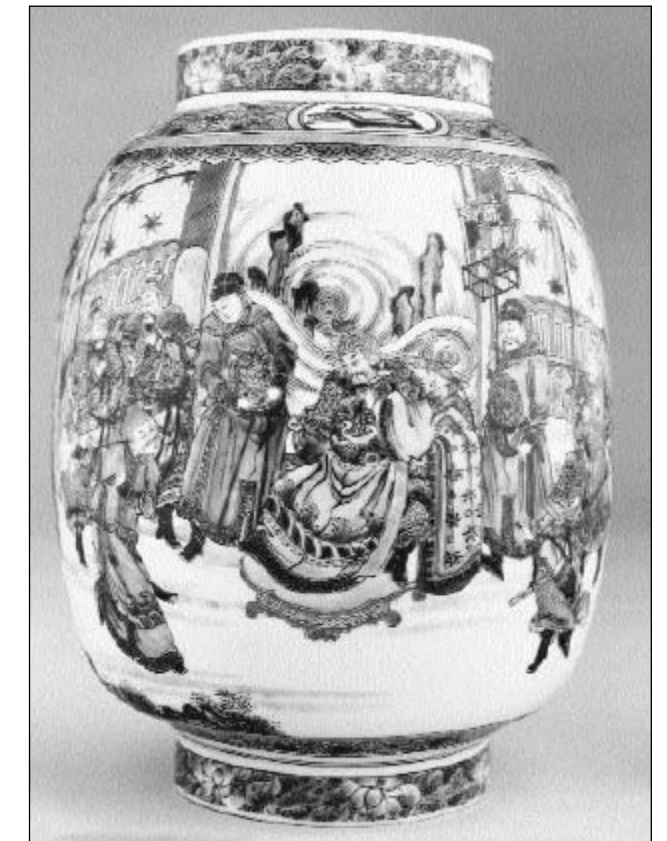


DESCRIPTION: The legend of Guandi is derived from actual events surrounding Guan Yu, a general who became known for his heroic attempts to reunite the country around A.D. 200. His military exploits were greatly embellished, elevating him from martial arts superhero to Military Emperor, and eventually to God of War. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguozhi Yanyi)*, a fourteenth-century epic novel, brings his heroic deeds to life in colorful detail. In this *famille verte* figurine, Guandi is seated wearing a belted dragon robe over relief-molded, studded breastplate and leg armor. It exhibits the great dexterity of the artisan in modeling and painting skills in decoration.



**Lantern**

#1931.86  
PORCELAIN  
HEIGHT 22.8 CM (9 IN.)  
QING DYNASTY  
KANGXI REIGN, CA. 1700



DESCRIPTION: This *famille verte* lantern is made to "eggshell" thinness with enameled colors and gilt to illustrate an audience scene in which an archer is bowing to a seated military commander. The commander is a fourth-grade military official, indicated by the crane in a mandarin square on his robe. Around them are six attendants carrying banners decorated with trigrams. This scene may be based on the story of military commander Liu Bei, as described in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

**Rouleau Vase**

#1931.159  
 PORCELAIN  
 HEIGHT 45.7 CM (18 IN.)  
 QING DYNASTY  
 KANGXI REIGN, CA. 1700



DESCRIPTION: Portrayed on this *famille verte* vase is another scene probably derived from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Foot and cavalry soldiers escort a canopied tumbril through a foggy mountain pass. The seated official may represent Zhuge Liang, a famed military strategist and heroic patriot. At one particular place within the narrative, Zhuge's retinue is ambushed at a desolate mountain pass. A line in the novel translates: "Now swords and spears are all around us." In accord with artistic license, the attire shown is contemporary for the early-eighteenth-century rather than the Three Kingdom period (A.D. 220-65).

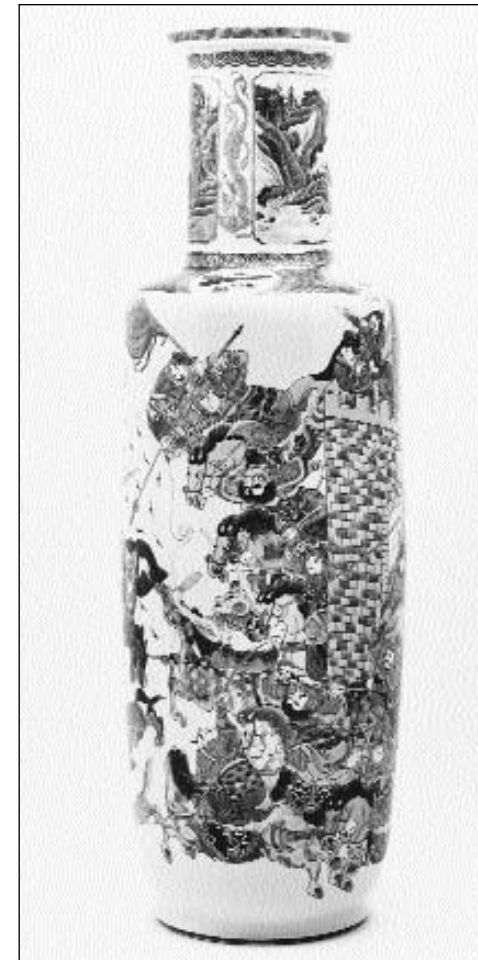
**Rouleau Vase**

#1931.160, PORCELAIN  
 HEIGHT 75 CM (29.5 IN.)  
 QING DYNASTY, KANGXI REIGN, CA. 1700-1722



DESCRIPTION: A battle scene from *The Tale of Kunyang City* is shown in a vibrantly enameled *famille verte* vase. Based on historical events, the scene deals with the life of Wang Mang. He seized control of China for a short period (A.D. 9-23) and established radical reforms which brought about widespread revolts. David Johnson succinctly describes the scene:

"Identifying the subject of the scene, the characters over the city gate read *Kunyang City*. The two figures standing on the city wall above the gate and discussing battle strategies are Liu Xiu in armor and wearing a helmet, a descendant of the Western Han royal house who was placed on the throne rivaling Wang Mang's, and his general, Deng Yu, in scholar's attire. To the left of the city wall, riding a lion and holding a sword and shield, is Wang Mang's general, Wang Xun, who was dispatched at the head of extensive troops to recapture Kunyang from Liu Xiu's control. Liu Xiu appears again, ready to impale Wang Xun with a lance as he charges out of the city on horseback, leading a small suicide squad under a general's banner against the enemy. At the forefront of the charge is a figure with a bottle gourd on his back who probably represents a Daoist immortal or demon calling forth a violent rain-storm to terrify Wang Xun's army of soldiers and wild beasts. This action suggests that magical Daoist forces aided Liu Xiu in defeating an overwhelming enemy" (Taft:644).



**A Pair of Rouleau Vases**

#1931.140, PORCELAIN (TOP)  
HEIGHT 73 CM (28.25 IN.)

#1931.146, PORCELAIN (BOTTOM)  
HEIGHT 73.7 CM (29 IN.)

QING DYNASTY

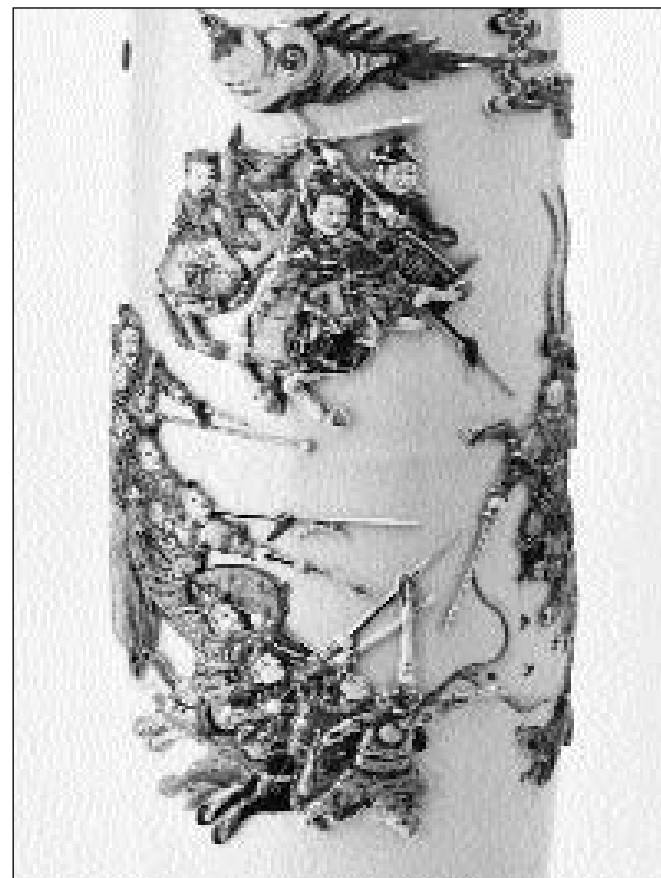
KANGXI REIGN, EARLY 18TH CENTURY

DESCRIPTION: More scenes from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* are shown on these *famille verte* vases, modeled and carved in high relief. A famous battle that occurred at Changbanpo became known as “Hiding the Baby among Innumerable Soldiers.” David Johnson describes the scenes:

“On one vase (1931.140) five soldiers—two with snares and three with swords, halberds, and maces—attack Zhao Yun, who has the infant son of Liu Bei strapped to his waist and a dream cloud containing a *mang*, or horned four-clawed dragon, issuing from his back. . . . On a stone bridge are a mounted warrior, perhaps Guan Yu, and an attendant, both armed; below are two mounted, armed soldiers and the leader of the warriors attacking Zhao Yun.

“On the other vase (1931.146), a small demon brandishes two clubs and releases from the bottle gourd at his neck a dream cloud of blackbirds that attacks a fierce red-headed man or Daoist demon mounted on a lion and commanding two wolves, a leopard, and a tiger. Holding this figure and his creatures at bay are two flanking lines of mounted halberdiers, while above Zhao Yun escapes with his commander’s infant son under a banner bearing the yin yang symbol, representing the positive and negative principles of life” (Taft:642).

“Many historical battles, such as the one at Changbanpo depicted on this pair of vases, were later believed to have been won with the intervention of Daoist supernatural forces” (Taft:643).





“Among  
the basic tasks  
of the art historian  
are the  
study,  
interpretation,  
and  
categorization  
of works of art  
so that others can  
carry out further  
analytical research.”

– E. J. Sullivan (Taft: 13)

## THE MARTIAL THEMES IN RETROSPECT

What is the significance of the symbolic and narrative decorations found on the seven selected artifacts shown on previous pages? There are various interpretations. However, David Johnson believes that, because of the political policies of the Qing dynasty, particular decorative motifs were selectively portrayed in artistic media as a comprehensive program of political propaganda (Johnson:11). This theory seems evident in light of China’s social setting and governmental control of the ceramic industry during this particular period under the Kangxi emperor.

During the first half of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the Chinese experienced a dramatic increase in population. Unfortunately, technological advancement stagnated and could not support the population. The peasantry was also exploited by high taxation, and scholar-officials became more and more detached from the masses. Governmental functions deteriorated with ever-increasing ill effect on state and society. Strong threats to national stability came in the form of peasant rebellions within the borders, plus, the weak state invited foreign intervention. One group of foreigners to invade were the Manchus, who eventually conquered the weakened Ming.

The Qing, China’s last imperial dynasty, was inaugurated by the Manchus in 1644. Unlike most conquerors, the Manchus “became avid admirers and students of Chinese civilization, and when they took control of China it was their contention that they came, not as enemies, but as preservers of the Ming heritage. . . . it was the least disruptive transition from one major dynasty to another in the whole of Chinese history” (Hucker:294-295).

Chinese history is often explained as a passage through dynastic cycles, in which one dynasty decays, allowing a new one to reestablish order only to eventually decay in due time itself. The pattern repeats itself according to the strengths and weaknesses of the central government. Much emphasis is therefore given to the Mandate of Heaven and the emperor’s personal talent for tending to the empire according to heavenly decree.

On the Taft porcelains we find images of rebellious forces attempting to overthrow government troops. Generals, military strategists, foot soldiers, and cavalry are each battle-ready, armed with all manner of weaponry, including those available by petitioning the spiritual realm. In times of peace and war, emperors must prove their worthiness to hold the Mandate of Heaven. The great Kangxi expressed his benevolence by supporting the peasantry through fair, noble governance. He “masterfully appropriated themes from China’s past to validate his rule as a just and legitimate alternative to that of the Ming dynasty. Fighting between Qing forces and the Ming loyalists in 1675 had caused the near destruction of the [imperial] kilns at Jingdezhen. After the rebellion was subdued, the Kangxi emperor ordered the rebuilding and modernization of China’s porcelain industry. The production of ceramic wares resumed during the 1680’s, and decorative schemes based on historical subjects that emphasize loyalty to the reigning dynastic house appear as identifiable narratives on porcelains made for the domestic and export markets. On the evidence of large numbers of extant ceramics decorated with historical and mythical battles set in periods dating from antiquity to the late Ming dynasty, it can be argued that the Kangxi emperor appropriated these scenes to subtly,

but clearly, point out the advantages of his rule” (Johnson:12).

The blue-and-white vase on page 97, in which women are shown preparing for mounted combat, symbolically portrays the social responsibility of loyalty to the emperor, even if it means sacrificing one’s life. One should obey military commands, as symbolically illustrated in the lantern on page 99 with the archer humbly bowing to the seated military commander. This lantern, like the vases shown on pages 100, 102 and 103, presents scenes from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Johnson states that “the use of the novel for political purposes during the reign of the Kangxi emperor was meant to draw a parallel between the exploitation of the Chinese peasantry by the Yuan nobility when the novel was written and similar exploitation by the Ming dynasty government prior to the establishment of the Qing dynasty” (Johnson:15).

Chinese history is filled with examples of military powers being used at the command of the central government. In the threat of rebellion, however, it is seen as an expression of dissatisfaction with politics and as a tool to obtain just government. In an effort to stabilize society, “the Kangxi emperor manipulated Chinese customs to instill in the minds of the populace that the residual hostilities between Ming loyalists and the foreign rule of the Qing dynasty had ceased” and the people of the united country could flourish by putting their energies to more helpful, productive endeavors, such as sericulture and rice production (Johnson:11). A country—like valued art and human life—requires precious care and constant protection, or it may be lost forever.

## CONCLUSION

Charles Taft (1843-1929), the older half-brother of President William H. Taft, was publisher of the *Cincinnati Times-Star*. He and his wife Anna purchased their collection piece by piece from London, Paris and New York markets. They acquired nearly one-third of their Chinese collection through Henry Duveen, who had a shop in New York in 1879. Duveen originally acquired most of the pieces for James A. Garland, the leading American collector during the late nineteenth century.

The Taft Museum, a historic landmark in itself, houses a priceless collection for research or simply viewing pleasure. In addition to Chinese ceramics, the Tafts also focused on old master paintings and European decorative arts. Today it is known as one of the outstanding small museums in the U.S., reflecting the strong eclectic connoisseurship of the Tafts. Its staff is consistently professional, courteous, and helpful. I was particularly impressed by the quality of the tours given for children. They were no less attentive than the personal guidance I received from David Johnson.

If you cannot visit the museum in person, I recommend contacting the museum to see what publications are available for purchase. Anyone interested in the Chinese art should note *The Taft Museum: Its History and Collections—Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, a superb publication for its photography, text and references. Also available are postcards, notecards, catalogues, photos, and brochures. *The Portico*, the museum’s newsletter, is sent to members. For visiting hours and further information, contact:

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