Peranakan Porcelain: Conservation versus Restoration

By Dr Robert B. Faltermeier

Conservation Treatments

Most museums all over the world practise conservation of porcelain and other materials instead of restoration. This involves minimal intervention with the artwork and thereby leaves as much of the original material intact and undisturbed. In contrast, many restoration techniques which remove or manipulate porcelain can partially or entirely cover the glaze with paint or lacquer.

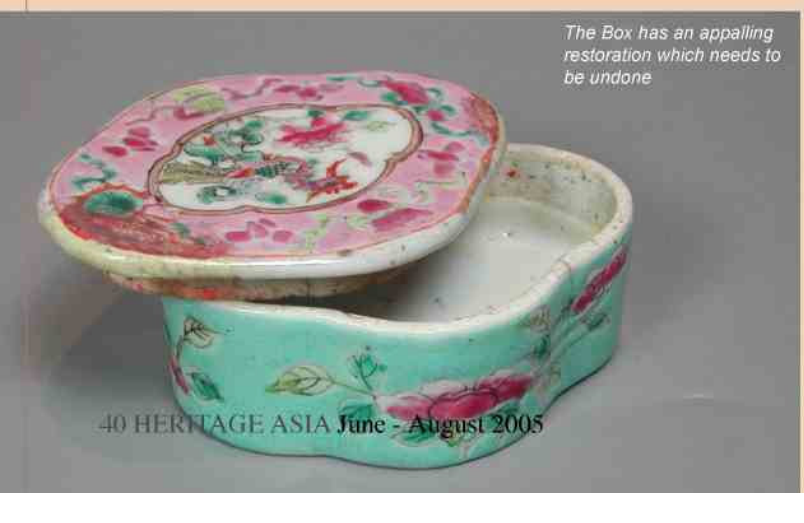
Conservation work is almost completely reversible and does the least amount of alterations to the Peranakan ware. But it has to be noted that there is no such thing as a 100% reversible conservation technique. The removal of original dirt or deposits can leave stains or marks that cannot be fully touched up and adhesives (glues) applied are rarely completely removable. This is especially the case of high-fired ceramics since they contain fine pores that can trap the adhesive and fillers applied during conservation.

Nowadays conservators use epoxy resins to join and replace missing pieces. A good conservator will be able to match the colours very closely to the original. The drawback of this technique is that it is too time consuming. Epoxy is relatively hard and the application of epoxy is also not easily reversible. If it is not carefully executed, the adjacent ceramic might be scratched, and there is also a possibility that the fill colour is not well matched or the fill changes colour due to light and heat.

Restoration Techniques

During restoration the broken or cracked porcelain is glued together and missing areas are filled in with, in most cases, unsuitable materials. The fills and cracks are then covered with paint. The new restorations and the adjacent porcelain are airbrushed with a solvent-based paint. This paint needs to be perfectly colour matched to the porcelain. Most restorations are done for the art market, private collectors and commercial art galleries. If a restoration is done well, it will be very difficult for a layperson to detect the cracks and missing parts.

In the past, restorations discoloured within a short period of time, especially in a climate with high temperature and light intensity. This is due to accelerated ageing of the infills, paint and lacquer. Today there are synthetic paints in the market that will take a longer time to age and discolour, and when the ceramic is not exposed to extreme environmental conditions, it can last for a long time.



The Box has an appalling restoration which needs to be undone

Conservation or Restoration

The advantage of conservation is the minimal interference with the actual body and surface of the porcelain in question. However, materials like epoxy resins tend to be hard and difficult to remove.

The colour matching is rarely satisfactory in the long run. Either the fill is off colour from the start or most resins in the market will change colour due to light and high temperatures.

Conservation techniques are desirable, since in principle they are the least harmful to an art piece. But conservation work on porcelain and high-fired ceramics is rarely visually or esthetically pleasing, since it can be easily spotted. In good conservation work, the fill blends in well when the ceramic is viewed from a distance or through a display case. Should the colour matching or filling be poor, the ceramic will look cracked or broken, and this distracts from the original décor and the original craftsmanship. A conservator will always educate the owner of a damaged piece that it is of academic and ethical interest not to alter the porcelain and keep as much of the original as possible.

In the case of hasty or poorly executed restoration, the glaze could be scratched when smoothing the fills. In my experience most high-fired ceramics that went through restoration work were heavily damaged with the glaze scratched underneath the overpainted areas. This damage cannot be undone and it will mar the original décor.

A good restoration will combine the principle of minimal intervention as practised in conservation, with the inherent esthetically pleasing nature of restoration. However it is important that the restoration is always visible to an expert, and that the restoration is entirely reversible. Therefore restorers need to adopt the practice of reversible materials and materials that do not age rapidly.

Simple ways of spotting restored high-fired ceramics and porcelain

1. Light shone through the porcelain will show up fills and cracks
2. Ultraviolet light can expose most lacquers, paints or added pigments.
3. A magnifying glass of about 10-30x will also show in many cases the pattern of an airbrush.
4. Acetone or thinner will remove most paints used to restore the porcelain.

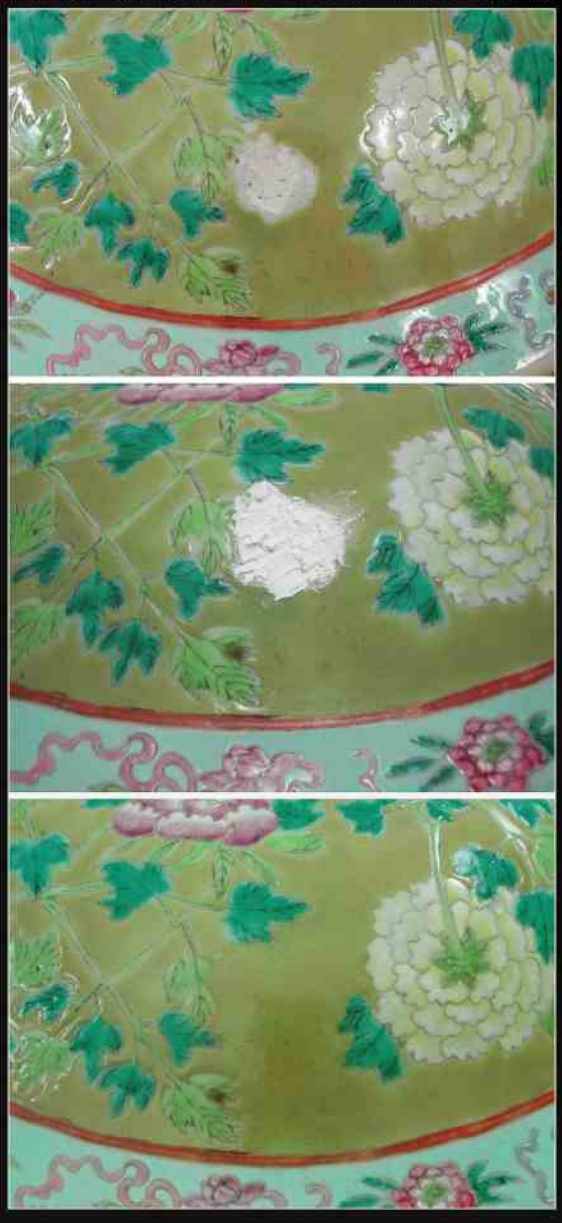
The finial had a poor yellowed restoration, which had to be redone

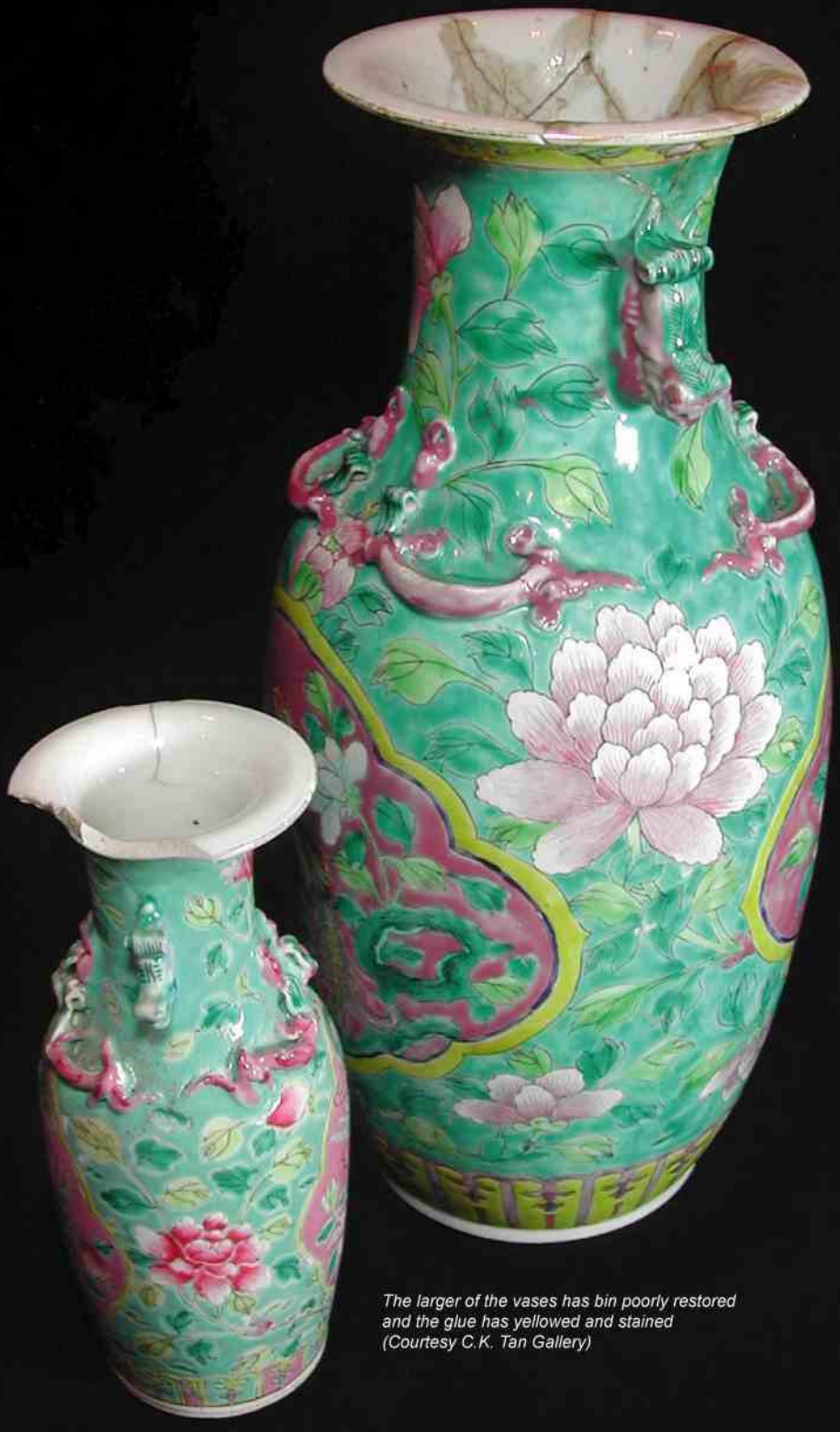
An Avid Collector by Lye Wai Choong

Peranakan ceramics have recently become popular among local collectors. This is due to the renewed interest in Peranakan culture and the association of these wares with Peranakan ceremonies and rituals.

Peranakan ceramics being largely functional were damaged over the years of usage. A collector may want to take a middle path between conservation and restoration to manage damages in Peranakan ceramics. It should combine the ideal of minimal intervention as practised in conservation, with the inherent aesthetically pleasing nature of restoration. Purists may disagree with this point of view.

Before
Chipped Peranakan porcelain, before restoration-conservation
During
Chip reconstituted with filler before levelling
After
Filled area colourmatched and lacquered with minimal overpainting





The larger of the vases has bin poorly restored and the glue has yellowed and stained (Courtesy C.K. Tan Gallery)