

The Chinese Handroll and the circular Bamboo-Box in the Herport-Collection in the BHM

The two objects are discussed here together, as they refer to each other on their respective index cards. It is mentioned, that the handroll might have been stored in the bamboo-box, but more about this later.

The Chinese handroll is a large painting on paper by an unknown artist. It is 520 cm long and 26 cm wide. Several scenes of women's life in a palace are depicted. There are several groups spending their days playing board games, sipping wine and chatting, playing music instruments or listening to music, sitting in a boat floating in a pond. It all happens in a garden with blossoming bushes, trees and birds. In some of the scenes a palace with its terraces and stairs is partially visible. All the women are elegantly dressed in long kimono-style robes with very long sleeves, and all of them show similar hair styles. Even though all scenes are independent, they seem to happen at the same time in the same place. It feels like overlooking a palace garden, secretly watching the women in their daily activities. The paper roll is framed by a band with inscriptions that are not yet translated.

The supposed container, a bamboo-box, is 30,5 cm high with a diameter of 6 cm. The box is engraved with two travelers in a pleasant scenery. Right above their heads there are three lines written in Chinese characters. As the writing in the picture, the writing on the box is not translated and analyzed as of yet.

In China's elite, handrolls were a common means of communication, whereas in Europe they were unknown for a long time. The first handrolls to be recorded in Europe were presented at the French court in 1686 as diplomatic gifts. However, there is some evidence, that similar objects arrived almost 100 years earlier in Europe.¹ At the same time, from Alexandra von Przychowski, the curator for China at the Museum Rietberg in Zürich, dated the handroll to the late Ming-dynasty, which is late 16th century. In style and subject, she compared it with paintings by Qui Ying, a famous painter of this period. She suggested that the painter of our handroll might have worked close to Qui Ying.² By the end of the 17th century, similar to Japan, China closed its borders for European traders. There was one exception, as every year between October and beginning of January, the Dutch East India Company was allowed to ship to the port of Canton. In the following years the Dutch started to order handrolls and wallpapers for Europe in the workshops.³ By then, Chinese objects were highly estimated in Europe. Handrolls were used as wallpaper, often cut into pieces to use single sceneries as decorative

¹ Wappenschmidt, Friederike. *Chinesische Tapeten für Europa*. (Berlin: Verlag für Kunstwissenschaft, 1989) p. 10ff.

² Laing, Ellen Johnston (1997): Qui Ying's other Patrons. In: *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 117, Nr. 4, p. 686-692.

Laing, Ellen Johnston (2000): «Suzhou Pian» and Other Dubious Paintings in the Received "Oeuvre" of Qui Ying. In: *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 59, Nr. 3 / 4, p. 265-295.

³ Wappenschmidt, *Chinesische Tapeten für Europa*, 24ff.

elements for lacquered furniture or other interior decoration.⁴ Therefore, the existence of this handroll and its good condition are exceptional.

The donator Albrecht Herport left for South East Asia in 1659 and returned nine years later in 1668. His travel report was published after his return in Bern. He showed no interest in art and crafts, but rather in the phenomena of nature and weapons.⁵ As can be seen in the *Donationenbuch* in the *Burger Bibliothek Bern*, his donation was dominated by objects of nature like a dried flying fish, a dried fruit of a *Sagoveserbaum* or several spikes of a porcupine. In the *Donationenbuch* several drawings and sketches of his own or somebody else's hand are mentioned.⁶ As Herport's drawings were used as templates for engravings for his Report, those drawings can be identified as his. However, if this Handroll would have been a part of the donation, it should have been mentioned separately as it's an extraordinary object.

It is unclear if the Handroll and the Bamboo-box belong together⁷ and by when they came to the museum. To store such an enormous picture into the box, it would have had to be tightly rolled to fit in. Furthermore, such boxes as containers for pictures are not known and rather unusual. On top of that, during the last three hundred years the collection's inventory was translated and transformed several times. During the early years it was part of the *Burger Bibliothek* and the objects were stored in a display cabinet in a small room next to the library. And this chamber of wonders was moved with new arrangements of the objects. In the 19th century half of the chamber of wonders was moved to the newly founded museum. Simultaneously other collections of the city and the canton of Bern were joined together and exhibited at the *Antiquarisches Museum* – the 20th century precursor of the existing *Historisches Museum*. The collection was divided into three groups: an archeological, a local and an ethnological part.⁸ The index cards were issued between 1920 and 1930. We do not know whether the objects were sufficiently marked to guarantee their identity or if there was an inventory of all objects. And we do not know where from the information on the objects was coming from. For further clarification the objects must be analyzed for marks of provenance and maybe as well for the materials used.

⁴ Wappenschmidt, *Chinesische Tapeten für Europa*, 100ff.

⁵ Herport, Albrecht. *Reise nach Java, Formosa, Vorder-Indien und Ceylon 1659-1668, Neuauflage nach der 1669 erschienen Original-Ausgabe von Georg Sonnleitner*. (Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1669/1930).

⁶ *Donationenbuch der Burgerbibliothek*. Burgerbibliothek, Mss.h.h.III.114. Arbeitsbuch zur Führung des Archives der Burgerbibliothek Bern von 8.1693 - 10.07.1726. 37.

Donationenbuch der Stadtbibliothek. Burgerbibliothek, Mss.h.h.XII.1. Verzeichnis der Donationen an die Berner Stadtbibliothek bis 1800. Reinschrift von Mss.h.h.III.114. 67.

⁷ On the index cards it's written, the picture was probably stored in the box. The expert said, this information must be doubted, as the picture would have been tightly rolled and such containers weren't normally used.

⁸ Kreis, Georg, Sibylle Meyrat, Arlette Schnyder, Brigitte Stalder, Martin Stuber. *Von Bernern & Burgern*. (Baden: Hier und Jetzt, 2015), 602.