

Shopping Guide in China

What to buy in China?

Antiques

A good place to find a wide selection of antiques is at Liulichang. Liulichang is a street in Xuanwumen, and many of the stores are quite old. This area has everything from scrolls, to jade articles to decades-old cigarette advertisement posters. There are definitely treasures to be found here, but it is hard to tell genuine antiques from dirty fakes. Real antiques are supposed to bear a red official seal that proves their authenticity, but sometimes real ones don't have it and fake ones do. The best attitude to have is: if you like it and you can bargaining down to a price you can accept, just go for it. Small jade articles and silver trinkets make great presents for people at home and they are easy to take on the plane.

Another large antiques market is the Antiques City at Panjiayuan. This is a multi-story building which is full of antiques and general kitsch. The same rules apply here as in Liulichang: if you like it, get it. Don't worry if it is fake or not. Many of the things are not real antiques, but on the hand, recently a 50,000-year-old fossil was confiscated from one of the sellers there. The fossil was on sale for about US\$ 150, so you never know. Beijing Curio City, gathering more than 250 curio shops under one roof, is China's largest trade center for antiques and folk art works. Many of the dealers are themselves connoisseurs and curio collectors. Antiques that date before 1795 are forbidden for sale or export. Those dated between 1796 and 1949 should bear a small red seal and a Certificate for Relics Export from the Beijing Cultural Relics Bureau, to allow them to be taken out of China. The seal also proves the genuineness of the items. A word of caution : Keep receipts which should indicate the name and age of the antiques of these items are bought in BARB-designated stores.

Porcelain

Porcelain, originating in old China, is still a major industry, producing dinner services, figurines and reproductions of antique vases, teapots and the like. The finest porcelain in the world can be easily purchased in China.

Cloisonne

Cloisonne(enamel formed in patterns of copper wire) is an art form developed in the 15th century, and now used to decorate vases, bowls, lamps, jewelry and ornaments. Cloisonne is an enamel handicraft made with roughcast brass and copper wire inlay. It is one of the traditional arts and crafts in Beijing. It first appeared in the Yuan Dynasty and was greatly Developed during the Jingtai reign of Ming. Jiangtailan was the name

of the dazzling colour of one of the most frequently used cloisonne enamels which appeared at that time, thus it is now used to refer to cloisonne enamels in general. The cloisonne process begin with the casting of bronze into different shapes-vases, bowls, boxes, and even bracelets- to which flat copper wire is then affixed in decorative patterns. Enamels of different colours are applied to fill the "cloisons" or hollows. Each cloisonne piece is fired three times with a fresh coat of enamel each time. After firing, the pieces are ground and polished to look like gold. This requires sophisticated techniques and artistic flair. Chinese cloisonne received first prize at the Chicago World Fair in 1904.

Lacquerware

Lacquerware consists of up 500 coats of lacquer applied to a copper base and carved into designs. The colors are red, green, yellow and black, while favorite patterns show flowers, birds, landscapes and figures. Lacquer is used for vases, plates, bowls and screens. Some lacquerware is inlaid with gold, mother-of-pearl or jade, to decorate folding screens and furniture which are genuine works of art. Lacquerware originated in the Han Dynasty, more than 2,000 years ago, but it reached Beijing about 1,000 years later in the Tang Dynasty. Techniques improved throughout the Yuan and Ming dynasties.

There are two types of carved lacquerware: metal and non-metal roughcast. The former has an enamel lining, and the later has a lacquer lining. Many layers, (up to a few hundred), of lacquer are applied to the box to a thickness of 5-18mm. After the lacquer has dried, it is carved, in relief of fretwork, by hand with landscapes, figures, flowers, birds, animals or other patterns. Beijing lacquerware is applied to a variety of objects, such as vases, plates, boxes, jars and decorated screens. They make nice decorative presents.

Jade

Jade is regarded by the Chinese as a stone descended from heaven. They value its hard, cool texture and translucent colors. It is extremely difficult to carve but China's craftsmen create incredibly intricate ornaments and jewelry from jade.

Jade carving appeared first in the Shang and Zhou dynasties about 3,000 years ago when it had become a separate profession and excavations have shown the fine workmanship of that time.

The materials used for jade carving include all kinds of hard stones, such as jadeite, nephrite, red agate, white agate, crystal, amethyst, coral, ruby and sapphire. It is a special skill to exploit the natural colour of a piece of jade to create an

effective design. So the most expensive ones are not those of one single colour, but those of multiple colour, the carving skillfully enhancing the different colours in an object. These jade carvings are highly collectable. There are also other jade items of more practical use, such as rings, necklaces, earrings, pendants, seals and cigarette holders. Yunnan, a province bordering Burma, has the largest jade carving and marketing center in China.

Carpets

Carpets, modern and antique, for use as tapestries or rugs, are plentiful and available at bargain prices. Carpet-making came to Beijing in the Qing Dynasty when Tibetan lamas were summoned to the capital to set up a carpet training shop at Baoguoqi (Temple of Safeguarding the Country) to produce carpets for the imperial palaces. By the end of the Qing Dynasty, Beijing carpets had gained fame both at home and abroad, and were awarded a first prize at the World Fair of 1903.

Beijing carpets mainly employ the traditional designs, such as dragon and phoenix, longevity characters, flowers, pine trees, cranes, lions, goats, bats, tigers, wheels, conch shells, parasols, lutes, chess pieces and Chinese paintings. These carpets are brightly coloured, soft and durable. They are made in all different sizes, from room-sized carpets to chair-sized ones.

There are some wall carpets with new designs, such as landscapes, paintings, figures and famous places in China.

Embroidery

Embroidery has a long history, and embroideries from Suzhou, Hunan, Guangdong and Sichuan are the most famous.

Suzhou embroidery:

Originated in the State of Wu during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.), whose capital was Suzhou. The embroidery is flat, neat, delicate, dense, even, smooth and shiny with beautiful designs, graceful Colours, and a lovely unique style. In the past, almost every woman in Suzhou knew how to do embroidery, and nobody would marry a girl who did not know how to embroider.

Hunan embroidery:

Originated in Hunan Province in southern-central China during the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 24).It features fine design, fresh colours and flexible stitch-work. Figures, landscapes, flowers, birds and animals are its main designs, in a unique artistic style.

Guangdong embroidery:

It is rooted in Guangdong Province with a long history of over 1,000 years dating back to the

Tang Dynasty (618-907). Guangdong embroidery is well-known for its gorgeous colour, distinct contrasts, vigorous design and string decorative characteristics.

Sichuan embroidery:

It originated in the Han Dynasty (206B.C.-A.D. 220). The traditional handicraft of Sichuan in western China, it has a unique quality create by its even stitches, shiny thread, smooth design and perfect craft.

Batiks

Chinese batiks originated in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D.220) and were also popular in the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Gradually this wax printing vanished in central China but was preserved among the national minorities in Yunnan and Guizhou. It is a cloth printing technique in which pictures are drawn on cloth with wax and the clothes then dyed indigo. After a dewaxing process, the cloth shows white patterns against a background colour. Batiks present natural, classical and graceful beauty, and have a strong artistic tradition. They can be made into clothes, tablecloth, bags, handkerchiefs, curtains, bedspreads, etc.

Silk

Silk, which has brought fame to China, can be readily found in a dazzling array of colors, patterns and textures. While large State-owned stores like the Beijing Yuanlong Silk Corporation, Ltd. can be trusted for quality and offer ready-made clothes as well as a complete array of fabric, private markets like Xishui and Yabaolu sell all kinds of silk clothing from shirts, underwear and trousers, to pajamas and bedspreads at negotiable prices. Most vendors at the markets are self-employed and speak some English. All the products are marked in Western sizes, but sizes are often deceiving, try on for size.

Chinese long gowns are considered the most elegant garment most suitable for women's figures. Silk gowns can be a truly long-lasting and useful item to purchase in China for yourself or as gifts for those special people back home.

Silk Figurine

Beijing silk figurines first appeared in the Tang Dynasty (618-907). It is a toy figurine made of silk, which is very light and looks lifelike. Beijing silk figurine is made of, and decorated with, silk, satin and crepe. Even the face, which is usually made of plastic, is also first covered with a layer of thin cotton fabric and a layer of gauze, and then painted with the eyebrows, eyes and other features. The procedure of making a silk figurine include: creating a framework; inserting the fillings to make it well-shaped; and then applying make-up and dressing it.

Beijing silk figurines can be purchased at the Silk Figurine Production and Marketing Department of Beijing Silk Flower Factory, located in Panjiayuan, Zuo'anmenwai. Some large handicrafts shops also sell them.

Painting and Calligraphy Scrolls

Painting and calligraphy works are found in most antique shops. One of the best sources is the courtyard-parking in East Liulichang.

Handicraft

Clay figurines and animals can be traced back to 1840s, and are still one of the most unique crafts in North China.

Dough modeling is another traditional folk art handed down from ancient times. Kneaded in half-cooked glutinous rice flour, dough figures, flowers and birds are popular small toys and exhibits in Beijing.

Toy Monkeys are loved by the children. The monkey is a near sacred animal in old Chinese folk tales. These toy monkeys are meticulously made and shown engaged in a variety of activities.

Papercutting is one the most popular handicrafts in Beijing. There is a wider variety of papercutting patterns that you can imagine available.

Kites can be used as ornaments and toys. One of China's favorite past times is flying kites, especially in Beijing where there is usually plenty of wind around to send them soaring into the sky. Available in many art and craft stores, kites are among the best Chinese presents to friends back home.

Snuff bottles, with paintings inside, represent a popular art from the Qing Dynasty and make excellent small gifts. You and your friends will marvel for years on how the artist paints such intricate drawings on the inside of these very small bottles.

Bone products, made from oxen and camel bones, include knives, fords, spoons, bracelets and necklaces.

Embroidery & drawn work appear on table cloths, napkins, sheets and handkerchiefs, all of which are excellent buys. The Beijing Yuanlong Silk Corporation, Lit. has a wide selection.

Medicine

Chinese pharmacies sell various kinds of nutritious pills and tonics made from herbs. Tongrentang, as other traditional pharmacies, have a resident doctor in charge of taking your pulse and making prescriptions. Most largest department stores and supermarkets have special drug counters.

Books

Every year 20,000 book titles and 1,300 periodicals are published in Beijing, home of the Commercial Press and other well-known publishing houses. They make up a small part of the stock of the city's major book shops, where you can find beautiful art books, translations of Chinese classics and textbooks on all known subjects. Prices are reasonable, particularly in the Foreign Languages Bookstores.

The Beijing Foreign Languages Bookstore and Beijing Xinhua Bookstore (with 137 branches around town) are major book sellers. The China Book Store in Liulichang birds and repairs all kinds of books and periodicals as well as selling them. Another good place for books is Haitian book street near Beijing University.