

The Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware, Hong Kong

By Anne Pinto Rodrigues

Cha, chai, teh – no matter what you call it, tea (*camellia sinensis*) is undoubtedly the favourite brew of the Asian masses, especially in China, where tea-drinking originated thousands of years ago.

Not surprisingly therefore, there is an entire museum in Hong Kong dedicated to the promotion of Chinese tea culture. Nestled amidst the lush greenery of Hong Kong Park and dwarfed by the surrounding skyscrapers, is the delightful Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware. This museum offers a rare glimpse into the evolution and history of tea-drinking in China and the different vessels used over the centuries for tea preparation.

Opened in January 1984, it is the first museum in the world dedicated specifically to tea ware. The museum's impressive collection includes about 600 pieces of ceramic and purple clay tea ware dating from the Western Zhou period (11th century BCE to 771 BCE) right up to modern times.



The historical Flagstaff House which is home to the Museum of Tea Ware in Hong Kong

A large portion of the museum's collection was donated by Mr K S Lo, tea connoisseur, ardent tea ware collector and more popularly known to the world as the founder of the Vitasoy group. His interest in tea ware was sparked quite accidentally

in the 1950s, when he spotted some old teapots in a store. Captivated, he researched the teapots and realised that they were the exquisite Yixing purple clay ones. He quickly purchased 30 of them and thus began his journey into the fascinating world of tea ware collecting.

The museum's well-crafted exhibits showcase how tea preparation and tea ware design have changed over time. During the Han dynasty (206BCE-220CE), people prepared tea for medicinal purposes, by boiling tea leaves with spicy substances like ginger, mint, leek and orange peel.

The Tang Dynasty era (618-907) saw tea-drinking spread from southern China to the north, thus becoming a national custom. The Mongols of the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) are said to have introduced the addition of cream to tea.



An eclectic collection of tea pots from the 16th and 17th centuries



A set of 12 exquisite wucai cups from the Qing dynasty (1662-1722)

During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), people began to prepare tea by 'steeping' tea leaves in a pot. The Yixing purple clay teapots became very popular during this time as they were thought to be the best in bringing out and preserving the colour, flavour and fragrance of the tea. In the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) that followed, brewing tea in a small covered bowl began to be practised.

One of the highlights of the museum's collection is the set of 12 Qing dynasty (1662 – 1722) cups in *wucai* (five-colour) enamels. Each cup has been delicately painted with the 'flower of the month' on one side and a poem praising the flower has been inscribed on the other side. It is believed that Mr Lo spent a fortune acquiring the complete set for his collection.

The Museum of Tea Ware is a branch of the Hong Kong Museum of Art and is located in the historical Flagstaff House, which was the office and residence of the Commander of British Forces in Hong Kong until 1978. The charming, two-storey black and white building was built in 1846 in the Greek revival design and is the oldest surviving building of that architectural style in Hong Kong.

Next to the museum is the K S Lo Gallery, built in December 1995 and displaying 25 priceless Chinese ceramic pieces and over 600 valuable Chinese seals, donated by the K S Lo Foundation. Right after the entrance to the gallery building is the cozy LockCha Teahouse. This traditional, Canton-style teahouse offers nearly 100 artisanal teas along with sumptuous, vegetarian dim sum.

The museum can be easily reached via Admiralty MTR station (exit C1). Despite the free admission, it is rarely crowded. One can spend a leisurely hour or two browsing through the exhibits. It is a 'must-visit' for any tea lover travelling to Hong Kong.

Anne Pinto Rodrigues has lived in Singapore for the past three years and enjoys exploring the hidden corners of the city. She is an avid traveller and blogs at No Roads Barred (www.noroadbarred.wordpress.com) about her travel experiences.

All photos by the author