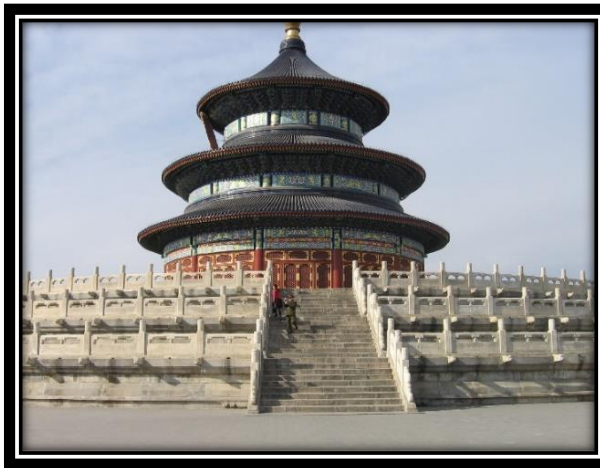


04 PARKS AND RECREATION AND CLOISONNE AND LACQUERWARE

The next day we went to the Temple of Heaven (Tiantan Park), where, as far as I know, there were no snakes. The park is large, roughly the size of Central Park in New York City. It's a complex of ceremonial buildings built in 1420 on 270 acres, the largest ancient worship complex in China, where the emperor of the Ming and Qing Dynasties and their courts would come to pray for good harvests.

"The Temple of Heaven became a World Heritage site in 1998," said our guide. "It is considered a masterpiece of traditional Chinese ritual architecture and landscape design. It is said that the Temple of Heaven influenced a lot of China's urban architecture and planning for many centuries. It is particularly important for the symbolism of its structural layout and the magnificence of its decoration."



"The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests is the largest building in the park complex," she continued. "It is a circular building with triple gables, built entirely of wood with no nails, on three levels of marble base."



When I commented to our guide how beautiful it is and how well-preserved for a building that is hundreds of years old, she informed us that the original building burned down in 1889 after a lightning strike and was rebuilt several years later. "Well, no wonder it looks so good," huffed Myrtle. "I would too." While my mind raced around trying to put together a scenario of Myrtle being rebuilt, our guide walked blissfully along, all us little ducks trailing after her.

We visited the Imperial Vault of Heaven that was connected to the Hall of Prayer by the Vermilion Steps Bridge, and we visited the Circular Mound Altar. "The Altar was built in 1530 and designed so that the prayers of the emperor would echo off the surrounding wall with resonance significant enough to communicate with heaven," said our guide, demonstrating the echoing wall. Myrtle immediately wanted to demonstrate her own echoing-wall talents, but I was not in the mood to rescue her (me!) from one of her shenanigans, so I distracted her by pointing out a beautiful Ribbon Dance going on farther down the path. "Ah!" she exclaimed! "Just what I hoped to find! I really really want to learn how to do the Ribbon Dance!" And she dashed ahead.

Within minutes she was smiling her brilliant smile and bowing her sweet little bow and Nihowing her lilting little "Nihow" to the performers. One of them took Myrtle in hand and began to teach her the ribbon dance.

There are times dear reader, when I wish I could bottle Myrtle's chutzpah, maybe as a nice perfume called "Myrtle's Charm." Then when I needed some extra chutzpah I could just spritz myself and voila! Sigh.



But I was lucky. As I stood nearby watching, another performer came to me, took my hand, and proceeded to demonstrate the ribbon dance. By this time our guide had come near, and she translated, which is why I can now teach you, dear reader, how to do the Chinese Ribbon Dance.

First you need the right kind of ribbon, a nice satin ribbon about five to seven feet long and at least three inches wide, preferably made of silk fibers, but other satin fibers will work too. Do not attempt a long ribbon when you are just a novice in this art. Ribbons of twelve feet and longer are best left to the pros.

Attach one end of your ribbon to a dowel and wrap your ribbon around the dowel. Start your music, and take your stance, a nice, easy posture with your knees loose so that you can execute the dance moves that help keep your ribbon in the air.

Flip your wrist out to unfurl the ribbon. This takes some practice. Do not let the ribbon fall to the ground. Let the rhythms of the music guide the movements of your hands and feet. Traditional Chinese music is best for this art. For slow sections use large, flowing movements so your ribbon seems to float

in the air, and for fast sections use quick, snapping movements of the wrist so that your ribbon seems to flutter. All of this will take a lot of practice.

Well, dear reader, I do not know what happened to me that day, but it must be admitted that I totally bested Myrtle in the Chinese Ribbon Dance! Absolutely vanquished her, truth to tell, or, in the parlance of a race driver, “She bit my dust.” Anyway, I don’t know whether it was my long limbs or my dearth of stressful expectations, but oh my! My silken ribbon just soared and swooped and fluttered and hovered! Myrtle’s, unfortunately, fell to the ground a few times.

Soon a small crowd gathered to watch this foreigner (ME!) perform the famous Ribbon Dance! I began to falter with nervousness, but then I took myself in hand and said, “This is your moment, girl! Live it!” Or something like that I guess, because I just kept that ribbon going and going until the onlookers grew bored and left, and even the few performers who remained were starting to look a little impatient.

OK, then, time to quit. Unfortunately, my wish to end on a high note ended on a low one, I’m afraid. I did a great twirl, got the ribbon caught up in my legs and went crashing to the ground. Oh, well, at least I didn’t have to spend the rest of the day dealing with Myrtle’s famous pout. My spectacular fall made her day, I guess. We thanked the performers profusely with many bows and then continued on our way to other attractions that different members of our group were watching.



It seems this large park today is a cultural and recreational center for the Beijing people. We watched seniors exercising on an outdoor gym. We watched people practicing on musical instruments, including the haunting Chinese Erhu, practicing singing and dancing and playing in an impromptu orchestra, and playing mahjong and board games. "How wonderful!" Myrtle and I both exclaimed. "A place where the community can come to visit, play, dance, sing, exercise – a real community place."

In the afternoon we visited a Cloisonne factory and our guide gave a brief lecture on the bus, as usual. "The earliest pottery in China is about 8000 years old. It was created by people who lived in the Shanxi valley area by the Yellow River. The earliest painting appeared on pottery about 6000 years ago.

About 600 years ago some workers in Beijing made the first cloisonne, so we say that Beijing is the birthplace of cloisonne. The factory we will visit is the largest in northern Beijing, employing 300 people. You will see over 30,000 pieces of cloisonne in this huge shop."



As we walked into the shop, my eyes lit on this spectacular vase in the lobby. "Oh my!" I squealed to Myrtle. "That one is MINE!" and I promptly went to it and threw my arm around it. It was almost as tall as I was! "Myrtle," I cooed, "can you imagine this in my foyer?!" She sort of burst my balloon by smirking, "What foyer?" But then she came close enough to spot the tag with the price on it. Her eyes opened wide and she smiled just a bit as she said, "I think you may have to sell your house to buy this one, dear JoJo." She showed me the price tag, and I leapt away from that vase as though it

had bit me. \$150,000! Yikes and quadruple yikes! I kept very far away from that baby during the rest of our visit.



That vase quite took my breath away, dear reader, and I was a bit afraid to look at anything else in the shop, truly. The guide had us gathered around her and was finishing her lecture. "Cloisonne was originally only for the palace and the emperors. It is very expensive because it is hard to make. Here is the Assistant Manager of this factory to show us around and tell us how cloisonne is made."

Well, dear reader, I am afraid I will not be much use to you if you want to learn how to make Cloisonne. My heart was still going a pretty rapid pitty pat and I kept dropping my pen as I tried to

jot down the important stuff, and, well, I was a bit of a mess, I guess. But if you want to try it, here are my notes: "Use pure minerals in glass powder form: copper for green, cobalt for blue, etc. Fire the pieces

at 870 degrees Centigrade, 400 F. (?) Copper melts at 1000. Fire 2-6 minutes per piece. The oven is electric today but in the old days they used wood fire or coal in the ground. It was very difficult work. You use charcoal to grind it smooth, then immerse it in water." Greek to you? Me, too.



We were invited to try our hand at painting on a piece of porcelain. Here is my attempt. Myrtle laughed at it, of course, saying, "They would have to charge about \$20,000 for your work based on your speed." Well, I still think my piece would have been very pretty if I had had time to finish it. And anyway, Myrtle did not even try, so there!



She said, "I am waiting for the jade factory, JoJo. Jade is my thing, not cloisonne." We did go to a jade factory in Xian the following week, and it was indeed an education. The first thing our guide said was "The Chinese people believe that jade brings good fortune." Hmmm. No wonder Myrtle likes it, I thought.



When I watched the workers handling those delicate pieces of jade, all carved with a diamond blade, I confess I shuddered a bit, grateful that it wasn't my jelly-nerves responsible for creating the works of art we saw in that jade factory, like this mother-of-pearl and jade screen that I gleefully simpered to Myrtle, "will only set you back \$2500, dear Myrtle. A real bargain! Think of the hours and hours of work it took to make this!" She did look a little crestfallen, because she collects fans.



Here are my notes from the jade lecture: *Some pieces of 4500-year-old jade have been found. Many varieties of jade. You can tell the quality by the hardness (jadeite is best because it is the hardest,) translucence, color, and sound. Chinese believe that jade is living and protects them. The longer you wear jade the brighter the color. Jadeite has 8.6 hardness, the "Chinese diamond." Agate in the jade family in China is hardness of 8.3, less hard than jadeite but very translucent. Du Jade is second quality, 7.8 hardness, makes beautiful statues.*

Jasper – looks black or blue but is green 6.5 hardness. Xiu Jade 6.2 "The beautiful jade" is usually one piece and one color (hard jade is one piece but multicolor.) You're on your own from here, dear reader.



We also visited a lacquer factory in Xian, and that is where Myrtle lost her cool, just a bit, or maybe a lot, considering her cool is so cool it is about frozen usually. The minute we stepped into the giant warehouse, her eyes fell upon a black lacquer table with eight chairs. She squealed, unbecomingly, I thought, swooped down on it, again unbecomingly I thought, and nearly swooned with lust as her little hands caressed that mirror-finish tabletop. She gushed, "Oh, JoJo, this is just exactly what my dining room

has been waiting for!' She did not hear me when I reminded her that her dining room was not much bigger than that table.

But her love and adoration were not lost on the salespeople working the warehouse floor. In a flash, two of them brought her a cup of tea and pulled out a chair for her, imploring, "Sit, Madame, please to sit at this beautiful table that wishes to make you happy by reflecting your own beauty. Look, there, see your reflection in the tabletop? You honor this table with your presence, and each time you use it in your own beautiful home, it will preen to know that it belongs to you, only to you. Madame."

The other salesman bowed to me, saying, "Please, Madame, please to join your friend." Somehow two more salespeople materialized, one pulling out a chair for me and one presenting me with a cup of tea. To tell you the truth, I missed his charming little spiel because I was more interested in how he was able to pour my tea. When I saw him lift his arm high above my head with that long-spouted teapot, I sort of ducked because I was afraid he meant to pour the tea right into my mouth, or at least on top of my head, and I will be honest with you: that did not appeal to me.

But suddenly the tea came down right in front of my face, a gentle cascade, right into that tiny cup, and not a drop was spilled. I could not help myself then, I had to test the table with my finger to believe it was dry. I think I sort of jerked my head up then and said, "Not a drop! He did not spill a drop!" Unfortunately, my excitement was not expected, and it unnerved the server so that his arm jerked and tea splashed out of the spout and landed with pretty little bubbles right on top of that table! Myrtle was horrified and started moaning a bit, "No, no, not on this beautiful table." Her new best friend whipped a napkin from somewhere in the fold of his tunic, pushed his tunic sleeve back, and with a true showman's flair swiped that napkin over the spilled tea while saying happily, "Please to observe Madame, there is no damage to this 100% true lacquer-top table, no damage, none. Please to put your hand here and feel the table." With a delicate flourish he lifted her hand and placed it where the hot tea had been.



Myrtle squealed prettily, looked up at him, batted her lashes, and grasped his hand in both of hers, rubbing it gently while whispering, "Oh, that feels so perfectly, perfectly lovely, sir." The four attendants opened their eyes wide and seemed to lean in as they held their breath. "Yikes!" I thought, "this is a bordello scene!" I gave her a timely little kick under the table, and she groaned! Groaned! Dear heaven above! Then I spotted this vision across the room and nearly had my own lacquerware orgasm!

The sheer over-the-topness of THAT vision woke me from my stupor, and I had a brilliant thought. I said in my most sophisticated voice (whatever that is,) “May we ask what transaction of a monetary nature would be customary for an exchange involving this table and chairs and a person who wished to get involved in that exchange. . .” At that point my voice petered out because I lost my train of thought. And nobody caught it for me either. Ten eyes looked at me in bewilderment. I would say “twelve eyes” but decided I couldn’t see my own eyes.

Then enlightenment flashed in my brilliant Myrtle’s eyes and woke her from her bordello ecstasy. She blinked and sat up, saying briskly, “She wants to know how much it costs.” I glared at her a bit, as suddenly all the attention of four industrious workers swarmed around me, one gently taking my teacup, one getting ready to pull back my chair, the other two bowing low again and again saying, “But of course, Madame, please to come with us, please, and we shall bring your heaven to you. Please to come with us.” I blubbered, “No, no, it is Madame Myrtle here who wants to know. It is Madame Myrtle.” One of them looked around as though expecting to find that another potential customer had somehow materialized, but the others caught on quickly and in a flash switched their gushy attentions to Myrtle, who had started to get up but plopped back onto her chair. She was no match for their attentions, however, and in short order she was whisked off the showroom floor to a small office. However, in a brief panic she snatched my hand on the way and pulled me along.

I won’t bore you with all the details of that happy little meeting, dear readers. We will close this little saga by saying that when Myrtle finally, after about ten minutes of amazing stalling, learned from the contract that appeared magically in front of her waiting for her signature and her credit card, that she would be on the hook for \$15,000, well, I gave her credit for not fainting nor having a heart attack. But her face did pale a bit. Then she rallied and tried to convince them that I was really the one who was interested in buying it – the rat! But I was having none of that. I firmly put the contract back in front of her and said that my financial resources did not reach to even one half of the sum on the paper. Brilliant move on my part if say so myself! The attention of all four salespeople dropped from me like I had suddenly developed a bad smell, and they tightened around Myrtle. However, she simply batted her baby blues and looked at them piteously with a few tears in her eyes and a story she made up on the spot about how her ex-husband, the brute, had stolen all her money, leaving her nearly a pauper, etc. etc. Wow! I even saw a tear in one eye. How does she get away with that?!

Meanwhile, I saw that I was no longer needed in that office, and I quietly exited and started to look around the showroom on my own. I steered far away from the vision above that made me nearly swoon, you’d better believe it!

But I soon found that a handsome salesman had attached himself to my wandering and he kept up a steady patter as we walked. “In this beautiful place, Madame, there are 2000 celestial workers. We are the largest lacquer factory in this province. A lot of our classic furniture was destroyed during the cultural revolution because it was too beautiful. Can you believe it? Finally the revolution was behind us and in 1980 we started to sell on the world market. Now the beauty you see here can be enjoyed around the whole world.

I see you are very interested in lacquerware, Madame. Now lacquer is a tree sap. The first lacquerware was made 6000 years ago. We still follow the process of the Han Dynasty today, isn’t that amazing? In the mountains grow the lacquer trees. We collect the sap in late summer. The resin turns black and brown on exposure to air. We use pine panels and dry them for one month, wrapped with linen, then

covered with three layers of lacquer plaster that shrinks the linen and makes the wood very straight and strong. Then the panel is sandpapered until smooth. Then the first coat of raw lacquer is applied with a brush. Then the panel is polished and redone. We put 30 layers of coating and polishing on the panel, Madame. Can you believe it? Then the panels have a mirror-like surface. Now we use super glue to glue jade and mother of pearl to the panels. All painting is done by hand. Now we give the panels another 20 coats of clear lacquer thinned with solvent. This whole process takes 40 days in the summer and 60 days in the spring and summer because of the drying time. Now, voila, Madame! You have a heat proof, waterproof, and acid-proof finish, never a water ring. You saw that beautiful mural on the outside wall? That painting is lacquer – waterproof. One additional point, Madame. To check the quality of true lacquerware furniture you check the dovetail joints. There must be no nails, Madame, none.”



He undoubtedly spotted the lustful gleam in my eye as I took a photograph of this unbelievable 4-panel screen. He followed me as I circled it in rapture until I happened to spot the price tag, “\$20,000. Yikes and quintuple yikes! How do I manage to fall in love with things whose price tags are likely to give me a heart attack? As the salesman took out his small pad and pen, I spotted the white peacocks next to another exquisite floral screen and I exclaimed, “Oh, that is just so extremely beautiful my heart wants to stop beating to honor the unworldly beauty.” I congratulated myself for coming up with this confusing bit of stalling. The salesman blinked a few times as he tried to decode what I said, and he quickly offered me a chair. But I made a beeline for those peacocks and leaned in to learn that they

would set me back \$4500, only about ten times what my budget could afford. I sighed and scanned the silk needlework cranes in a lacquerware frame nearby, only \$7500. I sighed again.



My helpful salesman came to my side and said, “Madame, thanks to generous visitors to our country, like you, and to people around the world who buy the beautiful things we make here in China, the income of the Chinese people is rising rapidly, so the price of everything keeps going up. It is not the fault of the Chinese people, you see. It is the fault of everything we make being too beautiful.” He gave his own great sigh and shrugged his shoulders while looking at me soulfully. Then he quickly started making notes on his order pad as he briskly said,

“Madame, because you are so kind and have such a discriminating eye, I will offer you, and only to you, a price reduction on one of these exquisite pieces of artwork that you admire. Which of these are speaking to your heart, begging you to take them home with you?” He showed me price reductions on his ordering pad and watched my eyes travel over the numbers, waiting to pounce should my eyes linger on one. Unfortunately, my eyes betrayed my brain and before I knew what was happening, the

salesman was calling to two burly assistants to come help move the peacocks to his office to be wrapped for transport.

Myrtle, heaven love her cotton-picking little heart, came swooping in at that exact moment, breathless and panicky. “JoJo! You must come quickly! DoDo has died! DoDo has died!” She gave a little bow and a “Nihow” to the salesman and then continued to wail, “Oh, JoJo, whatever shall we do? DoDo has died! Oh, JoJo, you must come quickly, come quickly!” She yanked on my arm, nearly toppling me, and started running to the exit, pulling me with her out into the parking lot, where she pulled me behind our bus and we both stood panting, leaning against it. I peeked around the corner and was relieved that we had not been pursued by the salesman.

When I got my breath back, I said, “Myrtle, who the hell is DoDo?” She spat back, “YOU are, you idiot! If I hadn’t seen how that salesman had got you in his clutches, hook, line, and sinker, you would have bought that thing and gone hungry for the next year!” She huffed, and I huffed right back. “I most certainly would NOT! I was not even CLOSE to buying that thing. Hmph!” But a little voice was saying quietly to me, “Oh, yes, you were, idiot.”

I sighed.

Just then I heard our guide’s voice asking the driver to open our bus doors, and when she left to retrieve the rest of her ducklings, I snuck onto the bus and found a window seat and opened my little book, pretending to read. When Myrtle joined me, I did not even look up.

Then there was a delay, and we learned that one of our group had bought the large lacquer table and eight chairs and was still arranging transport to the United States. Then we learned it was ObOff! Oh, dear! Then it was Myrtle’s turn to get huffy, and boy, she really got huffy. “That hussy! She has no right to that table! That was MY table! That Jezabel! That Two-Timer! She stole my table!” Really, dear reader, Myrtle was getting so het up and incensed I totally forgot my own embarrassment as I worried about her. I wanted so desperately to ask her how it could be her table if she never bought it, but I knew from experience that any comment I made, anything at all, would just add fuel to the fire; so I wisely zipped my lip while she muttered and stewed. I saw a few concerned looks sent her way, but in short order our bus was loaded and belched once as we took off and our guide grabbed the pole to stay upright while she retrieved her trusty microphone to recap our day and prepare us for the next one.



Part of her lecture was how to polish furniture safely. It was so surprising to me that I even wrote down the recipe: refined wheat flour, soybean oil or canola oil or olive oil. Put oil in bowl, add flour. Make dough ball, polish furniture for 20-30 minutes with the dough ball. I did a double take: "polish for 20-30 minutes?!" You must be kidding! It would take me more than TWO HOURS to polish just my six chairs! Sigh. So much for environmentally friendly housekeeping! Sigh.

When we got back to our hotel, Myrtle snatched a piece of bamboo out of this pot, like a common thief, I told her, and her theft totally destroyed the pleasing and Chi-friendly arrangement of the bamboo, which annoyed me. Then she crushed that poor bamboo before throwing it in front of ObOff's door, hoping, I guess, that the abused bamboo would bring ObOff bad luck. Poor bamboo.

To be continued.