



The Empty Pot

Readers Theater Play Script and Performance Notes

AUTHORS: Clarice Cabanlit, COUNTRY: China, GENRE: Folktales



CHARACTERS

NARRATOR

EMPEROR

ROYAL ADVISOR

ROYAL GUARD

YANG

MANCHU

RONG

SHEN

VILLAGE BOY #1 / MERCHANT #1 / YANG'S PARENT

VILLAGE BOY #2 / MERCHANT #2 / MANCHU'S PARENT

VILLAGE BOY #3 / MERCHANT #3 / RONG'S PARENT

SHEN'S MOTHER / VILLAGE GIRL #1

SHEN'S FATHER / VILLAGE GIRL #2

EMPEROR

If there are performance notes, they can be found on the pages following the script

Scene 1 – Emperor’s Throne Room

[**Stage Set:** The backdrop is painted with three areas: (1) the EMPEROR’s throne room; (2) a village scene; and (3) the home of SHEN, a boy. For the EMPEROR’s throne room, show on a painted backdrop a wall adorned with large Asian art frames, book-ended by columns, and along the top of the wall, ceiling trim made of thick red velvet and trimmed in gold. The throne is a large chair covered with red felt, to look like velvet, and a rug runner (or facsimile) leads to the throne. If you can, add curtains on top of the throne for an authentic touch. (See **Performance Notes** for more detail on the Emperor’s throne room.) The rest of the backdrop and set designs are described later.]

NARRATOR:

Hello, everyone. This play is “The Empty Pot,” a folktale from China. It is brought to you by *Stories to Grow by*.

[NARRATOR steps forward.]

NARRATOR:

Once upon a time in China there lived an Emperor who loved flowers more than anything. His special pride was the royal flower garden, and that was magnificent. Everyone else in the land was inspired to plant flowers, too. The very air throughout the entire kingdom smelled like perfume.

[NARRATOR breathes deeply and says “Mmm, mmmh!” as though he is smelling something wonderful.]

NARRATOR:

Ah, here’s the Emperor now.

[EMPEROR enters, followed by ROYAL GUARD. EMPEROR looks distressed.]

NARRATOR:

Lately, he has not seemed his usual, happy self. But why?

[EMPEROR sits on his throne. ROYAL GUARD stands to the side with arms crossed.]

EMPEROR:

(*raises his arm with finger in the air and makes an “Aha!” gesture, then calls offstage*) My Royal Advisor, come at once!

[ROYAL ADVISOR enters.]

ROYAL ADVISOR:

(*bows*) Sire?

EMPEROR:

I've got it! At last, an answer to the problem that has been vexing me for so long.

ROYAL ADVISOR:

That is good news! One should always be less vexed, Your Excellency.

EMPEROR:

Yet with no son and heir, it is an Emperor's lot to worry — who will inherit the crown? But now I know the answer!

ROYAL ADVISOR:

Excellent, your Excellency!

EMPEROR:

This will be my decree: Any boy in the realm who wishes to be Emperor must come to the palace and receive a special royal flower seed. In three months, the boy with the finest flower will become my heir and the next Emperor of the land!

ROYAL ADVISOR:

What a fine idea! I shall make the announcement at once. *(bows)* Sire. *(to audience)* What does raising flowers have to do with running a kingdom? But he's our Emperor. He must know what he's doing.

[NARRATOR steps forward.]

NARRATOR:

Soon the word was out.

[ROYAL GUARD enters, followed by YANG, MANCHU, RONG, VILLAGE BOY #1, VILLAGE BOY #2, VILLAGE BOY #3, and SHEN. The youngsters are pretending to push each other, trying to be the first in line. *(Remember, no real pushing- this is all pretend!)*]

YANG:

I was first!

MANCHU:

No, I was!

RONG:

Me, me!

[ROYAL GUARD tries to make the boys line up in an orderly way. YANG is first in line, followed by MANCHU, RONG, VILLAGE BOY #1, VILLAGE BOY #2, VILLAGE BOY #3, and last, SHEN.]

ROYAL GUARD:

(points at Yang, says sternly) You! No pushing! *(to all assembled)* Let's have some order. Quiet now, everyone! The Royal Advisor has an announcement.

[ROYAL ADVISOR enters.]

ROYAL ADVISOR:

As you have no doubt heard, the Emperor is hosting a royal contest to decide who will be heir to the throne.

[CROWD is abuzz with excitement.]

ROYAL ADVISOR:

Silence!

[CROWD goes instantly silent.]

ROYAL ADVISOR:

Any boy who wants to compete will receive one royal flower seed. After three months, he must return to the palace with your plant. The one with the finest flower will win the contest. He will be proclaimed as the heir and next in line to wear the crown!

[CROWD is again excited. ROYAL ADVISOR motions for YANG to approach.]

ROYAL ADVISOR:

So, who among you thinks he would like to be Emperor some day? *(all the boys wave their arms, and Advisor points to Yang)* You! Come here. *(hands Yang a seed)*

YANG:

(clenches the seed with glee) This seed will be the mother seed of all seeds! No one stands a chance against me!

ROYAL ADVISOR:

Whatever. Next!

[ROYAL ADVISOR points to MANCHU. MANCHU approaches and ROYAL ADVISOR hands MANCHU a seed.]

MANCHU:

(holds seed tightly in fist) This is my ticket! I will be Emperor! *(makes a victory sign)*

ROYAL ADVISOR:

(to audience) Kids! *(to the line)* Next!

[ROYAL ADVISOR, in turn, hands each boy a seed, each time saying “Here.” The boy who receives the seed does a short victory dance the way football players sometimes do when making a touchdown. Then that boy exits and ROYAL ADVISOR gives a seed to the next boy in line, etc.]

[The last to receive a seed is SHEN.]

SHEN:

(clutches seed to his chest) Aah—excellent!

[SHEN exits.]

[ROYAL GUARD and ROYAL ADVISOR exit through the palace section of the backdrop.]

[EMPEROR exits.]

Scene 2 – Village market

[**Stage Set:** A simple village scene. The backdrop shows a line of crowded booths displaying fruit and other wares, each topped by a red and yellow canopy with Chinese letters, signs, pictures, or banners describing the merchandise.]

[YANG, MANCHU, and RONG enter. They pantomime talking to each other. SHEN enters.]

SHEN:

(pleasantly) Hi there. Everyone get a seed?

YANG:

Yes—not that it matters for anyone else. Look at that baby. *(shows seed in his palm)* Check out the dark color. The size of that seed! It's practically growing already, right here in my hand.

MANCHU:

(looks at the seed in Yang's hand) When's the last time you washed your hands, Yang?

YANG:

(pulls back hand) You'd better watch what you say! When I'm Emperor, you won't dare talk to me that way! *(sighs loudly)* I'll have servants to do whatever I tell them to. *(turns to audience and points to someone)* You! Stand up! *(hopefully that person will stand up)* Ahhh, that'll be the life!!

MANCHU:

(to Yang) Earth to YANG! Have you ever considered someone else might win? Like ME, for example.

YANG:

What? Dream on! No way will YOU ever be Emperor.

[YANG and MANCHU scowl and move toward each other threateningly.]

SHEN:

Hey you two, shouldn't we all be getting home to plant our seeds?

YANG:

(to audience) He's got a point. I'm out of here. *(runs offstage)*

MANCHU:

Not before I am, you're not! *(follows Yang offstage)*

SHEN:

(calls to them) Careful, don't drop your seed! *(to Rong)* We might as well get started with our seeds, too.

RONG:

Yep. See you later.

[SHEN and RONG exit.]

Scene 3 – Outside Shen's home

[**Stage Set:** This is a simple home garden. Bring onstage on a table and three chairs, and surround the area with small clay planters. The backdrop is painted to show a roofline of SHEN'S home scooping upward, in traditional Chinese style.]

[SHEN'S MOTHER and SHEN'S FATHER are sitting at the table, talking to each other quietly. They look up when SHEN enters. SHEN runs excitedly toward them while holding up his seed.]

SHEN:

Mother! Father! Guess what I have? It's a royal seed! Let me tell you what happened ...

[NARRATOR enters. As NARRATOR speaks the lines below, SHEN pantomimes telling his parents about the royal contest.]

NARRATOR:

And so Shen explained to his parents all about the royal contest.

SHEN'S FATHER:

So, my son, you figure this is your big chance.

SHEN:

Why not? Everyone loved the melons I grew last summer. Remember how big and juicy they were?

SHEN'S FATHER:

True enough.

SHEN'S MOTHER:

Well, you might as well get started. Nothing will grow by standing here and talking about it.

SHEN:

It's still too early in the day to plant. I'll wait till the sun has gone down and the heat of the day is behind us.

SHEN'S MOTHER:

I guess you do know about planting.

SHEN:

And I know the perfect pot to use.

[SHEN looks around and picks up a couple of pots, considering each one in turn and then setting it down.]

SHEN'S FATHER:

Aren't all pots pretty much the same?

SHEN:

(looks around again then kneels beside a pot) Ah, this one. *(holds it up)* Perfect. Not so big the roots feels lost, not so small that it can't grow to its full potential. First I'll cover the bottom with big pebbles, then a layer of smaller pebbles for drainage. I'll add the richest, blackest soil I have. And then before I plant the seed...

SHEN'S FATHER:

Do tell.

SHEN:

(leans forward) I dampen the soil with water. So from the very first moment when the seed is planted, it's ready to grow.

SHEN'S MOTHER:

My goodness, you've thought of everything!

SHEN:

Once it sprouts, I'll check on it 20 times a day.

SHEN'S FATHER:

Uh.. don't forget you have chores to do.

SHEN'S MOTHER:

(laughs lightly) Until you become Emperor, that is.

SHEN:

You'll see. This will be the best flower, ever!

[SHEN exits.]

SHEN'S FATHER:

I didn't hear him say he was going to keep up with the chores.

SHEN'S MOTHER:

Yep, it doesn't seem to be at the top of his mind.

Scene 4 – Village market, a few weeks later

[**Stage Set:** This time, bring out several small tables. Standing behind the first table is MERCHANT #1, behind the second table is MERCHANT #2, and behind the third table is MERCHANT #3. Depending on your props, the merchants could sell fruit, scarves, vegetables, pottery, or agricultural tools.]

[VILLAGE GIRL #1 and VILLAGE GIRL #2 enter. They browse the wares on the three tables and pantomime talking among themselves.]

[NARRATOR enters. Followed by YANG, MANCHU, RONG and SHEN. YANG and MANCHU each hold a pot with a young plant. (See **Performance Notes** on how to construct the plants.)]

NARRATOR:

Look who's here. I wonder how their plants are coming.

YANG:

Look! (*holds up a pot with plant*) Have you ever seen such big green leaves? I can't wait to see the flower that blooms on this one. It will be HUGE! I sure didn't have any problem with THIS seed.

MANCHU:

I had no problems with my seed, either! It started growing on the very first day, as a matter of fact!

[YANG and MANCHU glare at each other, threateningly.]

VILLAGE GIRL #1:

I heard some of the boys had problems with their seeds.

VILLAGE GIRL #2:

That's what I heard, too.

MANCHU:

(*overhearing them*) I don't know what you're talking about.

VILLAGE GIRL #1:

Quit eavesdropping! We heard that some of the seeds didn't sprout, that's all.

RONG:

Even if I got a bad seed – which I DID NOT! — I'm sure it would grow in MY pot. Not that I'm saying I got a bad seed. I'm not saying that in the least.

MANCHU:

Well, I'm not saying I got a bad seed, either. Absolutely not.

RONG:

I don't know about anyone else. MY seed is perfectly fine.

YANG:

Mine's perfect!

MANCHU:

Nothing wrong with mine!

YANG, MANCHU, and RONG (turn to the audience and together say):

Except...

[VILLAGE GIRL #1 and VILLAGE GIRL #2 look at each other and shrug.]

VILLAGE GIRL #1:

Boys make no sense at all.

VILLAGE GIRL #2:

So what else is new? Who cares about those stupid seeds, anyway?

[VILLAGE GIRL #1 and VILLAGE GIRL #2 go back to looking at the merchant's wares.]

RONG:

(shows the others his plant) See for yourself. It's coming along pretty well, you have to admit.

YANG:

My leaves are greener.

MANCHU:

My plant is taller.

YANG:

My stalk is thicker!

MANCHU:

My buds are bigger!

RONG:

Will you two give it a rest?

MANCHU:

(cups hands to his mouth as if whispering) Hey. I heard that Shen's seed hasn't even sprouted. His pot is dark. Empty. Not one leaf.

[SHEN enters with a sad face.]

MANCHU:

Here he is. Let's ask him.

[SHEN stops at the rightmost table. RONG walks over to him.]

RONG:

Shen! How are you doing?

SHEN:

Not so good.

RONG:

Why?

SHEN:

My seed. It hasn't sprouted.

RONG:

That's hard to believe.

SHEN:

I did everything I could think of. But nothing!

RONG:

Don't worry, Shen. There's still time. Um... is there anything you can do to move things along?

SHEN:

I changed the pot two weeks ago! Rong, this has never happened to me before.

RONG:

I don't know what to say.

SHEN:

Even if a shoot appears tomorrow, I'll still be way behind. I'll never catch up!

[YANG and MANCHU walk over to SHEN and RONG.]

MANCHU:

(*to Shen*) So we hear you have yourself an empty pot. Tough luck.

YANG:

Face it, Shen. You are not Emperor material. While I, on the other hand.. (*preens*)

MANCHU:

Here we go again.

YANG:

...was BORN to RULE!

RONG:

(*shows his pot*) Look at my pot. I've got a perfectly good sprout.

MANCHU:

(*leans over*) Where? I can't see it. (*looks more closely in the pot*) Oh, THAT sprout? Looks like a speck of dust.

MANCHU:

Rong, do you still have that pouch of almond cookies?

RONG:

(*checks pockets*) Sorry, Manchu. I ate them all.

YANG:

You mean your pouch is ... empty, right?

RONG:

I think I know where you're going with this.

YANG:

As empty as...

YANG, RONG, and MANCHU together:

...Shen's pot! (*laugh*)

SHEN:

(*sadly*) I'd better go back to my garden. (*to Rong*) Anyway, it's good your seed came up.

[SHEN exits.]

YANG:

That got rid of him.

RONG:

Yang, is that a lady bug I see on your plant?

YANG:

What?! (*hovers over his plant worriedly*)

RONG:

(*shrugs*) Just sayin'..!

[YANG runs offstage, cradling his plant.]

RONG:

(*to Manchu*) Well, that got rid of HIM.

[All actors exit.]

Scene 5 – Emperor’s throne room, three months later

[Stage Set: same as the set in Scene 1.]

[NARRATOR enters.]

NARRATOR:

Three months passed. The day of judgement arrived when the boys were to return to the palace to show their plants. That morning the boys cleaned their pots carefully till they shone. They wiped each leaf with care, and each petal, till it glistened. The boys dressed in their finest clothes. Some mothers or fathers came with their sons to the palace.

[EMPEROR enters, followed by ROYAL GUARD and ROYAL ADVISOR. EMPEROR sits on the throne. ROYAL GUARD stands to one side, arms crossed as before. ROYAL ADVISOR stands to the other side.]

[YANG, YANG’S PARENT, MANCHU, MANCHU’S PARENT, RONG, and RONG’S PARENT enter. YANG, MANCHU, and RONG each hold a pot with a beautiful flower. SHEN, SHEN’S FATHER and SHEN’S MOTHER enter. Shen holds an empty pot.]

SHEN:

I can’t believe this. (*hangs head*)

SHEN’S MOTHER:

It is what it is, Shen.

SHEN’S FATHER:

You did your best. What else could you do?

SHEN’S MOTHER:

The old Chinese saying is you can’t walk half the road and give up. And you didn’t – you saw this one through.

SHEN:

I know. (*looks around*) But I’m the only one here with an empty pot!

ROYAL GUARD:

(*steps forward*) Attention, everyone!

ROYAL ADVISOR:

(*also steps forward*) Welcome! Three months ago, I gave each of you a royal seed. Today the Emperor will judge the best result. And now... His Majesty, the Emperor of China!

[EMPEROR stands up.]

EMPEROR:

(starts to examine the flowers in the pots) Hmm... *(frowns as he looks at each pot, in turn)*
Interesting! How remarkable! *(to Yang)* Did this plant grow from your seed?

YANG:

Of course, Your Majesty!

EMPEROR:

The seed you got from the palace three months ago?

YANG:

The very one!

EMPEROR:

(to Manchu) And yours, too?

MANCHU:

Indeed yes, Your Majesty! I planted the royal seed and tended it with care. Now look at it!

EMPEROR:

(comes to Rong's plant and scowls) Harumph!

[EMPEROR comes to SHEN.]

EMPEROR:

And what is THIS? An empty pot?

SHEN:

(voice shakes) I tried, Your Majesty. I did everything I could think of. But nothing! No disrespect for the royal seed, of course, Your Majesty. *(hangs head)* It just didn't grow.

EMPEROR:

(thunders) And now you have the nerve to come here with an empty pot?

SHEN:

I am sorry, Your Majesty.

[The EMPEROR stands quietly for a moment and then frowns at the other boys.]

EMPEROR:

(to the other boys) Well, it appears there is only one honest fellow among you!

[The crowd murmurs with confusion.]

EMPEROR:

(angrily to the other boys) I don't know where all you boys got your seeds, but there is no way your plants could have grown from the seeds we passed out for the contest ... Because the seeds all had been COOKED!

YANG'S PARENT:

What?

MANCHU'S PARENT:

What did he say?

RONG'S PARENT:

The seeds were cooked?

SHEN'S MOTHER:

Nothing grows from a cooked seed!

SHEN'S FATHER:

Everyone knows that!

[EMPEROR walks back to his throne and stands in front of it. ROYAL GUARD and ROYAL ADVISOR follow him and take their positions beside his throne.]

EMPEROR:

Three months ago, I instructed my Royal Advisor to pass out seeds that had been cooked. Only THIS young man... Um, your name, son?

SHEN:

Shen, Your Majesty.

EMPEROR:

Only SHEN had the courage to appear before me with the truth, his empty pot. And so now, may I present to you all... Shen, the winner of the contest!

SHEN:

(to his parents) What, I won? I won the contest?!

EMPEROR:

Shen, step up. *(motions for Shen)* I now proclaim you to be my heir, and after my reign is finished, you shall be the next Emperor of China!

[ROYAL ADVISOR hands EMPEROR a red satin cape. EMPEROR places cape around SHEN and shakes his hand.]

SHEN:

I don't know what to say, Your Majesty!

EMPEROR:

Your empty pot says it all, Shen.

[All exit.]

[NARRATOR enters]

NARRATOR:

And so when the time came, Shen became the next Emperor of the land. His mother and father moved into the royal palace. Every day Shen tended the royal garden as carefully as the Emperor had done before him. Shen ruled the land in peace and prosperity and was beloved by the people in the land. Well, let's say by MOST of the people..

[YANG enters.]

YANG:

I still can't believe that SHEN got to be Emperor! (*arms up in despair*) AUGHH!

[YANG exits.]

[If you have a curtain, close it now. If you do not, all actors come on stage and bow to the audience.]

Performance Notes for The Empty Pot

THREE WAYS THAT STUDENTS AND TEACHERS CAN UTILIZE THIS PLAY

1. Students can read the play aloud while sitting in the classroom. Ask the readers to skip all bracketed stage directions. You may prefer to rotate your actors to give all students a chance to read the speaking parts.
2. Students can perform the play in the classroom. Clear an area that can be used as the stage. Have the audience sit on the floor in front of the stage. Students in the play can make simple costumes and/or sets as described below. When the scene change, the characters "on stage" simply walk to the back of the room where they wait until their next appearance "on stage."
3. Students can perform the play on stage. Refer to the production notes that follow. Ask the actors to enter from the back of the room and move through the audience as they approach the stage.



COSTUMES

- ROYAL GUARD #1, ROYAL GUARD #2, and ROYAL GUARD # 3 — Mandarin collar shirts with long sleeves along with pairs of trousers. The colors of the shirts should be lighter than the colors of the trousers. Also, red conical Chinese hats (see below). Optional: Black beards can be drawn on their faces using black eyeliner pencil.

To make the Royal Guards' hats: Start with cardboard or cardstock. To determine the size of the cardboard/cardstock, measure the head of the actor who will wear the hat and cut a circle about twice that size. Cut a slit

in the circle from the outer edge the paper into the center. Bring the edges together so that the base is larger than the top. Glue edges in place. Use hairpins to ensure that the hat will not fall off the actors' heads.

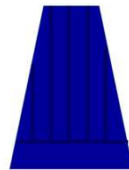
See image below:



- **ROYAL ADVISOR** — A blue robe tied with a purple belt at the waist and a blue special cylinder hat on his head (see below).

To make the Royal Advisor's hat: Start with a rectangular piece of blue cardboard or cardstock. To determine the size of the cardboard/cardstock, measure the head of the actor who will wear the hat and use a rectangle about twice as long. Bring the edges together so that the base is larger than the top. Glue edges in place. Draw some vertical lines at the front. Use hairpins to ensure that the hat will not fall off the actors' heads.

See image below:



- **YANG, MANCHU, RONG, and VILLAGE BOYS** — round-necked t-shirts and shorts, similar to SHEN's. In Scene 4, the boys wear Mandarin collar shirts and trousers.
- **SHEN'S MOTHER, SHEN'S FATHER, YANG'S MOTHER, YANG'S, FATHER, HOPEYANGL MOTHER, HOPEYANGL FATHER, and VILLAGE PEOPLE** — plain, dull-colored shirts. Males wear neutral-colored trousers, and females wear dark skirts.
- **SHEN** — a round-necked t-shirt and a pair of black shorts in SCENE 1, SCENE 2, and SCENE 3. In SCENE 4, he wears a Mandarin collar shirt and a pair of trousers.



- VILLAGE GIRLS — wear light-colored shirts and dark skirts.
- EMPEROR — wears a yellow satin robe tied with a red belt at the waist and a special hat on his head (see below). He has a long white moustache and beard that can be made out of white paper. Optional: Baby powder or cornstarch can be placed in his hair to make him look older.

To make the Emperor's hat: Start with a rectangular piece of yellow cardboard or cardstock. To determine the length of the cardboard, measure the head of the actor who will wear the hat and cut a rectangle about twice as long. Bring the edges together to form a lopsided cylinder with a base that is larger in circumference than the top. Glue the edges in place. Draw some vertical lines at the front.

Take a black rectangular piece of cardboard that is big enough to cover the top part of the cylinder that you just made. Give an extra two inches so that some part of it will protrude. Glue this piece to the top of the yellow cardboard cylinder.

Around the base, glue a small strip of red paper. Cut a small piece of blue foil in an oval shape, to represent a jewel. Glue this to the center of the red strip. Use hairpins to ensure that the hat will not fall off the actors' heads.

See image below:





PROPS

Scene 1

- Large potted plants, columns, statues, or other decorative embellishments to indicate the royal garden.
- A chair to represent the throne. The chair can be covered in shiny fabric.

Scene 2

- Colored marbles to be used as seeds. If marbles are not available, any round objects covered with colored construction paper can also be used. The total number will depend on the number of actors who will get seeds from ROYAL ADVISOR.
- The same large potted plants, columns, statues, or other decorative embellishments to indicate the royal garden.

Scene 4

- Several potted plants (flowering and non-flowering). The plants can be real or made from paper.
- A small table.
- Three chairs.
- An empty pot covered with silver foil.
- Various pots and pans.

Scene 5

- Bread (can be real or cut out of cardboard or paper).
- Fake fruits and vegetables (can be cut out of cardboard or paper).
- Fake fish and fake meat (can be cut out of cardboard or paper).
- A variety of pots with plants sprouting out for YANG, MANCHU, RONG, and other VILLAGE BOYS. The plants can be constructed of green cardboard, should be leafy, and can be stiffened by taping long wooden dowels or rods to their backs. The total number will depend on the number of actors who will use them.



Scene 6

- A red satin cape.
- An empty pot.
- Pots with plants (the flowers held by YANG, MANCHU, RONG, and other VILLAGE BOYS should be YANG-sized. You can make the flowers quite big to stand in visual contrast to SHEN's empty pot.)



SETS

- **Scene 1**— The façade of a palace is seen on the right side in scene 1. This can be done by drawing two pillars and a door on a large piece of Manila paper. On the left side is a garden. A backdrop can be painted showing trees, flowers, and nice landscaping. If a backdrop is not possible, simple cutouts of trees and flowers can be used.
- **Scene 2** — SHEN's house has a garden that can be seen on the left side. A table and three chairs are set up in front of it. Pots of plants, both flowering and non-flowering, are lined up near the edge of the stage. One pot is empty. On the right side are the trees and flowers used in scene 1.
- **Scene 3** — Several tables are spread out across the stage to depict a village market.
- **Scene 4** — Place a chair in the center of the stage for the Emperor's throne room. The chair is covered with satin fabric. Behind it is a backdrop showing a golden arc painted with nice designs.

