Porcelain Jar with Wucai Decoration of Lion and Peony

Height: 33 cm. (13 in.)
Early Qing dynasty
17th century

Recent provenance: Japan

The sturdy porcelain jar is of baluster shape thrown with thick walls rising from a concave, unglazed base with beveled edge to the rounded shoulder and upright neck. The jar is decorated with an exuberant design produced with an array of enamel colors—green, yellow, cobalt blue, and black—along with cobalt under the glaze which produced a deep blue. The sides are decorated with four lions frolicking amidst scrolling peonies. Two large, roaring yellow beasts frisking among the vines alternate with two tamer, more docile lions picked out in green with yellow heads, all with black detailing and iron red highlights. Each lion is surrounded by large peony blossoms in yellow, iron red and cobalt all borne on sweeping green vines and a proliferation of green leaves and all outlined in black for emphasis forming a joyful pattern. The green leaves are interspersed with larger wet looking blue leaves, a profusion of which ring the shoulder beneath a border of "cracked ice," painted in underglaze blue. An unusual detail on this jar is the two-character inscription written in cobalt beneath one of the upright leaves of red, green and blue that encircle the neck: xunsheng, "prosperous life.

Overglaze-enamel colors and the lively designs they create took on a particularly jubilant nature from the mid-Ming dynasty onward in the decoration of porcelain. The ceramics are carnival-like, a bit wild, and fun. Dragons dressed in bright colors with their eyeballs bulging—how can they be taken seriously? Lions romp and play with brocade balls. The old order of things, when porcelains seem to have taken themselves more seriously, gave way to a kind of comfortable chaos. Lions burst into the peony garden and appear to be delighted at having done so.

Towards the end of the Ming dynasty new compositional modes were developed, and simple ones at that, to accommodate the literary scenes that were the vogue in decoration. Dispensing with panels and excessive borders allowed for a simple "canvas" upon which the picture could unfold. This simplification, or reunification, of the body of a vessel was used to advantage also for such subjects as the present lion and peony in which the energy and dominance of the design are not interrupted or challenged. A jar also decorated with a lion-and-peony design in the Tokyo National Museum is attributed to the 17th-18th century but exhibits such an extremely conservative composition and old-fashioned border motifs one is tempted to suggest an earlier date (fig. 1). The marvelous tall vase in the Palace Museum in Beijing, its slender body wrapped with green stems that sprout green and blue leaves and brilliant red peonies, is more up-to-date aesthetically for the early Qing period (figs. 2-3). The border on the narrow shoulder at first looks rather strange but is recognizable as a form of the "cracked-ice" pattern, a decorative device that was a true innovation at this time and present on our lion-and-peony jar.

In examining the design on our piece closely, it became apparent that it was not a haphazard arrangement of lines that is characteristic of the pattern observable in later wares. The present, and the Palace Museum jar also, have too much rhyme and reason; they do not look like cracked ice. It looks, instead, as if a diagonal diamond-diaper or some standard geometric border had been brushed on with greater rapidity than usual and became in the

Fig. 1: Porcelain jar with wucai decoration of lion and peony, 17th-18th century, Tokyo National Museum, after Illustrated Catalogue of the Tokyo National Museum, Chinese Ceramics II, Tokyo, 1990, fig. 601.
Fig. 2: Porcelain jar with wucai decoration of peony, Qing dynasty, Shunzhi period, after Wucai dingcai, "Porcelains in Polychrome and Contrasting Colours: The Complete Collection of the Treasures of the Palace Museum," Shanghai, 1999, cat. no. 61.

Fig. 3: Detail of figure 2.

Fig. 4: Porcelain jar with wucai phoenix decoration, Qing dynasty, Shunzhi period, 17th century, Butler Family Collection, after Seventeenth Century Jingdezhen Porcelain from the Shanghai Museum and the Butler Collection: Beauty’s Enhancement, Shanghai, 2005, no. 132, p. 345.

process a bit disjointed, and perhaps one thing led to another. One sees this too in other porcelains, for example, the phoenix-decorated jar in the Butler collection which has an overall composition, interestingly against a diaper ground, with a ‘cracked-ice’ border on the neck in red enamel, a pattern that is really quite orderly (figs. 4-5). It appears that the present jar might be ascribed, as are many with similar features, to the Shunzhi period (1644-1661) in the early Qing when this device was being formulated. This is a reign era whose achievements in por-
celain production received little attention until a number of important exhibitions were presented and studies published, the foremost being that by Michael Butler, Julia B. Curtis, and Stephen Little. In their catalogue an underglaze-blue decorated jar with a design of lions romping in floral scrolls was described as having a “Buddhist lion and plant design,” recalling for us the origin of these subjects: the Tang-dynasty design of lions frolicking amidst grapevines, inspired by Buddhist ideas and icons imported from India (fig. 6).