13. An Unusual *Yingqing* Pillow

Height: 14.0 cm. (5 1/2 in.)
Length: 22.8 cm. (9 in.)
Depth: 12.8 cm. (5 in.)
Southern Song-early Yuan period
13th century A.D.

Provenance: an American private collection

The pillow was built out of an off-white porcelanous clay with a 'D'-shaped base, slightly raised on four short feet with three hand-modeled broad-trunked trees with fruiting branches supporting a large scalloped lotus-leaf headrest, the leaf's veins deeply incised into the top surface. Reclining on her side among the trees and shaded by the leaf canopy, a slender female figure garbed in a knee-length sheath, likely over a camisole, with folds, neckline and cuffs indicated by incised lines, her legs outstretched and ankles crossed, leaning on one elbow with her other arm wrapped around her upper body. Her hair is swept back in an elaborate coif, coiled and looped and held up with a phoenix-form headdress, a coy smile on her delicately modeled, finely featured face, with long earrings dangling from her pierced ears and extending onto her shoulders. The bluish to greyish-white bright, clear glaze covers all but the undersides of the base and headrest, the female herself and the fronts of the trees coated in glaze, which is casually applied on the ground, a splash of glaze washing up on the right of the figure and pooling below the tree to the left. The clay for the headrest was flattened out on a textile when its slightly bowed shape was being formed, the imprint of a burlap-type cloth visible on the underside of the rest. The porcelanous white body is specked with iron visible on the base and in the glaze, and has burnt an orange color in certain areas.

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A pillow formerly in the Mr. & Mrs. Yeung Wing Tak collection is the only other example that's come to light comparable in composition and construction to the quite extraordinary pillow here. It is constructed with a similar "D"-shaped base and leaf-shaped headrest supported on three massive tree trunks (figs. 1, 1a, 1b). However, in place of the female figure is a rather fanciful floral-like form. It is described as being produced of a light greyish porcelain with brick-red tint on unglazed parts and a faintly greyish *yingqing* glaze. The attribution to the 13th-14th century is likely due to the casual application of the glaze, exposing wide swathes of body, seen to some degree on the present piece, where areas not immediately visible to the viewer likewise escaped the application of glaze.

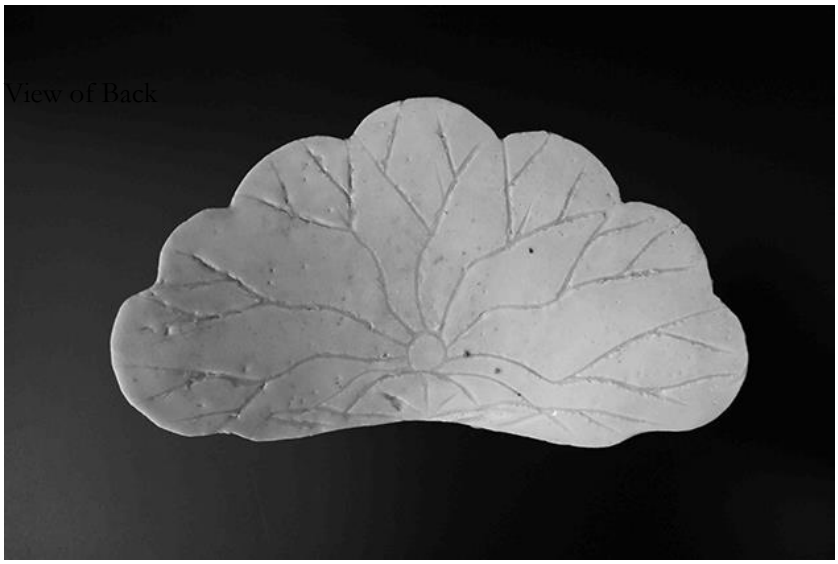
The trees depicted in these pillows are quite intriguing. At first they appear to represent a popular deciduous species, the *wutong*, which has a widespread distribution but is especially prevalent in southern climes—southern China and Southeast Asia, as well as in Yunnan. The *wutong* can be seen forming handsome boarders along city streets or planted in gardens but not restricted to the south (fig. 2). The bold branches can grow from the trunks of these trees in a manner that make them appear like the stretchers and ribs of opened parasols, similar to the branches of the trees depicted on the pillows here. This appearance and perhaps the shade the trees provide with their dense leafage during spring and summer account for their alternate name, "parasol trees." The large inflorescences depicted here

might represent the flowers of the *wutong*, blossoming in large panicles or clusters in the summer months. At the same time the knobs or excrescences present on trunk and branches are reminiscent of the form and growth pattern of the fruit known as durian (fig. 3). Mention ought to be made of the possible phallic nature of the tree branches keeping in mind that such innuendoes and references had been part and parcel of Chinese art since time immemorial.

The female figure of the present piece brings to mind the pillows produced at Jingdezhen during the Southern Song-early Yuan period with supports in the form of attractive reclining ladies, their cleavages exposed. They are known both from their presence in collections (fig. 4) and their discovery during kiln site excavations at Jingdezhen (fig. 5). An example was surprisingly found among the material excavated from the early 14th-century Chinese shipwreck found off the Sinan coast of Korea (fig. 6). In these pillows, the females rest their heads on one arm as does the present figure, while the other arm of each supports the headrest. Small contemporaneous *yingqing* waterdroppers, which would be used in conjunction with ink sticks and ink stones by painters and calligraphers, are sometimes designed with female figures also in repose, perhaps to brighten the day of the busy scholar (figs. 7-8).

In the present pillow the lady is dressed in rather unusual garb—a notable feature is the mid-calf length of the skirt. On the other hand, what appears a daring bodice—here seemingly strapless—does follow Tang couture introduced by female musicians and dancers and evidenced in the ceramic art of the period. This Tang fashion, prevalent in the north, had entered China by way of the Silk Road from Central Asia and while the reclining ladies in figures 4 and 5 are draped in robes covering what are likely strapless sheaths, the bodices are quite revealing. It seems that some thought was given here to establish a particular mood and the "look" of an exotic fashion, however, more likely from the south, and nearer to Jingdezhen, the source of the present pillow. It's been suggested that the figure might have been inspired by thoughts of girls from the southern boarder region, girls dressed in fetching sarongs with hair piled high.

Detail of: Back



Detail of: Headrest

Detail of: Base

Fig. 1: *Yingqing* pillow, Southern Song period, 13th-14th century, Jingdezhen, Museum of the Western Han Tomb of the Nanyue King, Guangzhou, after *Chinese Ceramic Pillows: The Mr. & Mrs. Yeung Wing Tak Gift*, Hong Kong, 1993, pl. 195.

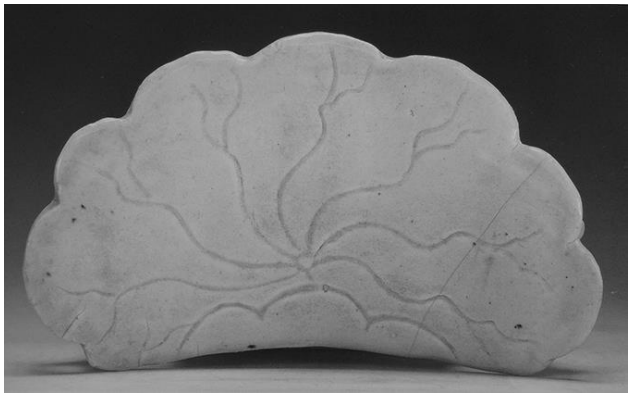


Fig. 1a: Headrest of pillow fig. 1.

Fig. 1b: Base of pillow fig. 1

Fig. 2: Wutong trees lining a city street in China.

Fig. 3: Durian tree with fruit.

Fig. 4: *Yingqing* pillow with reclining female figure, Southern Song period 12th-13th century A.D., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, after *Qinghai Ware: Chinese Porcelain of the Song and Yuan Dynasties*, London, 2002, pl. 125.

Fig. 5: *Yingqing* pillow with reclining female figure, Song dynasty, 13th century A.D., Chenjiang City Museum, after *Zhongguo taoci quanji*, vol. 16 (*Song Yuan qinghaici),* Shanghai and Tokyo, 1984, pl. 1.

Fig. 6: *Yingqing* pillow with reclining female figure, late Song-early Yuan period, Yuan, early 14th century A.D., recovered from the Sinan shipwreck of 1323, after *Special Exhibition of Relics Found off Sinan Coast,* Seoul, 1977, pl. 22.

Fig. 7: *Yingqing* waterdropper, Southern Song period, 12th-13th century A.D., excavated in Anhui, Anhui Provincial Museum, after *Porcelain Collected by Anhui Provincial Museum*, Beijing, 2002, pl. 80, p. 196.

Fig. 8: *Yingqing* waterdropper, Yuan dynasty (or later), 13th-14th century A.D., after Hin-cheung Lovell, ed., *Jingdezhen: The Yuan Evolution*, Hong Kong, 1984, fig. 59, p. 109.