

25. Underglaze-blue Decorated Porcelain Plate with Grapevine and Squirrel Design

Diameter: 41.2 cm. (16 1/4 in.)

Height: 7.3 cm. (3 7/8 in.)

Qing dynasty, Kangxi period

Late 17th-early 18th century A.D.

Acquired in Japan

The large, deep platter rises from the incurved foot with rounded sides rising to a wide flared rim. The interior is painted in the center in a fanciful manner with an asymmetrical pattern of fruiting grapes and vines clustered on the upper left, the tangled branches descending and each dangling three bunches of grapes and leaves, all in dark, fluid cobalt blue. The round grapes are all of the same shape and size and rendered in outline with the centers partially filled with blue and each bunch of grapes is associated with a single large leaf. The tendrils are painted as fine-line curlicues, the grapes, leaves, and tendrils creating a lively and dynamic abstract pattern. Four plump squirrels all in different positions nibble at the grapes, three hanging on to the clumps and one alone has successfully detached a few grapes for himself, all enclosed within two double line borders. The squirrel and grape motif continues on the rim with heavy fruiting vines on the top and the bottom, and somewhat more dispersed on the sides with four ravenous squirrels in profile, equidistant from each other, nibbling at the ripened fruit. The exterior is decorated with three pairs of grape bunches, each pair joined by a long scrolling vine surrounding a beribboned chime within a double circle. The foot is rough with hints of orange on the borders. Overall the glaze is clear and bright enhancing the almost liquid effect of the cobalt drawing. The rim has some slight chipping to the glaze and a small amount of kiln grit on the center of the interior.



Distinguished ancestors of the present monumental dish were produced during the early 15th century, exported at that time to the Middle East and are preserved yet today in such great collections as the Ardebil in Isfahan and the Topkapi Saray Museum in Istanbul (fig. 1). The large size of these dishes served the dining needs of the Islamic patrons and the ornamentation appealed to their taste for teeming florid designs. By the 16th century the fruiting grapevine design, which had been quite stunningly naturalistic despite its strong ornamental component during the early Ming, became more formalized and patterned and comparatively static, while still possessing the features and qualities that had great appeal to the same patrons (fig. 2).¹ The grape vine design was one among many floral and fruit subjects popular at the time. The present dish, which represents the 17th-century incarnation of the longstanding grape design, has been invaded by a family of squirrels who have succeeded in finding the delectable fruit.

Stylistically, the dish is typical of the later 17th century, or Kangxi period, underglaze-blue decorated porcelain: brilliant purplish-blue pigment applied in flat smooth washes against a bright white ground. Although the extravagance of the design can be seen in other contemporaneous ceramics designated for export to the Middle East (figs. 3-4), here the combination of organic and naturalistic elements with a dynamic pattern formed by coiling lines, circles and repetitive leaf shapes resulted in an especially stunning visual statement. The specific design is not a common one in ceramic art but does occur on pieces preserved, for example, in the Topkapi Saray Museum (figs. 5-6) and the Tokyo National Museum (fig.

7) and despite the various vessel shapes, the manner in which the elements of the design are drawn or painted is extremely consistent.

The word for squirrel in Chinese is *songsbu*, “tree rat,” and here the creatures do have that rodent look. In China this rather odd subject appears to have been developed during the Mongol domination in China. The squirrel became a symbol of the small-minded Mongol conquerors who were eating away at China’s inherent wealth as the squirrels were shown fattening themselves on the bountiful grapes that were their prey. The original meaning of this subject would have been lost in the Islamic world where the lively and charming nature of the subject and stunning presentation would have been all that mattered.

1. For a similar dish see *Kaikodo Journal XXV* (Spring 2009), no. 18, p. 63. Also see Regina Krahl (with Nurdan Erbahar and John Ayers): *Chinese Ceramics in the Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul*, vol. II (*Yuan and Ming Dynasty Porcelains*), London, 1986, p. 620, where it is noted that 31 of these dishes are in the collection.



Fig. 1: Underglaze-blue grapevine decorated porcelain plate, Ming dynasty, early 15th century A.D., Ardebil Shrine, Isfahan, after John Pope, *Chinese Porcelain from the Ardebil Shrine*, Washington D.C., 1968, p. 37 (top).



Fig. 2: Underglaze-blue grapevine decorated porcelain plate, Ming dynasty, 16th century A.D., Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul, after Regina Krahl (with Nurdan Erbahar and John Ayers): *Chinese Ceramics in the Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul*, vol. II (*Yuan and Ming Dynasty Porcelains*), London, 1986, no. 884, p. 620.



Fig. 3: Underglaze-blue fish-and-flower decorated porcelain plate, Qing dynasty, 17th century A.D., Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul, after Regina Krahl (with Nurdan Erbahar and John Ayers): *Chinese Ceramics in the Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul*, vol. III (*Qing Dynasty Porcelains*), London, 1986, pl. 2201, p. 918.

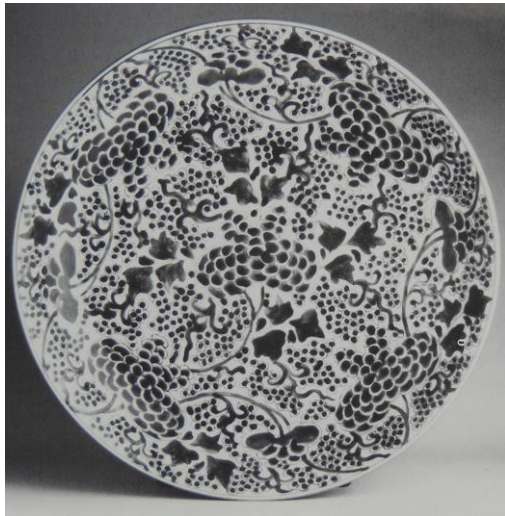


Fig. 4: Underglaze-blue peony decorated porcelain plate, Qing dynasty, 17th century A.D., Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul, after Regina Krahl (with Nurdan Erbahar and John Ayers): *Chinese Ceramics in the Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul*, vol. III (*Qing Dynasty Porcelains*), London, 1986, pl. 2213, p. 1026.

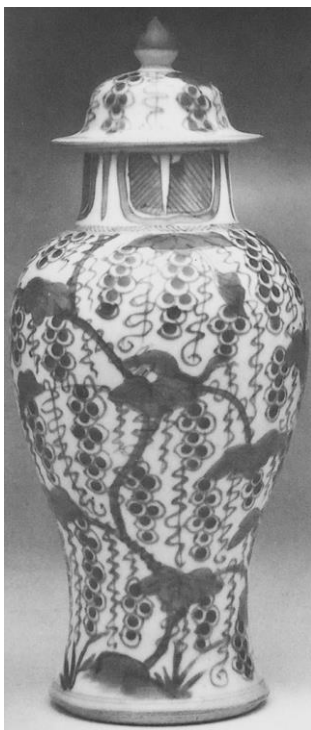


Fig. 5: Underglaze-blue grapevine and squirrel decorated covered jar, Qing dynasty, 17th century A.D., Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul, after Regina Krahl (with Nurdan Erbahar and John Ayers): *Chinese Ceramics in the Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul*, vol. III (*Qing Dynasty Porcelains*), London, 1986, pl. 2381, p. 1066.



Fig. 6: Underglaze-blue grapevine and squirrel decorated *cun*-shaped vase, Qing dynasty, first half 18th century A.D., Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul, after Regina Krahl (with NurdanErbahar and John Ayers): *Chinese Ceramics in the Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul*, vol. III (*Qing Dynasty Porcelains*), London, 1986, pl. 2382, p.1066.



Fig. 7: Underglaze-blue grapevine and squirrel decorated large porcelain jar, Qing dynasty, 17th-18th century A.D., Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo, after *Illustrated Catalogue of Tokyo National Museum, Chinese Ceramics II*, Tokyo, 1990, no. 558, p. 143.