

26. A Large Korean Inkstone 韓國葡萄猴子紋硯朝鮮

Length: 30.0 cm. (11 3/4 in.)

Width: 19.0 cm. (7 1/2 in.)

Height: 2.0 cm. (3/4 in.)

Joseon dynasty 朝鮮朝

18th century A.D. 公元 18 世紀

Acquired in Japan

The large, heavy inkstone is dark grey with a greenish tint; the grinding surface is a contrasting pale green with lighter swirls in the stone and one ‘eye.’ Of overall rectangular shape, the central circular surface has a thin raised rim and is enclosed within a deep rimmed well. The decoration surrounding the grinding surface is deeply carved and undercut with a woody grapevine anchored in the left corner, its roots clinging to the ground with clustered grapes, corkscrew tendrils, and tri-lobed leaves in relief borne on curling stems. A sprig of bamboo is carved in the lower right corner. A small monkey climbs on the outside rim of the well to the left reaching for a tendril with further clumps of grapes overhead and the grape leaves at the top entangled with a gnarled pine bough bearing circular tufts of pine needles. The sides and bottom of the stone are left relatively rough,



Not atypically, the carver responsible here for the inkstone decoration stepped out of the traditional boundaries set by Chinese masters to whom Korean artists and craftsmen looked over the centuries for inspiration, guidelines, ideas and technical knowhow. Here the standard “Three Friends of Winter”—pine, plum, and bamboo—include a new friend. The fruiting grapevine has come on the scene in place of the flowering plum. How does this affect the meaning of the “Three Friends of Winter” theme, a theme conveying attributes of fortitude, resilience, and perseverance? Greatly. The fruiting grapevine was similar in significance to the pomegranate for the Chinese and Koreans alike. Each plant conveyed wishes for fertility and numerous progeny, diluting the original theme that was tailor made for the idealized scholar-gentleman, a theme emblematic of scholarly perseverance and integrity.

The squirrel and grape together comprised another time-honored subject for the Chinese ever since the Yuan dynasty. At that time, Chinese painters held the squirrel as a reflection of the ravenous and destructive nature of the Mongol overlords, the squirrels devouring grapes as the Mongols devoured China’s cultural and natural wealth. In the present inkstone there is only a single creature, a small monkey reaching for the delectable fruit. This subject is not unique as evinced by at least two additional published inkstones, each of these with three instead of a single monkey (figs. 1-2). These monkeys convey positive reverberations in both the Chinese and Korean worlds if not exactly the same. Since the word for monkey in Korean is a homophone for emperor, the monkey is a symbol of authority and high governmental position, for the most part different from the Chinese who considered the monkey as simply cheerful, energetic, and flexible, but also loyal and wise. The Korean artist’s iconoclasm also resulted in unconventional decorative themes on underglaze-blue decorated porcelains, for example. Not only was a rather casual approach to painting taken by the Korean decorators, but invariably one of the three friends would be dispensed with,

and pairings of pine and bamboo or pine and plum became the décor of choice. Further, in contrast to Chinese inkstones, which are invariably carefully finished, the Korean example here is left with rough sides and base, an unfinished look in the eyes of the Chinese but to the Koreans, perfectly acceptable, perfectly perfect.

The two comparative inkstones here are known as “Sun and Moon” inkstones due to the overlapping circles, the central circle serving as the grinding surface and the moon sliver above serving as the well. An alternate configuration, as seen here and in a stone with a “Diamond Mountain” design (fig. 3), consists of a single complete circle as the grinding surface with the depression around the perimeter serving as the well. A further difference between the present inkstone and the two with similar subjects is the disposition of the grape vines. In the two comparative pieces the compositions are less dense and compressed than the present, with motifs raised against a flat recessed background. The less naturalistic design of the present inkstone might indicate a later date of production, that is, sometime during the 19th century.

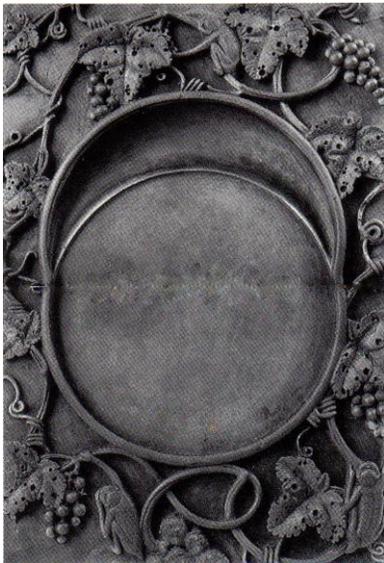


Fig. 1: Inkstone with monkey and grape design, Joseon dynasty, 18th century A.D., after Kwon To-hong, *Pyoru, "Inkstones,"* Seoul, 1989, no. 1.

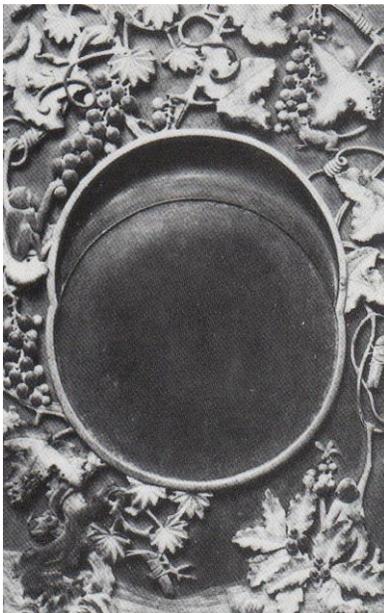


Fig. 2: Inkstone, Joseon dynasty, 18th century A.D., after Robert Moes, *Auspicious Spirits: Korean Folk Paintings and Related Objects,* Washington D.C., 1983, no. 80, p 156.

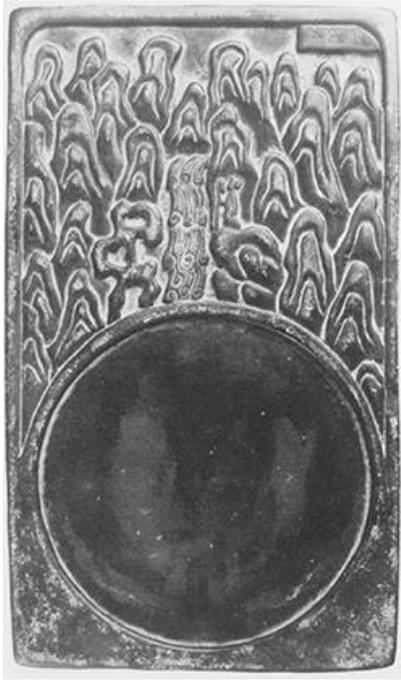


Fig. 3: Inkstone with “Diamond Mountain” design, Joseon dynasty, 18th century A.D., after Robert Moes, *Auspicious Spirits: Korean Folk Paintings and Related Objects*, Washington D.C., 1983, no. 81, p 157.