

58.

Silver Box and Cover with Scene of the Hunt

獵紋銀蓋盒

Height: 4.8 cm. (1 7/8 in.)

Diameter: 6.0 cm. (2 3/8 in.)

Tang dynasty

8th century A.D.

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Of rounded form, raised on a delicately thin, straight foot around the recessed base, the entire body is chased with a detailed and well-executed scene of mounted hunters in pursuit of their prey across a mountainous landscape, the scene unrolling around the exterior of the vessel as if one were viewing a handscroll. Four hunters on horseback race through the hilly terrain with a tri-peaked mountain range in the background, a variety of flora, fauna and scudding clouds sharing the environment, a ring-punched or ring-matted ground filling land and sky. One hunter holds a hawk, another twists backward in the saddle with bow and arrow ready to shoot, the remaining riders at full gallop while shooting straight ahead. A large wild boar, a smaller pig, deer, hare and birds flee for their lives. The fitted cover is decorated with related décor around a recessed medallion centered with a thin trefoil upright knob. The decoration consists of a pair of ducks opposite each other on either side of flowering plants.

The small covered vessel is a surprisingly rare form, based on the materials available to us today. The only comparable shape we've been able to find was in the Japanese Imperial Household Collection when it was published in 1928 and made more generally available to public scrutiny when Bo Gyllensvard reproduced the image in 1957 in his monumental study of Tang gold and silver (fig. 1). This vessel was grouped by Gyllensvard with a silver *pou* and a stemcup, both of which are decorated with dynamic hunting scenes (figs. 2-3. The *pou*, in the Shōsōin, the 8th-century repository at Tōdai-ji in Nara, is one of the most remarkable pieces outside of China, notable for its complex decorative scene. The stemcup, from the Mrs. Walter Sedgwick collection and now in the British Museum in London, depicts the scene progressing in a reverse direction, going from left to right, unlike the present vessel/The mounted archers and wildlife depicted on the more complex *pou* are racing in both directions.1

A remarkable discovery in Xi'an, or Chang'an as it was known when it was the bustling capital of the Tang dynasty, revealed a hoard of more than a thousand precious objects stored in two large ceramic vats along with a silver storage jar.2 The silver stemcup illustrated here, with a hunting scene like the present cup, was among

the numerous gold and silver vessels that comprised the hoard, which was buried, it is believed, sometime during the late 8th century on grounds where the mansion of a Tang dynasty tax official once stood, as discussed by Qi Dongfang (fig. 4).

The bustling capital, awash with foreigners and Chinese alike, was known for its internationalism, as a magical point where East and West came together. The commodities from both worlds were easily available, contributing to the success of the city's thriving markets. It's not surprising that Chinese craftsmen responded to the wealth of influences, ideas, and stimuli in the creation and production of their own local wares. Hence, scenes of the hunt became quite popular and especially notable are the mounted archers turning in their saddles to execute what is known as the "Parthian shot," a military tactic practiced by the ancient Iranians and borrowed by the Chinese during the Han and post-Han period (fig. 5).

The hunting scenes in late Zhou and Han period art, on bronzes, lacquer wares and paintings, sometimes include hunters pursuing not only animals from the real world but from mythical worlds as well. The hunters themselves are sometimes more sylph-like than human. The

Chinese of the Tang were, however, far more involved in the here and now. While the small vessel's shape is rare, its decoration is in the

mainstream of Tang gold and silver décor, technically, stylistically, and, indeed, culturally.

1. An example similar to the British Museum stemcup is in the San Francisco Asian Art Museum. See René-Yvon Lefebvre d'Argencé, *Ancient Chinese Bronzes in the Avery Brundage Collection*, San Francisco, 1966, pl. 19a, p. 128.
2. The cache was discovered in 1970 in Hejia village in Xi'an, Shaanxi province. Only in recent years has the find received careful and much welcomed attention in the West. See Valerie Hansen, "The Hejia Village Hoard: A Snapshot of China's Silk Road Trade," *Orientalism*, February 2003, pp. 14-19; Qi Dongfang, "The Burial Location and Dating of the Hejia Village Treasures," *Orientalism*, February 2003, pp. 20-24; and James C.Y. Watt, *et.al.*, *China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 AD*, Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition, New Haven and London, 2004, pp. 318-322.

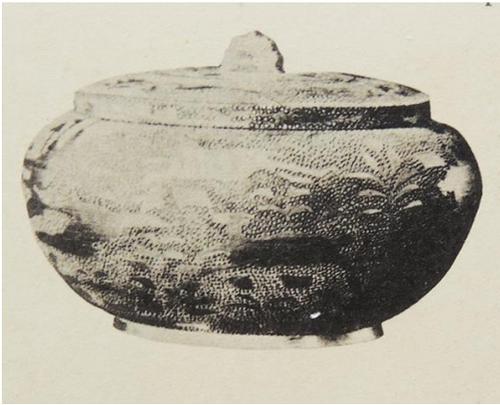


Fig. 1: Silver box and cover with hunting scene, Tang dynasty, 8th century A.D., Japanese Imperial Household Collection, after Bo Gyllensvard, "T'ang Gold and Silver," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, Stockholm, no. 29, 1957, pl. 17b, the image after the *Annual Report of the Imperial Household Museums*, Tokyo, 1928, pl. XXXVII.

Fig. 2: Silver *pou* with hunting scene, Tang dynasty, 8th century A.D., Shōsōin, Tōdai-ji, Nara, after Bo Gyllensvard, "T'ang Gold and Silver," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, Stockholm, no. 29, 1957, pl. 16.



Fig. 3: Silver stemcup with hunting scene, Tang dynasty, 8th century A.D., from the Mrs. Walter Sedgwick Collection, British Museum, London, after Bo Gyllensvard, "T'ang Gold and Silver," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, Stockholm, no. 29, 1957, pl. 17a.



Fig. 4: Silver stemcup with hunting scene, Tang dynasty, 8th century A.D., excavated in Hejiacun, Xi'an, Shaanxi province, Shaanxi Provincial Museum, after *Zhongguo meishu quanji: gongyi meishubian*, vol. 10, Beijing, 1987, pl. 49, p. 23.



Fig. 5: Mounted archer in "Parthian shot" posture, ceramic brick painting, 3rd century A.D, excavated from a tomb in Gansu province, after *Han Tang bihua*, Beijing, 1974, pl 53.



Detail of cat. no. 58.