

16. "Kraak" Porcelain Platter with *Qilin* Design

青花麒麟紋大瓷盤

Diameter: 35.4 cm. (14 in.)

徑 35.4 厘米

Height: 6.6 cm. (2 5/8 in.)

高 6.6 厘米

Ming dynasty

明

Late 16th-early 17th century A.D.

The large heavily potted dish is painted in deep cobalt with a liquidy consistency. On the interior, a pair of *qilin* with long snouts and jaws and ragged beards are positioned on a solid-blue earthy embankment barking at an oversized pomegranate borne on a leafy stem while on the side opposite the pomegranate an enormous peony plant arches over the two creatures. Three triple peach motifs surrounded by small leaves decorate the cavetto interspersed with butterflies and long leafy branches. The most interesting subject is reserved for the rim where two groups of five bottles are aligned on two shelves opposite each other on the rim, each group flanked by vases of flowers and a further bottle on each end. In between the shelves are cursorily drawn canopies supported by figures of lions each sheltering a pair of small human figures with arms folded as if greeting one another. On one side of each canopy a symmetrically fanned-out leaf frond is displayed and on the other a branch with dangling fruit-like forms is presented. The exterior of the dish was hastily painted with a pair of bare branches emerging from the rim. The foot is incurved and rather rough and encloses wide chatter marks and a bit of sand on the base.

Just when we think we've seen it all, something we have not seen, could not have anticipated nor imagined, pops up. So it was with the present dish. The overall appearance and physical characteristics—the quality of the porcelain material, the chatter marks on the base, the color and character of the blue and style of painting, as well as the quality of the bright, slick, clear glaze—are consistent with so-called *kraak* wares, the overglaze-blue decorated porcelains made at Jingdezhen during the late Ming period, an immense production encouraged especially by European and Middle Eastern markets.

The pair of *qilin* in the center, ruffians from some imaginary realm where fruits and flowers

grow to gargantuan size, are shown against the white ground and seem to cling to the rocky earth that is colored the same inky blue as they are, a ground that appears unstable, almost as if it were about to spin out from under them. But what gives us most pause is the design on the rim, which is stable and sedate but hardly commonplace within the sprawling, riotous world of *kraak* design. It is, in fact, completely out of the ordinary and out of our experience, aside from one published jar that shares an almost identical arrangement of rows of bottles lined up on shelves or tables and flanked by vases with flowers and further bottles, one on each end of each of the tables (figs. 1-3), the bottles likely representing the type made from the

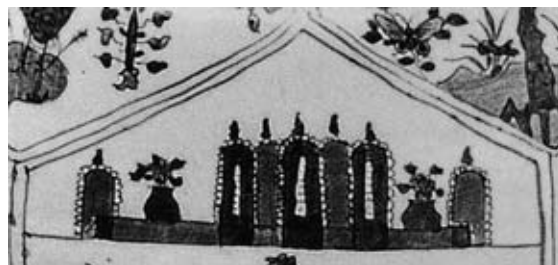


Fig. 2: Detail of fig. 1.

Fig. 1: Underglaze-blue porcelain jar, Ming dynasty, Wanli period, late 16th-early 17th century A.D., Paul Deutz collection, after George Kuwayama, *Chinese Ceramics in Colonial Mexico*, Los Angeles, 1997, no. 1, p. 29.

cont. on p. ??



Fig. 3: View of jar in fig. 1, after George Kuwayama, *Chinese Ceramics in Colonial Mexico*, Los Angeles, 1997, no. 1, p. 29 (bottom left).

16th century onward in China (fig. 4), and later Japan, or the actual European liquor containers the porcelains were based on.

The jar in figures 1, 2 and 3 on which this highly unusual design occurs "bears the Hapsburg emblem of the Spanish king Philip II..." and, further, the design "undoubtedly reflects early efforts to please the Spanish monarch, who controlled both Spain and Portugal from 1580 until the end of his life in 1598."¹ In addition to the shelves of bottles, which the platter and jar share, the jar is decorated with a variety of further designs including the unusual tree-like form (visible in the upper area of the main body zone above the confronting beasts to the far right in fig. 3), One is led on the basis of these shared rarities to ascribe the present dish to the Wanli period in the later 16th century, the same period of



Fig. 4: Underglaze-blue decorated bottle with pairs of creatures, Ming dynasty, 17th century A.D., British Museum, after Jessica Harrison-Hall, *Ming Ceramics in the British Museum*, London, 2001, pl. 11:11, p. 281.

production as that of the jar. The fruiting branch, so described here for want of a better description, is likely based on some European heraldic image while the canopies on lion-form stands, however, do ring a bell within the world of Chinese art, and possibly the figures meeting beneath them are gathering for some special occasion during which the liquor is sure to flow.

1. See George Kuwayama, *Chinese Ceramics in Colonial Mexico*, Los Angeles, 1997, p. 28.