Large Brown-Glazed Swatow Dish with Dragon Décor

漳州窯柿釉白龍紋瓷大盤

Diameter: 45.2 cm. (17 3/4 in.)
Height: 10.2 cm. (4 in.)
Late Ming dynasty
Early 17th century

徑**45.2**厘米
高**10.2**厘米
明晚期

Formerly in a Japanese collection.

Of deep form, the large dish is more like a bowl with the sides widely rounded, brought up from the broad base by the Ming potter, his finger grooves still visible on the exterior. The dish is covered with a coffee color glaze that resembles lusterware in sheen due to a layer of clear, colorless glaze over the brown. Decorated with a thick white slip, the central medallion is painted with two confronted spiny dragons with eyes highlighted in black, each dragon like a deep-sea creature writhing through waves in the midst of pearls and wisps of foam. The well is decorated with a swag design of alternating flaming pearls and tridents flanked by swiftly painted vine scrolls. Sandy grit adheres to the incurved foot and base.

Swatow wares were produced at kilns located in Chaozhou, Guangdong province. Nearby was the bustling southeastern coastal port of Shantou or Zhangzhou (also known as Swatow) whence the wares were exported. Perhaps exclusively an export commodity, these vibrantly decorated ceramics—which included underglaze-blue and overglaze enamal decorated wares as well as slip-decorated wares—were shipped primarily to Japan, Southeast Asia, and to the Islamic world in the west (figs. 1-3).

Since the dishes are relatively consistent in size and shape, interest was created entirely through the decoration, through lively and colorful overglaze enamel paintings, or wildly spontaneous and freely-brushed underglaze-blue designs, or the more painstakingly created slip-painted wares with their winning patterns of dragons or starbursts in pearly white against rich caramel-brown or sky-blue grounds. Other shapes were produced including jars and bottles and although brown- and blue-glazed bottles are known to have been decorated with white slip-trailed designs, these are quite rare and the technique applied more usually to the large dish forms. The twin-dragon design of the present example appears to have been quite popular and only very minor variations are ever encountered. A rather interesting deviation, however, occurred

Fig. 2: Swatow slip-decorated brown-glazed dish, Ming dynasty, 17th century, Museum Keramik, Jakarta, Adam Malik Collection, after Sumarah Adhyatman, *Zhangzhou (Swatow) Ceramics: Sixteenth to Seventeenth Centuries Found in Indonesia*, Jakarta, 1999, no, 248.

Fig. 1: Swatow slip-decorated brown-glazed dish, Ming dynasty, 17th century, found in South Sulawesi, private collection, after Sumarah Adhyatman, *Zhangzhou (Swatow) Ceramics: Sixteenth to Seventeenth Centuries Found in Indonesia*, Jakarta, 1999, no, 247.

when the white slip was applied in thinner and lighter strings as exemplified in a dish where the central dragons have been marginalized and a lion placed in the center (fig. 4), and in a further example where the white slip was applied in even lighter and thinner wisps causing the forms to appear as if they were dematerializing entirely (fig. 5).

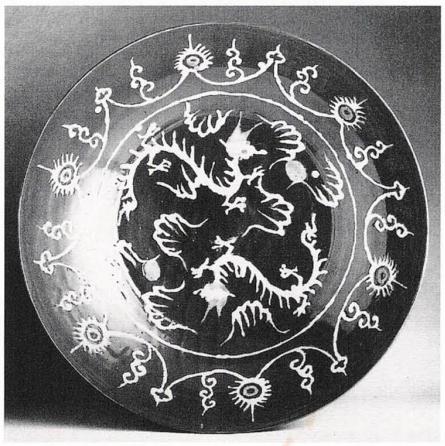

Fig. 3: Swatow slip-decorated brown-glazed dish, Ming dynasty, 17th century, Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul, after Regina Krahl, *Chinese Ceramics in the Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul*, vol. II: *Yuan and Ming Dynasty Porcelains*, London, 1986, fig. 1941, p. 896.

It is noteworthy that these slip-decorated ceramics that have a very rough-and-ready finish, apparent when the pieces are turned over and the bases and feet examined, in truth required more than a simple slap-dash approach to produce the desired aesthetic result. An initial application of slip, followed by glaze, followed by the white-slip design and lastly by a final coat of glaze comprised the multi-stepped operation that resulted in these very distinctive ceramics. We might ask ourselves what was the inspiration for their creation? How did the idea for such a novel technique ever come into being in a land where centuries of tried-and-true and immensely popular wares had been produced and quite lucratively so? The small brown or black glazed bowls produced in Jiangxi at the Jizhou kiln several centuries prior were sometimes decorated with white slip but the effect is so different, frugal and almost monastic in comparison to the lavish and boisterous Swatow wares that these gentle precursors are hardly the candidates we are looking for. So, the search goes on.

Fig. 4: Swatow slip-decorated brown-glazed dish, Ming dynasty, 17th century, Jacques Graefffe Collection, Brussels, after Daisy Lion-Goldschmidt, *Ming Porcelain*, London, 1978, fig. 282, p. 262.

Fig. 5: Swatow slip-decorated brown-glazed dish, Ming dynasty, 17th century, Museum Keramik, Jakarta, after Sumarah Adhyatman, *Zhangzhou (Swatow) Ceramics: Sixteenth to Seventeenth Centuries Found in Indonesia*, Jakarta, 1999, no. 244a, p. 176.