



Chinese Blue-and-White Ewer made for the Islamic market

China, Yuan Dynasty

ceramic

17cm high, 16cm wide

Stock no.: A5358

Provenance: American Private Collection

A fundamental revolution occurred in the history of Chinese porcelain during the fourteenth century under the domination of the Mongols, and this revolution had an enormous impact on the Near East and ultimately on Europe. The Chinese developed blue and white porcelain almost exclusively for the Middle Eastern market so the designs, far from being Chinese in conception were in fact Islamic, and consequently in terms of the treatment of shape and surface there was a clear dependence on Islamic traditions. The merchants of Persia and Syria were the two groups most interested in Chinese blue and white.[1]

The vivid blue that was used to decorate the new style of ceramic was also an import from the Middle East, coming from the small village of Qamsar (or Khamsar) thirty-five kilometres south west from Kashan in Central Iran. The abundant Qamsar deposits include cobalts that are high in iron, nickel, copper and manganese. All the underglaze-blue pigments on Chinese Yuan dynasty porcelain that have so far been examined are of the same constitution, i.e. high-iron cobalts with minimal manganese contents.

The Iranian cobalt has been described by Abu'l Qasim, who wrote a treatise on tiles and other ceramics in 700 Hijri or 1301 CE. Abu'l Qasim was a member of a prominent potter family in Kashan, and a Mongol court historian in Tabriz.[2] His text provided a comprehensive description of processes for forming, painting and firing ceramics in Persia in the thirteenth century. About cobalt it reported:

.... The stone lajvard, that the craftsmen call *sulaimani*, its source is the village of Qamsar in the mountains round Kashan, and the people there claim it was discovered by the prophet Sulaiman. It is like white silver shining in a sheath of hard black stone. From it comes the lajvard colour, like that of lajvard-coloured glaze. [3]

In Persian, the *sang-i lajvard* means lapis lazuli, though here the term must be used for cobalt. Cobalt was often used as part of the composition of fake gemstones imitating lapis lazuli.

Thus, we can see that this porcelain ewer is Islamic in shape, decoration and in the cobalt mineral with which it is decorated. It originally had a lid, as indicated by the loop on the handle, but all too frequently porcelain lids became detached and were either lost or broken. The only Chinese element on the piece is its pattern, which shows flowering lotus in the raised ogival panels on the body and rising lotus petals on the neck.

[1] Margaret Medley, "Islam, Chinese Porcelain and Ardabīl", Iran Vol. 13 (Taylor & Francis, Ltd , Abingdon on Thames, 1975), pp. 31-7.

[2] Oliver Watson, Persian Lustre Ware (Faber and Faber, London, 1985), pp.31-2.

[3] For a description and translation of the text, see James Wilson Allan, "Abu'l Qasim's Treatise on Ceramics" Iran Vol. 11 (Taylor & Francis, Ltd, Abingdon on Thames, 1973), pp.112, 116, 120.