



**Chinese Kraak Dish with Persian Figures**

Jingdezhen, China, 17th century

Porcelain decorated in underglaze cobalt blue

48.5cm diameter

Provenance: French private collection since 1960s.

Stock no.: A5457

This large blue-and-white kraak porcelain dish has in its centre medallion two seated Persian figures, possibly female. Facing each other, they are both wearing long garments and headdresses with the aigrette, typically worn by nobility. The figure on the left, shown against a rocky outcrop, holds a small drinking cup in the right hand. The figures are set amidst a landscape of flowers and vegetation consisting of grasses and a small tree. The central medallion is enclosed by two concentric bands of stylised flowers.

The rim of the dish is composed of 16 panels, alternating between wide and narrow. Two of the wider panels have Chinese narrative scenes while the rest are covered in different floral designs. The two narrative scenes portray the same design of an angler carrying a fishing rod with a creel. In the background are trees and Western style dwellings with gabled roofs. The panels of flowers have tulips and pomegranate fruits with outward sprouting, ornamental leaves. The narrower panels contain sprays of carnations, irises and other flowers. The exterior of the dish is decorated with lozenges alternating with tulips and pomegranates, between narrow panels of prunus, pine and flowering plants.

Kraak refers to a group of Chinese blue-and-white export porcelain, made in Jingdezhen in Jiangxi province in southern China. Kraak wares were shipped to Europe, the Middle East, Japan, Southeast Asia and Mexico in huge quantities during the late 16th and 17th centuries.<sup>1</sup> The name *kraak* is thought

to derive from the Portuguese name for their merchant ships, caracca, used to transport porcelain; both the Portuguese and the Dutch East India Company (VOC) controlled the porcelain export trade from China to Europe. However, it has also been suggested that the name may come from the Dutch word *kraken*, meaning “to break easily”.

Shah ‘Abbas I (1571–1629) of the Safavid dynasty is known for his donation of luxury vessels to the Ardabil Shrine (northwest Iran) in the early 17th century, most of which were Chinese blue-and-white porcelain. To accommodate this substantial collection, one of the chambers at the shrine was converted and renamed *chīnīkhāne*, or the “house of porcelain”, where niches on the walls displayed the porcelain objects. The concept of the *chīnīkhāne* was then copied by the nobility for displaying precious blue-and-white wares. Their association with royalty meant that they were even depicted in Safavid miniatures.<sup>2</sup>

The central motif of the two Persian figures implies that the dish was made to order for the Persian market. Figures with elongated narrow eyes, straight noses, thin long braids and short curls on the sides of the face, dressed in loose cut long garments with an aigrette in the headdress, are established in the Persian painting tradition and can be found in 16th and 17th century Safavid book paintings (see S.1986.152, S.1986.297 and S.305 in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.). A large kraak dish at the British Museum (accession no. PDF C645), dated to ca. 1635- 1650, has a central motif of two Persian figures.<sup>3</sup> The rim also has panels with two Chinese narrative scenes of a farmer carrying a load on a shoulder pole amongst stylised flowers, such as tulips, carnations and also pomegranates. See also a dish with similar figures, Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore (1995–03897). There are several comparative blue-and-white kraak dishes, dating to the second quarter of the 17th century with Chinese imagery in the centre but also with very similar decorative border schemes in the collection of the Topkapı Museum, Istanbul.<sup>4</sup> Kraak porcelain was exported around the world in large quantities; however, the pieces specifically made for the Persian market, recognised by their distinctive imagery, are rare.

1. Kerr, Rose and Mengoni Luisa E. *Chinese Export Ceramics*. London: V&A Publishing, 2011. p. 22

2. Canby, Sheila R. Shah ‘Abbas. *The Remaking of Iran*. London: The British Museum Press, 2009. fig. 80, p. 167.

3. The British Museum dish is 45.7 cm in diameter.

4. See figures 1600, 1601, 1602, 1603, 1604 and 1606 in Regina Krahl, *Chinese Ceramics in the Topkapı Saray Museum Istanbul, II Yuan and Ming Dynasty Porcelains*. London: Sotheby's Publications, 1986.