White Dragon in a Sea of Blue

Littleton and Hennessy

The European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF)
14th–23rd March 2014

Maastricht Exhibition and Congress Centre (MECC)
Forum 100
6229 GV Maastricht
The Netherlands

www.tefaf.com
We are highly honoured to be entrusted with the sale of this exceptional dish dating from the Yuan dynasty. At an impressive size of 40.5 centimetres in diameter it is one of only thirteen known pieces of this ware. The rarity magnified by being one of only three large dishes known to exist and the only one in private hands.

This dish was previously in the estate of Waltraud Hentschel, the wife of Jack Ellis, Member of Parliament for Prince Edward-Hastings, Ontario, Canada and by descent from the estate of her mother, Sophia Johanna Hentschel. How it made its journey from the kilns of Jingdezhen to North America is unknown but we are thankful to its previous keepers for ensuring its survival.

We are thrilled to be exhibiting in our eighth TEFAF. Each year we look forward to returning to Limburg and the familiar surroundings of the MECC to see our friends.

Finally we would like to thank Regina Krahl for undertaking the research for this catalogue, sharing her expertise and our excitement in a true masterpiece of Chinese ceramic art and Yuen Chiu for her excellent translation of Regina’s essay.

James Hennessy
Richard Littleton
Hong Kong
February 2014
This magnificent dish owes its timeless beauty to a poignant moment in the history of Chinese ceramics, when daring, innovative concepts were developed at Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, that should define the direction of the country’s porcelain production for centuries. This dish is unique and of an exceedingly rare style, yet stylistically an archetypal representative of the new departure of China’s ceramic industry in the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368).

The abundance of cobalt blue – a rare, imported commodity – here used for the glaze, and the bold simplicity of the sparse, contrasting design make for a highly successful combination. The dramatic impact of a piece of porcelain such as this to ceramic connoisseurs used to Song (960-1279) aesthetics can hardly be overestimated. Fine ceramics until then were generally small, hardly ever of bright colour and rarely decorated with distinct figurative patterns. Once pieces such as this existed, however, there was no turning back and China’s ceramics were forever transformed.
With its crisp, barbed edge this dish has the classic shape, proportions and size of the best Yuan porcelain chargers. Although the large vessel must have been designed with foreign customers in mind, the design is quintessentially Chinese. Examples with similar dragons were made both large and small, and while some ended up in the Near and Middle East and one was discovered at Yangzhou, a major overseas port, others remained in China and have come to light both in the south and the north.

This style of decoration, where the white design creates a sharp contrast to the deep cobalt-blue glaze, is among the rarest used on Yuan porcelain. Only one dozen other pieces executed in this manner appear to be preserved, all except one in museum collections: two large dishes of similar form as the present piece, five small dishes, four wine jars of *meiping* shape, and one spouted bowl in a non-Chinese metal form. Ten of these vessels are decorated with three-clawed dragons similar to that on the present dish, but none of them is showing additional clouds.
A slightly larger (46 cm) barbed dish from the Safavid Royal collection preserved in the Ardabil Shrine and now in the National Museum of Iran, Tehran, shows a similar dragon chasing a flaming pearl, but reversed, and the animal depicted with a more extravagant tail and more elaborate flame-like extensions emanating from the body. There is no decoration around the well, and the centre is apparently not set off by a ridge like here. The dish is illustrated in *Oriental Ceramics. The World’s Great Collections*, London, New York and San Francisco, 1980-82, vol. 4, col. pl. III (fig. 1); and was recently included in the exhibition *Youlan shencai. Yuandai qinghua ciqi teji/Splendors in Smalt. Art of Yuan Blue-and-white Porcelain*, Shanghai Museum, Shanghai, 2012, cat. no. 40.

A dish of similar size (41.5 cm) and with a similar recessed centre, from the Ottoman Royal collection and still in the former Ottoman palace, Topkapi Saray, is decorated with a *qilin* and pheasant in an indicated garden setting in the centre and a pair of phoenixes among floral sprays around the well, all similarly executed in white relief; see Regina Krahl, *Chinese Ceramics in the Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul*, ed. John Ayers, London, 1986, vol. 2, no. 551 (fig. 2).
Five small dishes (15.2 – 16 cm) with flat circular rims, all decorated with a simpler dragon facing the other way, four of them chasing a flaming pearl, are preserved in China, Japan and England. The dragon without pearl appears on a dish in the Palace Museum, Beijing, illustrated in *Zhongguo taoci quanji* [Complete series on Chinese ceramics], Shanghai, 1999-2000, vol. 11, pl. 242 (fig. 3); the other dishes, all with dragon and pearl, are in the Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Osaka, from the Ataka collection, included in the exhibition *Ataka Eiichi no me. Bi no kyūdōsha/The Eyes of Ataka Eiichi, Seeker of True Art*, Osaka, 2007, cat. no. 124 (fig. 4); in the Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo, published in *Idemitsu Bijunakkan zōken zukan. Chapoku tokyō/Chinese Ceramics in the Idemitsu Collection*, Tokyo, 1987, col. pl. 133 (fig. 5); in the British Museum, London, from the collection of Harry Oppenheim, included in Jessica Harrison-Hall, *Catalogue of Late Yuan and Ming Ceramics in the British Museum*, London, 2001, no. 1:44 (fig. 6); and in the collection of Sir Percival David, now also in the British Museum, illustrated in *Oriental Ceramics*, op. cit., vol. 6, col. pl. 26 (fig. 7).
A spouted bowl with a small lug for attachment underneath the spout, decorated with a wild goose carrying a reed on the inside and flower sprays on the outside, from the collection of Mrs. Alfred Clark, was acquired for the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, by the Museum's then Director Sir Leigh Ashton at Sotheby's London on 24th March 1953 (lot 68), and is illustrated in John Ayers, *Far Eastern Ceramics in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London, 1980, pl. 41 (fig. 8).

克拉克夫人（Mrs. Alfred Clark）舊藏一匜，其流下有一小繫，盌內飾蘆雁圖，器外則繪折技花卉，此器是阿什頓爵士（Sir Leigh Ashton）於1953年3月24日在倫敦蘇富比拍賣會上，為當時他所執掌的倫敦維多利亞與亞伯特博物館購藏所得，詳見John Ayers所著《遠東陶瓷》，圖版41（倫敦：1980）。（圖8）。

Four *meiping*, each with a dragon chasing a flaming pearl, are recorded in China and France: A large *meiping* (43.8 cm) excavated at Yangzhou, an important port city in Jiangsu province with easy access to the sea via the Yangzi River, now preserved in the Yangzhou Museum, is published in *Zhongguo taoci quanji*, op. cit., pl. 241 (fig. 9); a smaller *meiping* (33 cm) is preserved in the Yihewan Imperial Summer Palace in Beijing and has been published in Lu Kan, ‘Yihewan cang Yuandai lanyou bailongwen meiping/Blue Glazed Plum Vase with White Dragon Design of Yuan Dynasty Collected at Summer Palace’, *Shoucang jia/Collector and Connoisseur*, no. 10, 2008, pp. 71-2, and again by the same author in ‘Cangmang tianqiong – Jiaolong ganzu. Ji Yihewan cang lanyou bailongwen meiping [Deep blue dome of the sky – a mythical dragon catching a pearl. On a blue-glazed meiping with white dragon design collected in the Yihewan]’, *Shoucang jia/Collector and Connoisseur*, no. 83, November 2008, pp. 56-7 (fig. 10); another *meiping* of similar size (33.6 cm) in the Musée Guimet, Paris, is illustrated in *Oriental Ceramics*, vol. 7, col. pl. IV (fig. 11); a fourth example, again of larger size (43.8 cm), in a private collection in China, has more recently come to light and has been published as a genuine Yuan example by Wei Ziyun, ‘Yuandai gulanyou ciqi zhenyan xiaoyi [Brief discussion of real and fake Yuan dynasty cobalt-blue glazed porcelains]’, *Shoucang jia/Collector and Connoisseur*, no. 32, August 2004, pp. 27-29, figs 1-3 (fig. 12).

中國和法國也有四例龍戲珠紋梅瓶: 一例是揚州出土的大型梅瓶（43.8公分），揚州為江蘇省重要通商港口，位於長江下游入海口，此瓶現為揚州博物館珍藏，圖見前述著作《中國陶瓷全集》編號241（圖9）；另一例較小的梅瓶（33公分）為北京頤和園珍藏，圖見盧侃所著〈頤和園藏元代藍釉白龍紋梅瓶〉，收錄於《收藏家》2008年刊號10頁71-2，以及同一作者撰寫的〈蒼莽天穹 蛟龍趕珠—記頤和園藏藍釉白龍紋梅瓶〉，載於《收藏界》2008年8月刊號32頁27-29，圖例1-3（圖12）；巴黎吉美博物館藏梅瓶大小相若（33.6公分），圖見前述著作《Oriental Ceramics》卷七彩色圖版IV（圖11）；第四例的器型亦較大（43.8公分），這件近年纔曝光的作品乃中國私人珍藏，邁子雲視之為元代真孃，並於其論文《元代鈷藍釉瓷器真贗小議》中發表，詳見《收藏界》2004年8月刊號32頁27-29圖例1-3（圖12）。
Although no vessels in other shapes are preserved in this technique, fragments of a blue-glazed jar with a very similar three-clawed dragon design were recovered from a well in the old city of Zhenjiang, again in Jiangsu province, see Zou Houben, ed., *Jiangsu kung wushi nian* [Fifty years of archaeology in Jiangsu], Nanjing, 2000, p.418, fig. 30 (fig.13), where a further blue-glazed fragment with white dragon design, apparently too small to enable reconstruction of a shape, is recorded to have come to light in Nanjing.

雖然未見其他形制的傳世品採用這種工藝，但江蘇鎮江古城一口井中曾出土一藍釉罐殘片，其三爪龍紋與本藏品如出一轍，詳見鄒厚本主編的《江蘇考古五十年》頁418圖例30（南京：2000）（圖13），文中提到南京也出土了一塊藍釉白龍紋瓷片，但其大小顯然不足以修復成型。
It is highly surprising that even with this small number of extant pieces, two different techniques appear to have been employed to achieve a similar decorative result. On the open shapes, like on the present dish, the body of the dragon appears to have been first outlined in white slip under the glaze; once the blue glaze was in place, the full design was applied, either in form of liquid slip, like here, or in some cases perhaps in form of a thin sheet of clay; details were then incised and the design covered with a transparent glaze. On the upright vessels, this method was not possible, since the design would have slipped from the glaze. It was therefore carved into the unglazed body, emphasized with slip and transparent glaze and reserved on the blue glaze. The latter technique resulted in a pure white design, while with the former, incised details tend to appear in pale blue. The animated dragon on the present dish – the only one on the dishes to face to the right – is masterfully executed and unusual in the naturalistic way the fourth leg is largely hidden, with only two claws appearing from underneath the body. This kind of artistic freedom, which is characteristic of the Yuan dynasty, would be difficult to imagine in any other era.

The present dish reveals another secret: it is the first piece of this type – and thus unique – to show that the original appearance of these pieces would have been even more glamorous: the blue glaze used to bear additional decoration in gilding. Only small traces of the original gold design are remaining on the outside, which do not allow for a reconstruction; one can only speculate that it might have been a lotus scroll. Less than a handful of vessels have otherwise come to light which show the prestigious cobalt-blue glaze combined with gild decoration, but none show white relief designs and all are very small. A spouted bowl and a small cup were recovered from the Baoding hoard in Hebei province, and two gilded blue-glazed jue libation cups have been excavated in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, and Shexian, Anhui province, respectively; all are published in Ye Peilan, *Yuandai ciqi* [Porcelain of the Yuan dynasty], Beijing, 1998, pls 200-203, the small cup being the best preserved (fig. 14).

即便傳世品如此之少, 但最令人意外的是, 工匠們竟採用了兩種不同的工藝, 以達到類似的裝飾效果。像本藏品這種敞口器物，其瓷身應該是先用白色泥料勾勒輪廓，上覆藍釉，再塑貼出完整的紋飾，它們或像本盤般採用泥料，或薄施一層黏土，然後再刻劃細部。最後再施透明釉，放立件器物而言，這種方法並不可行，因爲紋飾會在釉下洇散。因此，瓷工會在素胎上直接刻劃圖案，再用泥漿和透明釉加以渲染，在藍釉之上營造留白效果。後者的紋飾色澤瑩白，而前者的泥花細部常略為泛藍。本藏品的龍紋活靈活現，它在近似盤中是唯一朝右的例子，其畫工與此相仿，其中一腿若隱若現，龍身之下僅見二爪，效果生動傳神而不落俗套。這種不拘小節的藝術風格，正是典型的元代特色，其他同期鮮可得見。

本藏品還揭開了另一個鮮為人知的秘辛：它的藍釉之上原先還排有金彩，可見同期器物的外觀應更為華美，而在這例中已不見，且顯著顯足珍貴。原來的描金紋飾，僅在器外依稀可見，且已無從修復，所以只能據此推測為題材廣泛。在已發表作品中，僅有寥寥數例結合了珍罕的描藍釉和描金紋飾，但無一具白色壁貼，而且僅具小巧玲瓏的器物；河北保定窖藏文物中有一匜和一小盃，浙江杭州及安徽歙縣則各自出土了一描金藍釉爵盃；上述各例皆發表於葉佩蘭所著《元代瓷器》圖版200-203（北京：1998），其中保存至為完好者當屬小盃（圖14）。
Interestingly, this type of vessel – like the best blue-and-white porcelains of the time – would seem to have been produced by the commercial kilns of Jingdezhen. Excavations of Yuan blue-and-white porcelain have shown that the designs and styles of imperial and commercial kilns at that time were not distinctly different, yet – surprisingly – wares from the public kilns were far superior overall. The imperial manufactories, probably not yet under strict court control, lagged manifestly behind their public competitors, which executed both demanding commissions for inland customers (like the ‘David Vases’) and important wares for shipment abroad (like the fine collections of Yuan porcelain preserved in Turkey and Iran). Commercial kilns occasionally also added cobalt-blue glaze to the reverse of large blue-and-white dishes: A dish fragment excavated from the 14th-century Tughlaq palace site of Kotla Firuzshah in Delhi has a blue-glazed outside similar to that of the present dish, but the inside is painted in underglaze-blue on white; see Ellen Smart, *Fourteenth Century Chinese Porcelain from a Tughlaq Palace in Delhi*, Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society, vol. 41, 1975-77, pl. 78a.

The imperial kilns equally tried out the technique of adding a white relief design to a blue ground, as fragments recovered from the waste heaps at Jingdezhen document. None of them appear to have survived intact, none of them may ever have been deemed fine enough to leave the kilns. They are grandly decorated with five-clawed dragons, yet seem poor in execution compared to the magnificent three-clawed versions such as this dish and its companions listed above, with the white designs more thickly applied and more clumsily drawn. Compare a covered jar and an ink-stone box and cover discarded at the kilns and reconstructed from sherds, decorated with white relief designs of dragons and other minor motifs on a blue glaze, included in the exhibition *Jingdezhen chutu Yuan Ming guanyao ciqi/Yuan’s and Ming’s Imperial Porcelain Unearthed from Jingdezhen*, Yan-Huang Art Museum, Beijing, 1999, cat. nos 6 and 7 (fig. 15). Imperial and non-imperial production in this case present exactly the same picture as blue-and-white, where the few fragments known from the imperial kilns equally seem like a poor version of those produced for sale.

饶富兴味的是，这类器物与当时的上乘青花瓷一样，很可能出自景德镇民窑。出土的民窑瓷器表明，当时的御窑和民窑在风格、题材上差别不大，但其中出类拔萃的，无疑是民窑瓷器的整体制作水平可与一枝独秀。御窑可能尚未受到朝廷的严格规范，所以其水平远逊于民窑，而民窑既要满足国内客户的需要（诸如‘大维德瓶’），亦要生产远销海外的重要器物（如土耳其和伊朗珍藏的佳妙元瓷）。民窑的瓷器往往在器外施钴蓝釉，但在器内施白地青花纹饰，详见施玛特（Ellen Smart）所著《Fourteenth Century Chinese Porcelain from a Tughlaq Palace in Delhi》，载于《东方陶瓷学会会刊》1975-77年刊号41图版78a。

据景德镇出土的瓷器残片可见，御窑也曾试过在蓝釉地上施贴白色纹饰，但就此而言，未见保存完好的传世品，也许根本未曾有作品达到理想的烧造水平。它们可能以薄胎的单龙纹饰，但民窑作品则以厚胎的五龙纹饰，饰及上施巡回似倒贴，其做工大为逊色，而且白地粉彩用油料厚涂，工艺亦大失生涯，殆此可参照景德镇民窑残片修复而成的件器和现藏，其外施钴蓝釉地和其它粉彩纹饰，详见《景德镇出土上代民窑瓷器》展览图版编号57（北京）及《黄海陶瓷》（1999）第15期。当时的御窑及民窑瓷器之间的高下之分，其实也存在在民窑瓷器，即显现于民窑青花瓷器残片中，其工艺水平亦逊于同类型之商品瓷。
By the early Ming dynasty (1368-1644) the imperial kilns had fully mastered this style of white-on-blue decoration. Very fine examples with the white designs reserved without the use of a slip were produced in the Xuande reign (1426-35), but even from this period, when technical difficulties or prohibitive costs were rarely an obstacle, only a dozen examples have survived. For a large blue-glazed Xuande dish with fruit and flower designs reserved in white see Regina Krahl, *Chinese Ceramics from the Mei-yr-tang Collection*, London, 1994-2010, vol. 4, no. 1667. The style was thereafter hardly used until it was revived in the Yongzheng period (1723-35) of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911).

時至明代（公元1368至1644年）初葉，御窰的藍地留白工藝已臻爐火純青之境。宣德年間（公元1426至1435年）亦有燒造毋須用瓷漿留白的佳作，但即便是在這個技術成熟、不計工本的年代，也僅有十二件作品流傳至今。宣德藍地留白花果紋大盤是其中一例，詳見康蕊君所著《玫茵堂藏中國瓷器》卷四編號1667（倫敦：1994-2010）。其後，這種裝飾風格幾乎銷聲匿跡，直至清代（公元1644至1911年）雍正年間（公元1723至1735年）始再度大放異彩。
THE CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA

中國歷代年表

新石器時代 Neolithic Period
c.6500-1700 BC

夏 Xia Dynasty c.2100-1600 BC

商 Shang Dynasty c.1600-1100 BC

周 Zhou Dynasty c.1100-256 BC

西周 Western Zhou c.1100-771 BC

東周 Eastern Zhou 770-256 BC

春秋 Spring and Autumn Period 770-476 BC

戰國 Warring States Period 475-221 BC

秦 Qin Dynasty 221-206 BC

漢 Han Dynasty
206 BC-AD 220

西漢 Western Han 206 BC-AD 8

新王莽 Xin (Wang Mang Interregnum) AD 9-23

東漢 Eastern Han AD 25-220

三國 Three Kingdoms 220-265

魏 Wei 220-265

蜀漢 Shu Han 221-263

吳 Wu 222-263

晉 Jin Dynasty 265-420

西晉 Western Jin 265-317

十六國 Sixteen Kingdoms 304-439

東晉 Eastern Jin 317-420

南朝 Southern Dynasties

北朝 Northern Dynasties

南朝 Southern Dynasties

北朝 Northern Dynasties

北朝 Northern Dynasties

北朝 Northern Dynasties

北朝 Northern Dynasties

北東 Northern Dynasties

宋 Song Dynasty 960-1279

宋 Song Dynasty

宋 Song Dynasty

金 Jin Dynasty 1115-1234

元 Yuan Dynasty 1279-1368

明 Ming Dynasty 1368-1644

洪武 Hongwu 1368-1398

永樂 Yongle 1403-1425

洪熙 Hongxi 1425

宣德 Xuande 1426-1435

正統 Zhengtong 1436-1449

景泰 Jingtai 1450-1456

天順 Tianshun 1457-1464

成化 Chenghua 1465-1487

弘治 Hongzhi 1488-1505

正德 Zhengde 1506-1521

嘉靖 Jiajing 1522-1566

隆慶 Longqing 1567-1572

萬曆 Wanli 1573-1619

泰昌 Taichang 1620

天啟 Tianqi 1621-1627

崇禎 Chongzhen 1628-1644

清 Qing Dynasty 1644-1911

順治 Shunzhi 1644-1661

康熙 Kangxi 1662-1722

雍正 Yongzheng 1723-1735

乾隆 Qianlong 1736-1795

嘉慶 Jiaqing 1796-1820

道光 Daoguang 1821-1850

咸豐 Xianfeng 1851-1861

同治 Tongzhi 1862-1874

光緒 Guangxu 1875-1908

宣統 Xuantong 1909-1911

中華民國 Republic of China 1912-

洪憲 Hongxian (Yuan Shikai) 1915-1916

中華人民共和國 People’s Republic of China 1949-