

The Depiction of Animals in Yuan Dynasty Blue and White Porcelain in British Museums

A number of the pieces that will be looked at in this article were exhibited in the ground breaking exhibition *Chinese Art Under the Mongols: The Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368)*, held at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1968. (Fig 2.)

This was the first time that the art of the Yuan dynasty, from painting, sculpture, lacquer, metal ware and porcelain, was examined in detail. Sherman Lee in his introduction believed that this may have been due to the fact that the Yuan dynasty was very brief in duration (around 90 years) and that it was a foreign one (Mongol), which he believed had been a deterrent in the past to proper and full Chinese appreciation. 1.

Despite the shortness in length of this dynasty, it was an incredibly innovative period artistically. This was especially true with regard to the development of the technique of blue and white porcelain, which was to have a significant influence on the porcelain production of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

The pieces that will be examined essentially date from around the mid 14th century, the high point of Yuan dynasty production, but prior to this, it is important to put the development of blue and white ceramic production into its historical context.

When the Mongols seized power from the Southern Song dynasty in 1260, the influence of the Chinese officials and court on ceramic production ended. The bureaucratic elite was now composed of Mongols and other foreigners. 2.

Foreign trade was encouraged and with the Mongol empire reaching across to the Middle East, (Fig 3.) Arab and Persian merchants set up trading posts in ports along the south China coast. Muslims were to be found at all levels of society from high-ranking government positions to artisans. These links would have facilitated the cobalt pigment reaching China from Persia. 3.

The Mongols did not have a significant interest in porcelain for its use at the court and thus their influence on production was

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Fig 1. The 'David' Vases at the entrance to the Percival David Collection at the British Museum.



Fig 2. View of one of the galleries of the exhibition, *Chinese Art Under the Mongols, The Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368)* in 1968 at the Cleveland Museum of Art.



Fig 3. Map of the Mongol Empire during the Yuan dynasty.

minimal during this period. Influence in production would come from the Middle East, which had an established tradition of blue and white ceramics. This is the major reason that the major holdings of Yuan blue and white are outside China at the Topkapi Saray Museum in Istanbul and at the Ardebil Shrine, which are now housed in the Iran Bastan Museum in Teheran. 4.

Stylistically, the shapes and decoration of the mature Yuan style derived their influence in part from the Qingbai wares of Jingdezhen. The meiping vase (Fig 4.) illustrates the horizontal banding approach to the decoration, with a main central field, which in this case contains an incised four-claw dragon. This was to become the standard format for vertical closed forms such as jars and vases. However, there were exceptions to this, as we will see later.

The major innovation, however was in the approach to rendering a pictorial design (on dishes) to be seen from one viewpoint only. 5. Lee asserts that this pictorial approach to decoration was almost unknown in the preceding Tang and Song dynasties, except for the Cizhou wares of the later Song. (Fig 5.) The ducks on lotus pond design, a common theme in Yuan pieces, can trace its origins back to these earlier paintings on slip. (Figs 5 and 6.)

In terms of dating the mature Yuan dynasty style to the mid 14th century, the large pair of dated blue and white vases in the Percival David Collection, known as the 'David vases' have become the linchpin for this, due to their long inscription and date of 1351. (Fig 7.) John Alexander Pope made a detailed study of the dating of the wares from the Topkapi and the Ardebil Shrine in 1952 and 1956 respectively. He based his dating on stylistic criteria which tied in closely with the David vases.

Despite two other earlier dated examples discovered after his writing in the late 1970s, his approach has stood the test of time and these wares have been generally accepted to date to the mid 14th century.

The synthesis of a foreign influence of decorative approach using cobalt, with Chinese design elements and a high fired medium was to result in one of the most successful developments in the history of porcelain production.

Interest in Chinese ceramics by English collectors from the latter part of the 19th, to the mid 20th century resulted in a number of fine examples of Yuan blue and white being imported into Britain. Most of these were ultimately left to a number of museums across the country. In keeping with the theme of this piece, examples will be examined by animal and comparisons will be made from other collections.



Fig 4. A Qingbai 'dragon' vase, meiping Yuan dynasty, Idemitsu Museum, Tokyo, 26.3cm high.



Fig 5. A Cizhou 'ducks on lotus pond' bowl, Song Dynasty, The Detroit Institute of Arts, 23.5cm diameter.



Fig 6. A blue and white 'ducks on lotus pond' dish, Yuan dynasty, Victoria and Albert Museum.

Dragons

Dragons in Chinese art have a long history and (especially the five-clawed examples) were first used as an imperial symbol to represent the Emperor from the Han dynasty (202 BC to 220 AD). The dragon in China has also been associated with rain and water and the season of spring. 6.

It seems appropriate to start this survey of pieces with the well known and celebrated 'David vases', which stand at the entrance to the Percival David Collection gallery in the British Museum. Both vases bear the long inscription at the neck above the elephant head handles, that these altar vases were presented (with a matching incense burner) at the Xingyuan ancestral shrine by Zhang Wenjin in April 1351. (see the full inscription below).

Each of the baluster bodies is painted with a large four-claw flying dragon chasing a flaming pearl. Its long body wraps around the entirety of the vase in a sky of elaborate cloud scrolls and above two successive bands of breaking waves. The main field is complemented by a band of phoenix at the lower part of the neck and there are three registers of flowers, chrysanthemum at the rim, lotus at the shoulder and peony at the foot. The lower part of the foot is painted with petal panels containing emblems.

It is believed that these vases were brought to England around 1920 by Mountstuart William Elphinstone (1871-1957). He gave one to Sir Percival David and the other was sold to the collector Charles Ernest Russell (1866-1960). Sotheby's sold Charles Russell's collection in June 1935, where David purchased it for £360. 7.

3.



Fig 7. Pair of blue and white 'David vases', Yuan dynasty, Percival David collection, 63.5cm high.

The inscription Reads:
'The faithful disciple and member of the Jingtang Society, Zhang Wenjin of Dejiao Lane in the village of Shuncheng in Yushan county of Xinzhou prefecture, is happy to present an altar set of an incense burner and vases as a prayer for the protection of the whole family and for the peace and prosperity of his descendants. Recorded on an auspicious day in the fourth month of the eleventh year of Zhizhang (1351). Dedicated before the Xingyuan ancestral shrine of the General Hu Jingyi'.



Fig 8. Reverse of the 'David vases'.



Fig 9. Detail of one of the 'David vases'.

The large baluster vase in the Topkapi Saray in Istanbul is painted with a similar dragon above breaking waves. Below the rim, there is another thin band of breaking waves and a band of petal panels with emblems, which is very similar to those on the David vases. (Fig 11.)

A jar in the Idemitsu Museum in Tokyo is painted with a similar dragon amongst the same elaborate cloud scrolls as the 'David vases'. (Fig 10.) There is also a similar band of waves at the rim and a band of scrolling peony at the shoulder.

On close examination of these three examples, it does appear that the dragons may well have been painted by the same hand. (Figs 9, 10 and 11.) The treatment of the scales, the wavy hair emanating from their legs, the four claws and their slightly upturned heads all point to this fact.

The division of these vertical forms into horizontal bands, does make sense where the surface area varies depending on the horizontal section of the vessel. This seems to work most effectively on the wide bodied guan jar from the Idemitsu Museum, as a larger part of the dragon can be seen at once.



Fig 10. A blue and white vase, guan, Idemitsu Museum, Tokyo, 30.3cm high.



Fig 11. A blue and white vase, Yuan dynasty, Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul.

A very different dragon is painted to each side of a flask in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It still follows the convention of its head being slightly raised, but this dragon is more sinister in appearance with its fierce facial expression, twisted and contorted body and the hairs on its legs and tail taking on the appearance of flames. The dragon facing to the left has caught the flaming pearl in one of its three-clawed feet, as it flies above the breaking waves. (Fig 12.)

The upper part is painted with a central cloud-collar motif painted with a phoenix on a floral ground, flanked by two half collars of chrysanthemum. The cloud-collar motif was derived from Tartar and Mongol textile cloud-collar capes, (Fig 13.) which on this example works as a clever framing device with interesting negative spaces.

The sides are each painted with a vertical panel of peony topped with another, simpler cloud-collar, below double dragon handles. (Fig 16.) The shape of this flask would most likely have derived from a Middle Eastern metalwork form.

The flask was loaned by George Eumorfopoulos to the 1935-6 International Exhibition of Chinese Art, held at the Royal Academy and was purchased directly after this by the Victoria and Albert Museum, with assistance of The Art Fund, Vallentin Bequest and Sir Percival David and the Universities China Committee.

A similar flask with a simpler design is in the Topkapi collection, which depicts a more sketchy dragon. (Fig 15.) Its handles have been broken off and its neck replaced with a later Ottoman silver-gilt one. Another flask of the same design, but with a dragon similar to the 'David vases' (Fig 14.) was sold by Doyle auctioneers in New York from the F. Gordon Morrill collection in September 2003. It had suffered some damage to the neck and body.



Fig 12. A blue and white 'dragon' flask, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 37cm high.



Fig 13. Textile cloud-collar motif.



Fig 14. A blue and white 'dragon' flask, Yuan dynasty, Doyle, New York, 36.7cm high.



Fig 16. Side and reverse of the 'dragon' flask.

Qilin

The large dish in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford is painted with a qilin to the central field. It stands just beyond a rocky outcrop, with another overhanging its lowered head, surrounded by plantain, melons and bamboo, which emanate from outside of the central field and converge towards its middle. (Fig 17.)

The qilin, or sometimes known as the 'Chinese unicorn', is portrayed with a scaly body, slender legs and cloven hooves like a deer. It has a bushy tail like a Buddhist lion and a dragon's head with two horns. It denotes good fortune and is further associated with long life, fecundity and good government. 8.

This qilin compares quite closely with one depicted on a dish in the Topkapi Saray Museum, which in this case has its head raised and is in full gallop. (Fig 19.) This dish has a continuous peony scroll in the cavetto instead of the lotus of the Ashmolean dish. Another comparable qilin can be seen in the band on the shoulder of a large peony guan jar in the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum. (Figs 18 and 20.) This animal is also in full flight, but has its head turned backward.

In comparing these three qilin, it is not inconceivable to again assume that they may have been painted by the same hand. The stylistic treatment of the scales, the wavy tails and the hooves hint at this association.

The Ashmolean dish was bequeathed by professor Archibald Sayce (1845-1933) in 1933. He was in Peking in 1912 when he was able to acquire a number of great rarities. He was a scholar of hieroglyphics and cuneiform and in 1869 he was elected a fellow and lecturer of Queens College, Oxford. He bequeathed his collections of Middle and Far Eastern antiquities to the Ashmolean on his death in 1933. Unfortunately, this dish has been broken and restored.



Fig 17. A blue and white 'qilin' dish, Yuan dynasty, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 45.7cm diameter.



Fig 18. A large blue and white 'peony' guan jar, Yuan dynasty, Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum.



Fig 19. Detail from a large blue and white dish, Yuan dynasty, Tokpaki Saray Museum, Istanbul, 46.5cm diameter.



Fig 20. Detail of the Bristol City Art Museum 'peony' jar.

Fish

The depiction of fish on Yuan dynasty blue and white ceramics is perhaps one of the most successful of the designs, which is perhaps due to the sense of realism that is given to its aquatic environment.

The dish in the British Museum successfully illustrates this and the two large water weeds also act as a successful framing device to the the Mandarin fish which is depicted in the centre. (Fig 21.) By overlapping and painting the thinner weeds in a slightly lighter tone, a sense of three dimensional space is successfully created.

A comparison dish to this can be seen in the Topkapi Saray Museum, (Fig 22.) but in this example the framing device of the water weed is employed vertically. Both of these dishes have a similar border designs of lotus scroll and diaper (which is also similar to the Ashmolean dish), but in the British Museum example, the rim is lobed, which derives from a metal work form.

The painting of a carp amongst waterweed seen from above is particularly effective in the guan jar from the Topkapi Saray Museum (Fig 23.) and the wide format of this shape lends itself perfectly for this design. One of the most successful fish and waterweed designs is depicted on a jar in the Brooklyn Museum. (Fig 24.) Here the weed does not frame the fish, but is subordinated to create a more realistic pond environment complete with lotus.

The British Museum dish was bequeathed by Mrs Walter Sedgwick (1883-1967) in 1968. According to Soame Jenyns, she was a collector of impeccable taste and she bequeathed parts of her Chinese and Japanese collection to the Museum from 1933 to 1968, as well as to the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, the Fitzwilliam and the Victoria and Albert Museum. 9.

The word fish in Chinese is *yu*, which is a homonym for abundance and affluence, so this design symbolises wealth. 10.



Fig 21. A blue and white 'Mandarin fish' dish, Yuan dynasty, British Museum, London, 47.1cm diameter.



Fig 22. A blue and white 'Mandarin fish' dish, Yuan dynasty, Topkapi Saray, Museum, Istanbul 48cm diameter.



Fig 23. A blue and white 'fish' guan jar, Yuan dynasty, Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul, 27.5cm high.



Fig 24. A blue and white 'Mandarin fish' guan jar, Yuan dynasty, Brooklyn Museum, New York, 30.3cm high.

Mandarin Ducks on Lotus Ponds and Peacocks

Continuing the theme of lotus ponds decorated on the entirety of guan jars as we saw with the Brooklyn Museum example, this jar in the Fitzwilliam Museum successfully portrays the same scene, but from above the water, with a pair of Mandarin ducks swimming on its surface. As with the other jars of this type it has a thin band of breaking waves at the rim. This jar was bequeathed to the Fitzwilliam by Oscar Raphael (1874-1941) in 1941. Raphael was a wealthy bullion merchant and was a founding member of the Oriental Ceramics Society in 1921. At his death, he split his collection between the British Museum and the Fitzwilliam 11.

Paired Mandarin ducks, native to East Asia, traditionally symbolise marital happiness in China and a different approach to the design can be seen to the interior of a stem bowl in the Ashmolean Museum (Fig 26.) and a dish that we looked at earlier in the Victoria and Albert Museum. (Fig 27.) In these examples, the circular, flat format is organised symmetrically, with a duck swimming towards the other on either side of centrally placed lotus.

This 'peacock' jar in the British Museum is included in this section, as its decorative format without bands is similar to the Fitzwilliam example. (Fig 28.) Instead of a lotus pond, this jar depicts a male and female peacock amongst bamboo, rocks, peony, plantain and lotus. Each bird stands on a clear ground and the plantain, bamboo and rocks emanate from the foot of the jar in a similar manner to how they are painted at the edges of the large dishes.

It was purchased from Major Arthur W. Foster who sold a number of pieces to the British Museum in 1961 through the Brooke Sewell Permanent Fund.



Fig 25. A blue and white 'Mandarin ducks and lotus pond' jar, Yuan dynasty, Fitzwilliam Museum,



Fig 26. A blue and white 'Mandarin duck and lotus dish, Yuan dynasty, Ashmolean Museum, 17.8cm high.



Fig 27. A blue and white 'Mandarin duck and lotus' dish, Yuan dynasty, Victoria and Albert Museum, 15.9cm diameter.



Fig 28. A blue and white 'peacock' jar, Yuan dynasty, British, Museum, 30.2cm high.

Phoenix

The last piece to be looked at is a double phoenix dish in the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). Where the dragon was to represent the emperor, the phoenix represented the Empress.

The central field is painted with the two large birds one above the other flying in a clockwise direction. They are both painted amongst flowering peony that emanate from the upper and lower edges of the circular composition. Their fully spread wings, long scrolling tails and position in the central field gives the impression of circular movement.

This dish can be compared to one in the Topkapi Saray Museum where the decoration is reserved in white on a blue background. This technique creates a very dynamic and graphic effect, where the decoration relies predominantly on outline and the contrast between the white and its blue ground. However, the only slight disadvantage with this technique is that it does not allow for the tonal shading that you get in the painted birds and flowers of the V&A example.

The newly conceived approach to pictorial design was a significant innovation during the Yuan dynasty. The large scale vessels, especially dishes, made for the Middle Eastern communal style of eating, provided a highly successful format for these designs in this new medium.

As the paint was applied directly to the unfired body, mistakes could not be rectified, which therefore required a level of technical excellence that came about by constant repetition. The blue and white medium was also a great success because it was economical to produce. Once the cobalt was applied to the body, it was covered in a glaze and only required one high temperature firing. This technique was not improved upon or significantly altered for over the next 600 years.



Fig 29. A blue and white 'double phoenix' dish, Yuan dynasty, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 41.3cm diameter.



Fig 30. A blue and white double phoenix dish with chrysanthemum, white reserved on blue. Yuan dynasty, Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul, 45.5cm diameter.

Notes

1. Lee, Sherman, Ho, Wai-kam, *Chinese Art Under the Mongols, The Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368)*, Cleveland Museum Art, 1968, *The Art of the Yuan Dynasty*, p. 1.
2. Krahl, Regina, Ayers, John (Edited), *Chinese Ceramics in the Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul, Vol II, Yuan and Ming Dynasty Porcelains*, London, 1986, p. 481.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Lee, Sherman, Ho, Wai-kam, *op cit.* p. 23.
6. Gates, Jay, *In Pursuit of the Dragon, Tradition and Transitions in Ming Ceramics, An Exhibition from the Idemitsu Museum of Arts*, Seattle Art Museum, 1988, p. 7.
7. Davids, Roy, Jellinek, Dominic, *Provenance, Collectors, Dealers & Scholars in Britain & America*, 2011, p. 163 and 383.
8. Kerr, Rose, *Chinese Ceramics, Porcelain of the Qing Dynasty 1644-1911*, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1986, p. 81.
9. Davids, Roy, Jellinek, Dominic, *Op cit.* p. 395.
10. Eberhard, Wolfram, *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols, Hidden Symbols in Chinese Life and Thoughts*, London, 1986, p. 106.

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- Fig 4. Seattle Art Museum, *In Pursuit of the Dragon, Tradition and Transitions in Ming Ceramics, An Exhibition from the Idemitsu Museum of Arts*, Seattle Art Museum, 1988, cat no. 5. p. 63.
- Fig 5. Lee, Sherman, Ho, Wai-kam, *Chinese Art Under the Mongols, The Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368)*, Cleveland Museum Art, 1968, cat no. 53.
- Fig 6. Photograph © Victoria and Albert Museum.
- Fig 10. Seattle Art Museum, *In Pursuit of the Dragon, Tradition and Transitions in Ming Ceramics, An Exhibition from the Idemitsu Museum of Arts*, Seattle Art Museum, 1988, cat no. 10. p. 69.
- Fig 11. Krahl, Regina, Ayers, John (Edited), *Chinese Ceramics in the Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul, Vol II, Yuan and Ming Dynasty Porcelains*, London, 1986, cat no. 578, p. 398.
- Fig 13. Cammann, Schuyler, *The Symbolism of the Cloud Collar Motif*, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 33, No. 1, March, 1951, p. 5.
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