



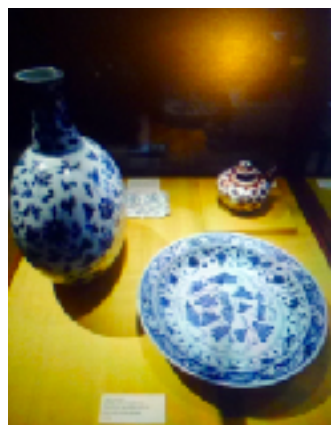
Fig 1. The entrance to the Design Museum in the old Royal Frederik's Hospital building.

## Top Ten Chinese Ceramic Picks from the Design Museum, Copenhagen

About ten years ago I was invited to host a handling session at the Design Museum in Copenhagen for some of its members and friends. I remember it so clearly as it was one of the most enjoyable evening talks that I can remember giving.

I have always found that handling sessions are the most fun and interesting way of communicating information to people. I do enjoy giving formalised slide lectures however, the fairly loose structure in a handling session and the interaction between the pieces and the people always creates an interesting response, which is never predictable.

I had visited the Museum previously and on seeing the quality of the Chinese collection, I suggested a handling session as an idea to my colleague and it was arranged for my next visit. I prepared with a general loose framework for discussion and a little history of the museum, but I did not know what pieces would be available until we arrived.



We decided to arrive early, but due to a miscommunication, we found that everyone was seated in the Asian gallery waiting for the session to begin.

I was met with was a group of around 40 people seated around two trestle tables set up in an L-shape. When I cast my eyes across the tables I was somewhat stunned to see some of the best pieces of the collection arranged across the tables for me to discuss. What you see in the images above is a number of the pieces that I was fortunate enough to handle that night.

The museum was founded in 1890 by the Confederation of Danish Industries and the NY Carlsberg Museumslegat. It opened in 1890 in what is now Hans Christian Anderson Boulevard and moved in 1926 to its current location, which was the former Royal Frederik's Hospital on Bredgade Street. The building was constructed in the Rococo style during the reign of King Frederik V from 1752-57. 1. The building was designed around a central outdoor space known as the Grønnegården (open museum garden). (Fig 2.) This space is used for exhibitions and is an outdoor café in the summer.

The interior spaces were created by the influential designer Kaare Klint (1888-1954), (Fig 3.) who had to adapt the hospital wards into functioning galleries (Fig 4.) and the large windows with views onto the central garden gave some effective natural lighting to the spaces. Klint lived and worked at the Museum and also taught architecture and design. 2.

When I last visited the museum in 2013 there were galleries dedicated to the Chinese and Japanese collections, which unfortunately have now been put into storage and replaced with post war design galleries.

The following pieces are my pick of the Chinese collection which, without question, is world class.



Fig 2. The open museum garden.



Fig 3. Kaare Klint (1888-1954).



Fig 4. Interior view of one of the galleries.

## A Ruyao Circular Washer, Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127)

Ruyao are the rarest and most treasured of all the wares in Chinese ceramics. It is believed that they were made for a very short period of around 20 years roughly from 1086 to 1106 at the kilns in Ruzhou, in modern Baofeng county in Henan province. 2.

They have attained almost mythical status amongst collectors as they are virtually unobtainable. Only 6 examples have come up for sale at auction since 1940 and only 87 heirloom (not excavated) examples exist, with only 36 of these outside of China. 3.

Regina Krahl in her catalogue essay to the last example sold at Sotheby's Hong Kong in October 2017 (no 50) gave a complete catalogue raisonné of all the extant examples and this piece is cited as number 60. 32 other circular washers are listed which vary in size from around 13cm to 16cm.

This is a particularly successful example as it exhibits the subtle turquoise colour and the translucent crackle that refracts light. The crackle is created by the glaze shrinking at a slightly faster rate than the body in the firing process. These wares are also known by their characteristic 'sesame' seed spur marks, which in this case has 3 (Fig 5a.), but some examples have 5.

On looking at this piece, it does seem quite surprising that such a humble and understated looking object has become one of the major icons of Chinese art. But historically, this represented the Song literati scholar aesthetic of simplicity and honesty, as opposed to showing off technical skill and decorating a piece elaborately.

It is also interesting that the focus on the formal elements of the piece, such as shape, colour and glaze ties in with a modern, contemporary aesthetic and Song ceramics have been so widely influential in 20th century studio ceramics.

I have been fortunate enough to have handled five of these wares, which have all been brush washers: two at Sotheby's Hong Kong auctions (a foliate washer was also offered in April 2012 (no 29)), the Sir Alan Barlow circular washer when it was part of the Sussex University collection (no 55), which is now in the Ashmolean Museum, and the circular washer in the Princessehof Keramiek Museum, in Leeuwarden, Holland (no 59).

As the value for this piece is so high, it made sense that we did not handle this on the night of the talk, but I was lucky enough to handle it at a later date.



Fig 5. A Ruyao circular brush washer, Northern Song dynasty, 13cm diameter.



Fig 5a.



A Blue and White Vase, Meiping,  
Ming Dynasty, Yongle Period (1402-1424)

The design of this blue and white meiping is particularly rare and I have only found a similar example in the Palace Museum, Beijing. Most of the examples tend to be painted with lotus or sprays of fruit and flowers with bands of leaves or further sprays at the foot.

This design represents a naturalistic view of flowering peach blossom and bamboo that one might see when gazing out of a window. The sense of naturalism is heightened by the use of tonal shading where some of the elements, such as the prunus, are darker and appear closer to the viewer and some (the three leaves in the centre of the image on the left) are lighter and seem further away.

The British Museum has a vase with a similar pictorial design, but has the addition of birds perched on branches of prunus. The Palace Museum in Beijing has a vase (with a cover) with a design of a garden with rocks, plantain and bamboo.

The base of this vase is unglazed. (Fig 7a.)

Fig 6 A blue and white vase, meiping, Ming dynasty Yongle period, 36cm high.

A Copper-Red Kendi, Ming  
Dynasty, Hongwu Period (1368-1398)

Kendi's (pouring vessels) with copper-red decoration from the early Ming dynasty are rare and the strong, deep red colour is uncommon, as it was particularly unstable and volatile in the kiln and would often result in a dark grey colour.

This example is painted with peony to one side and chrysanthemum to the other, between thin bands of *ruyi* at the neck and above the foot. There is also another band of *ruyi* on the upper surface of the flange of the neck. The base is left unglazed and it would have been fired standing upright on its foot. (Fig 7a.)

The compressed hemispherical shape is particularly pleasing and this, together with the flanged neck, would have made it easy to hold and pour with both hands.

Kendi's are unusual ritual vessels and they were made for the Chinese and the south-east Asian market. They are more commonly found in examples dating to the mid to later Ming dynasty during the Wanli period (1572-1620) when they were often constructed in animal forms, such as frogs, elephants, phoenix and crayfish.



Fig 7. A copper-red kendi, Ming dynasty, Hongwu period, 14cm high.



Fig 7a.



Fig 8. A large blue and white moonflask, Yongle period, 45cm high.



Fig 8a.

### A Large Blue and White Moonflask, Ming Dynasty, Yongle period (1402-1424)

This flask is one of my favourite pieces in the collection. The reason for this is that it combines a wonderful round and tactile body of a just off-white colour, with a freely painted Indian lotus design.

One of the reasons that this continuous meandering lotus design is so effective is because the outlines of flowers and the leafy scrolls are slightly blurred and almost suffuse into the surrounding ground. This is partly created by the 'heaped and piled' effect of the thickly applied cobalt blue pigment which has seeped through the surface of the glaze. The design would not have been as successful if these elements were painted in a more exacting style with hard outlines. Despite the lotus flowers being slightly stylised, the impression and essence of the natural elements are successfully captured.

A band of the same design is repeated on the waisted neck, which is below a band of *lingzhi* at the rim. The base is left white and covered in a clear glaze. (Fig 8a.)

This flask was originally in the collection of Jean-Pierre Dubosc, the renowned French connoisseur of Chinese art, who was stationed in China as a diplomat during the 1930s and 1940s. It was exhibited at the 1954 Venice exhibition at the Palazzo Ducale.



A Blue and White Double-Gourd Vase,  
Jiajing Mark and Period (1522-1566)

This vase is quite a feat in construction and would have required the potter to throw two bulbous sections independently and then lute them together using a porcelaneous slip prior to painting and firing. The shape of the double-gourd was a symbol of fertility, as gourds generally contained many seeds.

The decoration depicts four roundels of five-claw dragons to the lower bulb and four of phoenix to the upper one. They are flanked with sprays of scrolling *ruyi*. The quality of the painting is not the finest, but the blue colour is very strong and vibrant and has often been referred to as 'Mohammedan blue' (*huihui qing*) on pieces from this period. This reflected the fact that much of the imported cobalt pigment originated from Kashan in Persia.

The glazed base bears an underglaze six-character mark of the Jiajing period and also a label for the Alfred and Lady Ivy Clark collection (Fig 9a), which was considered one of the finest in England after that of Sir Percival David.

Fig 9. A blue and white double-gourd vase, Jiajing mark and period, 47.5cm high.

A Blue and White Dish, Ming Dynasty,  
Yongle Period (1402-1424)

This barbed or bracket-lobed dish is painted with a central peony surrounded by a lotus, rose, camellia and hibiscus and the stems are interlaced in a delicate arabesque design.

Individual sprays of lotus, peony, chrysanthemum, pomegranate, hibiscus and morning glory are painted twice within the twelve lobes and face each other across the dish. The everted rim is painted with continuous scrolling lingzhi.

Large dishes with barbed rims were first made in the Yuan dynasty and were made for the Middle Eastern market. The large scale format suited the communal style of dining that was practised in the Islamic world at this time.

The exterior of the dish repeats the 12 individual flower sprays and has an unglazed base. (Fig 10a.) As with most Yongle period pieces, this example bears no reign mark.



Fig 9a.



Fig 10a.



Fig 10. A blue and white dish, Ming dynasty, Yongle Period, 37.8cm diameter.

**A Large Blue and White 'Boys' Jar,  
Guan, Jiajing Mark and Period  
(1522-1566)**

This wide bodied jar is painted in a similar style to the double-gourd dragon and phoenix vase above in that the quality of the painting is quite loose and sketchy, especially in the details of the trees and the band of lappets at the foot.

One of the reasons for this deterioration in quality could have been the increase in the demand from the court, which resulted in a significant increase in production at the imperial kilns in Jingdezhen. This meant that some compromises in quality had to be made in order to maintain output.

Misfiring of glazes and distortions of shape (on taller forms) can also sometimes be seen on pieces from this period and in this example, a diagonal linear glaze crawl runs down the left side of the body. (see Fig11.)

This jar would have originally had a cover and it is rarer and thus more desirable to be complete with one. The renowned Shanghai and Hong Kong collector J.M. Hu owned a pair of these as well as a pair of wucan fish examples, all with covers. The base bears an underglaze blue six character Jiajing mark. (Fig11a.)



Fig 11. A blue and white 'boys' Guan, Jiajing mark and period, 34cm high.



Fig 11a

**A Purple-Splashed Junyao 'Lotus Bud' Water  
Dropper, Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127)**

This is such a wonderfully tactile piece and a jewel of an object that just has to be handled. The globular body, takes the form of a lotus bud, hence its name and the thick opaque pale blue glaze thins to a mushroom brown colour at the rim. The thickness of the glaze can be seen in the lower image (Fig 12a), where it stops short of the foot and reveals part of the unglazed body.

Three large purple copper splashes are added to the side of the body and pieces with this are much more desirable than those that are just fired in pale blue. Within the copper splashes there is a transition of colour from deep blue to purple, through to light blue. This glaze effect was to influence 18th century Qing dynasty flambé glazes, which produced whole pieces with similar glaze effects. The application of the copper splashes to this piece is very similar to that on the small 'bubble' bowls that were made during the same period. They were so named, because when viewed from above the interior of these bowls resembled the look of a bubble.

Junyao wares of the Northern Song dynasty are generally smaller than later pieces and are some of the finest of these wares. The most common forms are bowls, dishes and water droppers. Vases are generally quite rare.

The base is glazed and bears a label for the Venice 1954 Chinese exhibition. (Fig 12a.)



Fig 12. A Junyao 'lotus bud' water dropper, Northern Song dynasty, 9.5cm high.



Fig 12a.



Fig 13. A blue and white ewer, Ming dynasty, Yongle period, 35.8cm high

### A Blue and White Ewer, Ming Dynasty, Yongle Period (1402-1424)

This large, early Ming ewer is based quite closely on a Middle Eastern brass form of the 12th/13th century, such as the silver-inlaid ewer from Herat. (Fig 14.) The Chinese potters in Jingdezhen were adept at adapting shapes to order and this ewer cleverly captures the spirit of the earlier metal example.

The vertical side panels successfully mirror the lobed sections of the earlier piece and give a vertical format for different flowers, which in this case are painted with peony, mallow, lingzhi, lotus and pomegranate. The shoulders have moulded lappets and the cylindrical neck is painted with peony. The strap handle that joins the body to the neck is painted with individual flower sprays (Fig 13a.)

Ewers of this type were originally made with a matching domed cover and a knopped finial but it is rare to find examples complete with this.

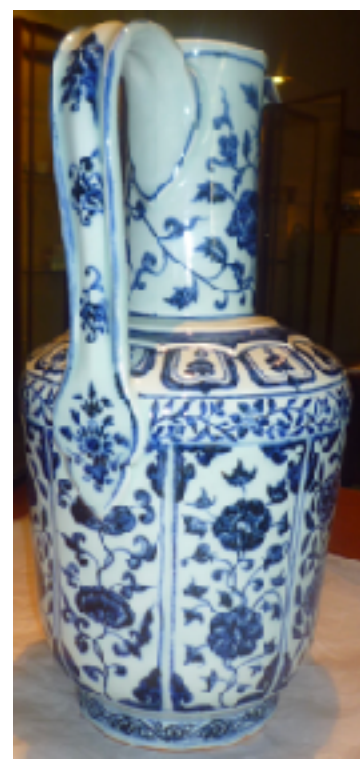


Fig 13a.

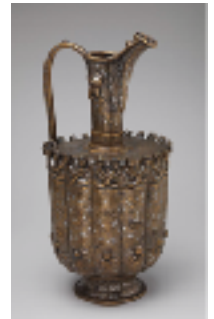


Fig 14. Silver-inlaid brass ewer, 1180-1210, Herat.

### A Large Underglaze Blue and Celadon Moonflask, Qianlong Seal Mark and Period (1736-1795)

This moonflask is of a particularly unusual and complicated design that would have been constructed from 7 separate parts from the garlic or globular-shaped mouth and waisted neck, to the two strap handles, the two parts of the circular body and the foot.

The body is painted to the centre of each side with a circular *shou* character surrounded by ruyi and leaves. It is set on a celadon ground that is lightly incised throughout with a floral design and bordered with thin band of leafy scrolls. The mouth is painted with a classic lotus scroll design.

This form is based on a similar, but smaller early Ming Yongle blue and white shape which is constructed in a similar way (Fig 15.) and it in turn was influenced by Middle Eastern metalwork forms.

The glazed base is painted with a six-character Qianlong seal mark. (Fig 16a.)



8.

Fig 15. A blue and white moonflask, Yongle period, 24.5cm high.



Fig 16a.



Fig 16. An underglaze blue and celadon moonflask, Qianlong mark and period, 50.5cm high.

The Design Museum has historically been an interesting and exciting space for art and design in Copenhagen. With the current world-wide interest in contemporary art and post war design, it is not surprising that a renewed emphasis has been given to this and Danish design has always been at the forefront of innovation.

Perhaps it may be possible to dream that one day in the future, this collection may re-emerge if not in this space, perhaps in some other dedicated one.

## Notes

1. Design Museum Danmark, *History & Architecture*.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Krahl, Regina, *A Ru 'Ice Crackle' Brush Washer*, catalogue essay for Sotheby's Hong Kong sale of the Le Cong Tang Ru Washer, 03 October 2017, lot 5.
4. *Ibid.*

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Fig 15. Photograph © Sotheby's Hong Kong, *The Pilkington Collection of Chinese Art*, 06 April 2016, lot 17.



Fig 17. Reading room designed by Kaare Klint.



Fig 18. Café Klint.



Other Pieces in the Collection



Fig 19. An iron-brown and white gardenia dish, Zhengde mark and period, 25.3cm diameter.



Fig 20. A blue and white 'grapes' dish, Ming dynasty, Yongle period, 47.8cm diameter.



Fig 21. A large blue and white meiping, Wanli mark and period, 46cm high.



Fig 22. A Longquan celadon cong vase, Southern Song Dynasty, 27cm high.



Fig 23. A blue and white vase, Jiajing mark and period.



Fig 24. A blue and white ewer and cover, Daoguang mark and period, 21cm high.



Fig 25. A very large blue and white 'phoenix' fish bowl, Ming dynasty, Jiajing period, 59.8cm high.



Fig 26. An iron-red and green enamel double-gourd vase, Jiajing mark and period.



Fig 27. A blue and white octagonal box and cover, Jiajing mark and period.