

CHINESE CERAMICS THROUGH THE AGES

Collectors the world over have long recognized the virtues of Chinese ceramics, with vessels from all periods taking pre-eminence for both their technical and aesthetic qualities. Throughout the rich and complex history of China, ceramic production has persisted as an art of high refinement, its influence being felt from one side of the globe to the other, from Japan and southern Asia to the capitals of Georgian Europe. Whilst connoisseurs have long appreciated the exquisite refinements of Chinese ceramics, especially of the Song and Ming Dynasties, recognition of the unique and rustic beauty of the country's domestic wares can similarly be detected. Responding to the textures and shapes that constitute this latter consideration, the Maroondah Art Gallery is currently staging 'Chinese Ceramics Through The Ages', an exhibition that brings together a selection of vessels from 3,000 B.C.E. to 1,900 C.E.

Drawn from seven of the major epochs of Chinese history, the exhibition celebrates a vast and continuous tradition. However, unlike similar such shows, the focus here is not on the wares of the imperial kilns, but showcases a selection of utilitarian items made for domestic usage or alternatively for export to Asia and the middle-east.



Fig. 1

Some of the items in this exhibition, such as the Ming Dynasty swatow pieces, were discovered on the ocean floor off the coast of Vietnam where they had lain for four centuries, only to be rediscovered as part of the famed Bhin Thuan Shipwreck. Others, such as the presentation of Ch'ing kitchenware, were discovered near the old city of Amoy on the coast of southern China, now known as the new urban centre Xiamen. Looking at these pieces, many of which are encrusted with barnacles and in some instances even coral, (Fig.1)

one is reminded that China has a long and complex history of trade with distant lands. Given the level of refinement achieved by the ceramicists of the Song and Ming this is hardly surprising. Even the more rustic pieces on show reveal a sophistication that has inspired ceramicists the world over.

Enhancing the appeal of these pieces - that is if their fine shapes and glazes were not enough are the added layers of history and human contact that are palpable aspects of such vessels. Indeed several of these items were used over many generations before finding their way onto the open market and into private collections. Included for instance are three high walled 'alms bowls' used by monks during the Ming Dynasty, Fig.2. Simple though they may be, they are wonderful examples of the reductive beauty of even modest Chinese ceramics. Each of these is a pleasure to handle, sitting comfortably in two hands, befitting their original function in the mendicant and ritualised lives of their former owners.



Fig. 2

In contrast to these robust and solid items, the near eggshell delicacy of the Song Dynasty teacups and saucers is testament to a refined cultural life. For such vessels to have survived these past eight centuries, not to mention the tumult of those epochs, is testament to the respect afforded them through successive generations. Included here is a particularly early example of porcelain ware, illustrated in Fig. 3, along with later pieces of considerable refinement.



Fig.3

In its attempt to include works from several major periods, the show contains a number of fascinating items. Amongst the earliest pieces displayed are three Banshan type vessels dating from China's Neolithic or 'Yangshao' period (approximately 5,000 B.C.E. – 3,000 B.C.E.). Unearthed in western central Gansu province, these three storage jars are dated to the Yangshao-Majiyao culture, around 3,100 B.C.E. – 2,700 B.C.E. (Fig. 4). As possibly the earliest producers of bronze implements, the Yangshao-Majiyao communities represent a pivotal period in China's early history, making the inclusion of these pieces a strong point of interest. In light also of the techniques used to fashion these wares, that is simple coiling and burnishing, they are both remarkably symmetrical in design and considerably light of body. Furthermore the durability of the unglazed clay body can be seen in the trace patterns of plant roots visible across their surfaces, evidence of having lain buried for some five thousand years.



Fig.4

Moving forwards in time two pieces from the Tang Dynasty (618 C.E. – 907 C.E.) are also worthy of attention. These two items are from the legendary Batu Hitam shipwreck,

discovered in 1999 one nautical mile off the coast of the island of Belitung, Indonesia. Importantly the discovery transformed perceptions of the Tang, providing key insights into what could loosely be termed that period's 'maritime silk road', a trade route extending all the way from China to Persia and the Middle East and one that was largely unknown to modern historians prior to the discovery of this remnant Arab dhow. Like many of the 67,000 ceramics on board, the two bowls were produced in Changsha in southern China. Typically they are decorated with Islamic designs, highlighting their express production for the export markets. The designs associated with these vessels range from firework and foliage patterns, to Koranic surahs. The bowl in Fig. 5 carries the definitive statement of Islamic faith, the qalimah: "There is no god but god". Executed in dramatic free-hand bravura, the formation of the text is such that it might also be interpreted as an impromptu study of the elements. In this swirling rendition of wind, rain and clouds, the ineffable presence of the divine in nature is poetically and succinctly expressed.



Fig. 5

Other salvaged pieces, such as the recently auctioned swatow ware, discovered off the coast of Vietnam and widely known as the Bhin Thuan Shipwreck are also included in the exhibition. These include a superb blue and white charger with phoenix design, Fig. 6, along with a simple yet refined celadon bowl of exquisite proportions, along with an additional large charger. Of these latter pieces, examination of the bases reveals patches of adhered sand and grit, caused at the time of manufacture through being placed directly on the ground

whilst still hot from the kiln. Strictly speaking they mark the pieces as less than superior quality; however by contemporary standards details such as these enliven the tactility of these wonderful items.



Fig. 6

Similarly, a selection of Ch'ing Dynasty vessels, which are far from 'perfect' in the traditional sense are embellished by the accretions of continual usage. As each of these pieces have at one time or another been damaged and subsequently mended using an ingenious system of metal cramps, they fall into a sub-category of Chinese ceramics known as 'cramp ware' or "bo-wah-zai" Fig.7. Using this system the metal armatures do not penetrate through the wall of the vessel, allowing for their continual and safe usage. As an expression of the frugality of traditional Chinese society 'cramp ware' is little known or appreciated by western aesthetes. They are however prized amongst Asian collectors, especially in China and Taiwan where exhibitions are periodically staged.



Fig. 7

In focusing on the utilitarian end of Chinese ceramics, 'Chinese Ceramics Through The Ages' in no way champions the refinements prized by connoisseurs of Imperial porcelain – the famed productions of the Jingdezhen kilns that set record prices at auction in London, New York and Hong Kong. Instead, it looks to a lingering appreciation of items both loved and abused in the flux of daily life and to the riches of China's great ceramics heritage.

'Chinese Ceramics Through The Ages' was on at the Maroondah Art Gallery, 32 Greenwood Avenue, Ringwood, 3134 from Sunday 26 October – Saturday 13 December, 2008.

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