

Two early silver mounted porcelains at the Royal Ontario Museum

By Philip Cheong



Fig. 1. Photo published with permission of the Royal Ontario Museum © ROM

the Canadian frontier. From Canada, he served as the British military attaché with the United States Army in the Spanish-American War and became a close friend to Theodore Roosevelt. It was in Canada that he met his wife, Ruth Moore, the daughter of a prominent New York banker. He retired from the military in 1900, but served with distinction during World War I, and for the next 18 years, served as the Conservative M.P. for Fareham. His estate “Chequers” was given to the British nation and serves as the country retreat of British prime ministers.

Among the glories of the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto is a collection of largely early decorative arts and objets ver-tue from Europe and some Asian material formed by Arthur Hamilton Lee (1868-1947) and his wife, Ruth, Viscount and Viscountess Lee of Fareham in the early decades of the twentieth century. Lord Lee was a British soldier, diplomat, politician and art collector who served in China, Canada, and the United States. Along with Samuel Courtauld, he was one of the founders of the Courtauld Institute of Art in London.

Arthur Lee’s military career began in China and then in Canada, where as a young man in his mid-twenties, he was Professor of Strategy and Tactics at the Royal Military College in Kingston, Ontario. One of his accomplishments here at that time, when Canada was still a relatively young country, was an organization of a military survey of

The majority of Lord and Lady Lee's collection went to the Courtauld Institute but this smaller collection of decorative arts and objets vertu from the Mediaeval era and onwards came to Canada for safekeeping during World War II and was eventually given to the Massey Foundation in Canada. It is in this collection which was given in trust to the ROM that contains two of the earliest silver mounted Asian ceramic items in the museum's collection; a rare sweetmeat box of Chinese blue and white porcelain with English or Dutch silver mounts from around 1570 (Fig. 1) and a 15th-century Vietnamese dish with silver gilt mounts on its base and rim with unidentified English provincial marks from around 1625 to 1650. (Fig. 2)

The second piece is much rarer than most items of this type as the material is Vietnamese in origin, not Chinese. Almost all known mounted pieces are Chinese, and to find a

Vietnamese example is extremely rare. While we tend to think of early export ceramics as Chinese, the Vietnamese were conducting a lively trade in ceramics in south east Asia during the 15th and 16th centuries. Some of these pieces would have been taken by Arab traders to the Middle East and Turkey where there are surviving examples from collections formed during this era in the Tehran museum and Topkapi Palace museum. It would have been from this pool of trade ceramics that this most likely filtered into the west from the Levant.

The ceramic dish itself is typical of Vietnamese wares used domestically and for export and is decorated in an underglazed blue on a greyish ground. In the case of Vietnamese ceramics, the blues are almost always an inky-greyish shade on a greyish body, the result of using low grade cobalt for the glaze and not very refined clays for the body. In



Fig. 2 Photo published with permission of the Royal Ontario Museum © ROM

addition, the base is often painted with a chocolate coloured wash which is the case in this piece. The Chinese box in comparison has a deep and rich blue colour on a clean, white porcelain ground. It is interesting to note that while the silver mounts are contemporary with the Chinese box, the mounts for the dish is about a century and a half later. Why it took so long for this to happen, we will never know; for a piece this size would certainly have acquired mounts once it reached Europe in the 15th or 16th centuries. By the time these mounts were applied, (Jackson has ascribed the maker's mark -IV over a pellet or star in a heart-shaped shield)-to being active around 1630-35 in the second edition of 1921¹), Chinese porcelain had already become widespread and less rare with the involvement of the Dutch East India company. Perhaps this piece only came in from the Levant at this time as the result of a



Fig. 3, Photo Courtesy Sotheby's

downsizing or dispersal of a Turkish noble's household. Surviving pieces in the Middle East and Turkey were never mounted in precious materials and in the kitchens of the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, one can find numerous examples of Chinese serving dishes as well as some Vietnamese ones in their unadorned glory.

Chinese ceramics in Elizabethan England was a rarity and there are still a number of surviving examples with contemporary silver mounts. However, Chinese ceramics had reached the shores of England well before Elizabeth's time. According to tradition, the first pieces that came into Britain was in 1506, more than fifty years before Elizabeth I ascended the throne. These pieces were said to have been given by Philip, Archduke of Austria and his wife Joanna, Queen of Castile to Sir Thomas Trenchard, High Sheriff of Dorset in gratitude for his hospitality to the couple after their ship was forced to make landfall at Weymouth after a storm at sea.²

The idea of mounting secular precious objects or curiosities with silver and gold originated during the Renaissance with natural and man-made objects. Ostrich eggs, nautilus shells and hard stone vessels were commonly mounted into cups, and these occupied the top of the luxury market while coconut shells and stoneware vessels, being the least inexpensive, occupied the bottom. These items could in part form the basis of a *Kunstkammer*, a cabinet of curiosities or wonder which was fashionable amongst European nobility at the time. Prior to this, if one were to look for mounted objects, it would be more common to find them in cathedral treasuries where classical, Byzantine and Islamic semi-precious stone or glass vessels were converted into ecclesiastical vessels used for the office of communion.

The introduction of Chinese ceramics, considered the most exotic and prized, reinforced

the idea of precious metal mounts both for emphasis on its rarity and for additional protection for the material. The perceived magical nature of Chinese porcelain also prompted Renaissance princes of the Machiavellian ilk to seek it out as it was believed to crack or discolour should poison come in contact with it. One of the earliest known piece of Chinese porcelain to be mounted and recorded is the Gaignieres-Fonthill vase of around circa 1300-1330 A.D. from the Yuan period (1279-1368). This piece was first recorded in the collection of Louis the Great of Hungary when it was probably given to him by Mongol emissaries in 1338 on their way to visit the antipope Benedict XII in Avignon, France. The vase, a qingbai ware characterized by a pale bluish white glaze, is decorated with beading and applied and carved decorations in relief. Several decades after its arrival at the court of Louis the Great, it was richly mounted with precious metals and gems as an ewer and given to Charles III of Naples. Throughout time, it ended up in several notable collections including that of the Duc du Berry, the Grand Dauphin (the son of Louis XIV) and the eccentric English collector, William Beckford of Fonthill Abbey. The mounts were unfortunately removed in the 19th century for its precious materials and what we know of its mounted appearance is from a surviving drawing from the early 18th century and an engraving from the frontispiece of John Britton's *Graphical and Literary Illustration of Fonthill Abbey, Wiltshire* published in 1823.

The earliest surviving piece of porcelain with its European mounts still intact is a celadon bowl from the Ming period (1368-1644) mounted in silver gilt with an accompanying silver gilt cover in the collection of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen in Kassel. The silver date from around 1453 and was in the possession of Count Philip von Katzenellenbogen who was known to have travelled in

the East between 1433 and 1444.³ The bowl is on a typical gothic foliate shaped base with strap mounts encasing the bowl and embellished with enamelled armorial bearings.

Before the middle of the 16th century, the trade routes that porcelains took to Europe were arduous and dangerous. Arab traders would ship the goods through a maritime route that brought them through the Indian and Arabian coast and up the Red Sea. Due to difficulties in navigating portions of the Red Sea, the goods were often landed on the coast and sent up through the Nile to Fustat (modern day Cairo) or through the Hajj pilgrimage route via Arabia to Syria and eventually Turkey. There, English traders active in the Levant trade were well situated to re-direct some of these porcelains to England. After the 1560s, the bulk of export ware to Europe was carried by Portuguese in their carracks. Here, English privateers took advantage of the opportunity of seizing Portuguese ships and depriving them of their cargoes without having to travel as far to Asia. From this period, is a notable group of five surviving blue and white pieces with silver mounts of circa 1585 that were formerly in the collection at Burghley House and now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. As late as 1592, the Portuguese ship "Madre de Dios" was captured off the Azores which resulted in an influx of porcelain into the collection of wealthy Englishmen.⁴

Amongst blue and white wares, the earliest recorded silver mounted example in Europe would be a dish from around 1365 in the collection of Louis, duc d'Anjou and mentioned in an inventory from 1379-80 described as an "*escuelle pour fruiterie*"⁵. This piece of blue and white would also have been an early example of blue and white, for as a type, blue and white porcelain only made its appearance in the 14th century.

In England, the earliest recorded mention of

porcelain is from a letter from the Surveyor of customs at Southhampton, Henry Hutoft, to Thomas Cromwell, announcing the arrival of a present of novelties to Henry VIII. In this letter, the porcelain is described as "*three potts of erthe payntid, called Porseland*"⁶ We discover that these pieces "*before they shall be presented, there shall be to every one of these things certain preparations, such as chains of gold and silver, with colours and other things, for the furniture of the same*"⁷

indicating the fashion for mounting precious objects in silver and gold. The earliest English example of mounted porcelain is a Ming period celadon bowl with unmarked gilt mounts of circa 1506-1530 in the gothic style which was believed to have been presented to New College, Oxford, by the Archbishop Warham (1450-1532).⁸ William Warham was the Archbishop of Canterbury and it believed that this bowl was presented in 1530 to his college of which he was a member between 1473 and 1488. This bowl also has been traditionally attributed as a gift from Archduke Philip of Austria to Warham during his sojourn in England.

Last year, a Ming period wucai decorated wine pot with royal and ecclesiastical connections came onto the market. This piece had reputedly belonged to Elizabeth I and upon her death, passed into the hands of her personal chaplain, Henry Parry, the Bishop of Worcester. A piece such as this is rare to begin with, as it does not fall into the category of export ware. Instead, it is a piece of very fine quality 16th century wucai porcelain which would have been used at the Chinese imperial court (wucai ware is distinguished by five colours – red, yellow, green, blue and the white of the porcelain) and simply mounted with a silver spout and chain to safeguard the lid.

How this piece ended up in England and in Elizabeth's court is a mystery. As it is distinguished from the usual export blue and white,

it is quite likely that this piece was a trader's prized possession carried across great distances in the hopes of turning a tidy profit. Ultimately perhaps, it was a gift to the queen to curry favour and could even have been part of an ambassadorial gift from the Spaniards as a large amount of the Chinese porcelain exported to Portugal and Spain remained in the Iberian Peninsula. A piece such as this, unusual to begin with, must most certainly have been the jewel in the crown of any European collection of Chinese porcelain, hence the greater cachet as part of an ambassadorial gift. What sets it apart from other gifts of precious metals and gems is that it is an exotic piece unseen before in England insofar of its glaze. Almost all Chinese porcelain that came to England at that time were exclusively blue and white with rare examples of other wares like kinrande ware (an iron red glaze with gilt decorations) and celadon.

The two pieces in the ROM's collection are part of this history of trade and exploration between the European world and Asia. Both represent part of the spectrum in time and trade in foreign exotica, namely Asian ceramics; the box being the more normal type of Chinese export porcelain that you would find in 16th century England or Holland that came to Europe on Portuguese or Spanish ships; the second, a more unusual and rare 15th century Vietnamese piece that would have travelled partly through maritime routes and then through land routes in the Levant and Europe. The dish certainly would have had several owners en-route before finally finding its English owner who encased it in its silver mounts. These pieces would have been prestige possessions bearing witness to the wealth, status and sophistication of its owners and were precious heirlooms in their own time and historical objets de vertu in ours. The ceramics themselves would not be considered great examples of the type by connoisseurs of Asian ceramics today, and would easily be dismissed

by serious collectors of the type, but because of they are encased in period silver mounts, they are elevated beyond the ordinary. A piece of unmounted trade porcelain would not hold the same fascination or interest as one that is because with the addition of the mounts, it becomes a synthesis of both Asian and European decorative arts. It is partly in this that we can appreciate the historical importance that these exotic pieces had for its original owners.

Endnotes

1 Information provided by Stephanie Allen of the Royal Ontario Museum for 997.158.107 from their artefact database.

2 There is a bowl know as the 'Trenchard Bowl' which is in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, but that piece has been proven to be a later piece from the Jiajing period (r. 1522-66) by Philippa Glanville and therefore could not be from the gift made in 1506. See Philippa Glanville's article "Chinese porcelain and the English goldsmiths, circa 1550 to 1650" in *The Proceedings of the Silver Society*, Volume III, Number 6, Autumn 1987

3 F.J.B. Watson and Gillian Wilson, Mounted Oriental Porcelain in the J. Paul Getty Museum (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1999), p. 4

4 Philippa Glanville, "Chinese porcelain and the English goldsmiths, circa 1550 to 1650"
The Proceedings of the Silver Society, Volume III, Number 6, Autumn 1987, p. 157

5, 6, 7 John Carswell et al, Blue and White: Chinese Porcelain and Its Impact on the Western World, (Chicago: The University of Chicago, The David and Alfred Smart Gallery, 1985) p. 106

8 Charles Oman, English Domestic Silver, (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1959) p.61

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