



Noble Blue

THE ENDURING APPEAL
OF BLUE GROUND
CHINESE PORCELAIN





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OF BLUE GROUND
CHINESE PORCELAIN



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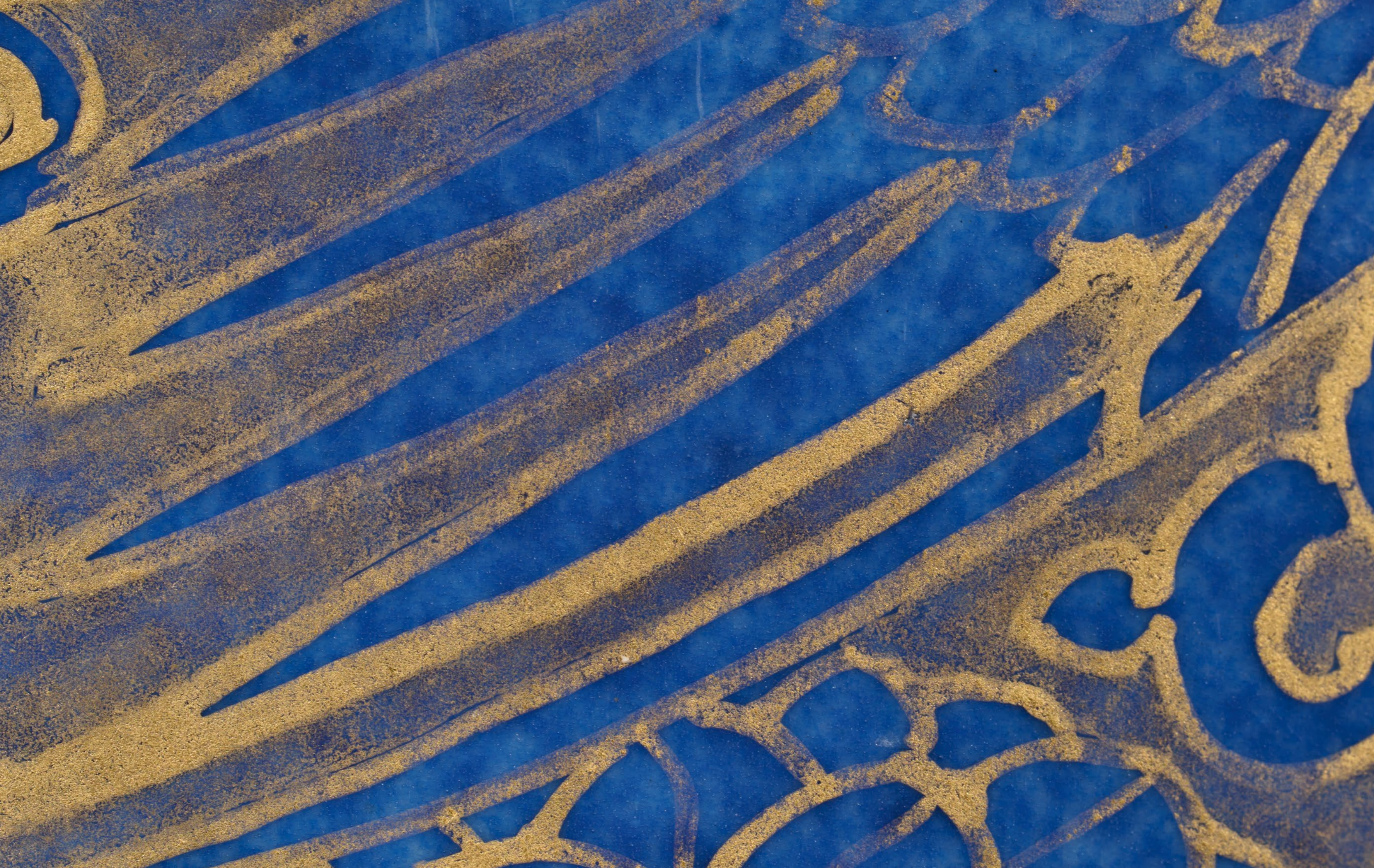
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Foreword

In our quest to select themes for our gallery’s exhibitions and catalogues which are relevant to our area of expertise, whilst also sufficiently representative to allow the exploration of new perspectives and interpretations of particular subject matters, we always try to look for those themes that have not been covered by other past exhibitions or publications.

This year we are proud to present such an exhibition and catalogue, on a group of pieces that, as far as we know, is discussed and exhibited as such for the very first time. *Noble Blue: The Enduring Appeal of Blue Ground Chinese Porcelain* focuses on a type of Chinese porcelain that is commonly known, although not always correctly, as ‘Powder Blue’.

We began collecting examples of blue ground Chinese porcelain in 2011 in order to make up a group large enough for a research project and the exhibition and catalogue we are now presenting at our galleries in London and Lisbon. In total we will be exhibiting over 100 individual examples of blue ground porcelain, of which 94 are discussed in the 61 entries of this catalogue.

This exhibition focuses on pieces ranging from the 17th to the 19th century, produced in the Chinese city of Jingdezhen. Their uniqueness in terms of decoration is what made this porcelain so widely admired across the world, collected by royalty and nobility, including the courts of the Chinese Imperial family, of the Sultans of the Ottoman Empire and of European royal families. Some of these collections have become references for blue ground porcelain, and to this day examples can still be found in collections at the Forbidden City Imperial Palace in Beijing, in the Topkapi Saray Museum in Istanbul, assembled by the Turkish Sultans, in the Porzellansammlung in Dresden, assembled by Augustus the Strong, and in several of the Portuguese royal palaces, where collections gathered by the Portuguese Royal family are housed.

Blue ground porcelain was produced in much smaller numbers than most other types of Chinese porcelain. It can be found in a wide range of shapes and shades of blue, from large ‘soldier’ vases, fishbowls and other decorative pieces, to seemingly utilitarian examples such as teapots, ewers, plates, dishes, punch bowls and even dinner services. What unites them and turns them into objects of enduring appeal is a very particular and sophisticated look that is both understated in its apparent monochrome-like decoration, especially when observed from afar, whilst also exuding opulence, luxury and richness of decoration with its overglaze gilt contrasting with the deep blue ground, in some instances further enhanced by underglaze blue or polychrome decorated reserves, resulting in stunning pieces with a tremendous visual impact.

A striking characteristic of blue ground porcelain when decorated in gilt over the glaze, particularly in the cases of ‘monochrome’ examples, is the remarkable visual impact achieved in instances where the gilt decoration remains intact. But no less impressive, and in what is more often the case a result of the gold being fired over the glaze at a low temperature, making it more prone to wear, are the porcelains where only subtle, incomplete and faded sections of the gilt decoration remain, unequivocally recording the passage of time, the worn gold shown in an almost abstract, poetic fashion.

This catalogue, with two introductory articles by Ronald W. Fuchs II, editor of *Ceramics in America* and independent scholar, and by Bruno Alexandre Morais, researcher at Jorge Welsh Research and Publishing, discusses the theme at large, whilst also clarifying the terminology and production techniques of the various expressions of blue ground porcelain, such as ‘powder blue’, ‘blue glazed’ and ‘underglaze blue’ porcelain.

We hope that the enthusiasm and pleasure we have experienced in working on this exhibition over the last few years will be shared by all those who visit it, and that the catalogue may serve as a basis for further research on this fascinating ‘noble porcelain’.

Luísa Vinhais
Jorge Welsh

Acknowledgements

Dedicating a catalogue to an exhibition focused on a very specific theme requires considerable planning, firstly in bringing together enough representative works and then embarking on the necessary research that will ultimately bring such projects to fruition. It is a long process, usually taking years, but also a tremendously rewarding one due to the very collaborative way in which we run such projects, working in consultation with our in-house team but also with our friends across the world, such as independent scholars, curators and collectors.

This catalogue is no exception and we are indebted to all those who in some way contributed their time and expertise to help us make it as informative and relevant to the subject as possible. We would like to thank Cora Würmell, Cristina Neiva Correia, José António Ribeiro and Maria Antónia Pinto de Matos for having shared with us their research, information or even just thoughts and ideas, and also for their permission to photograph or supply images of objects to be illustrated in our catalogue.

We are particularly grateful to Ronald W. Fuchs II for contributing to our catalogue with a most interesting introductory article, ‘*A Great Show of Dark Blue Porcelain with Gilding*’; *Blue-Ground Chinese Porcelain and its Influences*.

For the overall research, writing of entries and the introductory text *A Royal Taste for Blue Ground Chinese Porcelain* we thank Bruno Alexandre Morais, our in-house researcher. Once again, we commend him for his dedication and hard work for this year’s catalogue project. We also thank Matilde Relvas for her collaboration and work on some of the catalogue entries.

We are grateful to the Asian Civilisations Museum, Blenheim Palace, Carlos Vasconcelos e Sá, Helder Carita, Palácio Nacional de Queluz and the RA Collection who provided images for catalogue illustrations.

We would like to extend our gratitude for what has become a core and dedicated team for most of our publications, Alice Stilwell for the editorial coordination; Kenneth Elliott for the revision of some of the texts; Kennistranslations for the proofreading and editing; Norprint for the printing; Panorama for the graphic design; Richard Valencia and Eduardo Nascimento for the photography; Bouke de Vries, Ian Norman, Mariana Andrade e Sousa Norton and Natasha Albuquerque, for the conservation and restoration of some of the pieces included in the exhibition.

Last but not least, our catalogues and exhibitions depend on the dedication and hard work of all our in-house teams in London and Lisbon, without whom this project would not have been possible. To Ana Viegas, Bruno Pinto, Carolina Ferreira, Fatime Hashani, Helena Fonseca, Leonor Pais, Ana Helena Isaac, Marcelo Bardella, Zhou Shenglan a very special and warm thank you for your valuable contributions and your continuous support and dedication to all our projects.

Luísa Vinhais
Jorge Welsh



¹ Pair of Ewers

Porcelain decorated
in blue ground and
overglaze gold

China — Qing dynasty,
Kangxi period
(1662-1722)

H. 20.5 L. 14.5 W. 10 cm

A pair of pear-shaped ewers and covers, each with a globular body that tapers towards a long, cylindrical neck slightly flaring towards the stepped, straight rim, with an ear-shaped handle and a long S-shaped spout, attached to the neck by an S-shaped bridge, and standing on a rounded foot. The covers are almost flat and overhang the rim, each topped by a double bud finial. Each ewer is decorated with a blue ground and finely painted in gold, with an ogee arch-shaped panel on each side with a lotus flower at the pointed apex, enclosing a *qilin* among flames above motifs from the Eight Treasures (*babao*), namely the lozenge (*fangsheng*) and the artemisia leaf on one side, and the rhinoceros' horn (*xijiao*) and the sounding stone (*qing*) on the other. The spouts and handles show traces of gold scrolls and scattered flower heads. The covers are decorated with double concentric circles around the rim, and three sequentially painted borders

of rectangular designs, swirls and *ruyi* heads around the double bud finial, which is painted with a flower head on the top. The underside is glazed but undecorated.

Known in India and the Middle East by the Persian word *aftaba*, ewers of various sizes coupled with matching basins (*sailabchis*) were used in the Islamic world for ablutions. The main physical characteristics of these ewers (which are pre-Islamic in shape) can also be observed in Chinese porcelains featuring bulbous bodies, raised circular bases, long and often S-shaped spouts, tall necks and ear-shaped handles. The cultural meaning as a tool of hospitality and purification in the Islamic world led to the original shape and its variations travelling and being reproduced freely in different sizes and materials across Asia.¹



Pear-shaped ewers were reproduced in Chinese porcelain from at least the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368), undoubtedly inspired by metal models (fig. 52).² Smaller models, such as this pair, could have been used as water containers for tea preparation, or to hold alcoholic beverages.³

A similarly-shaped ewer decorated with a blue ground and floral designs in gold is in the Musée national Adrien Dubouché, Limoges.⁴ Two other pieces with traces of gold in the decoration can be found in the Porzellansammlung Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.⁵ Two other examples with a slightly different shape and similar gold decoration, one with a blue ground,⁶ and the other in mirror-black glaze,⁷ are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

A blue and white ewer with a heart-shaped panel with white scrolls reserved on intense blue and surrounded by a ‘cracked-ice’ pattern, with additional 19th century Dutch silver mounts belonged to the former Mildred and Rafi Mottahedeh Collection.⁸ There is one other example bearing a silver mount with a thumbpiece in the British Museum, London.⁹ A ewer decorated with *famille verte* enamels, from the former collection of Augustus the Strong, is also in the Porzellansammlung Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.¹⁰ This item was listed as a ‘milk jug’ in the 1721 inventory. •

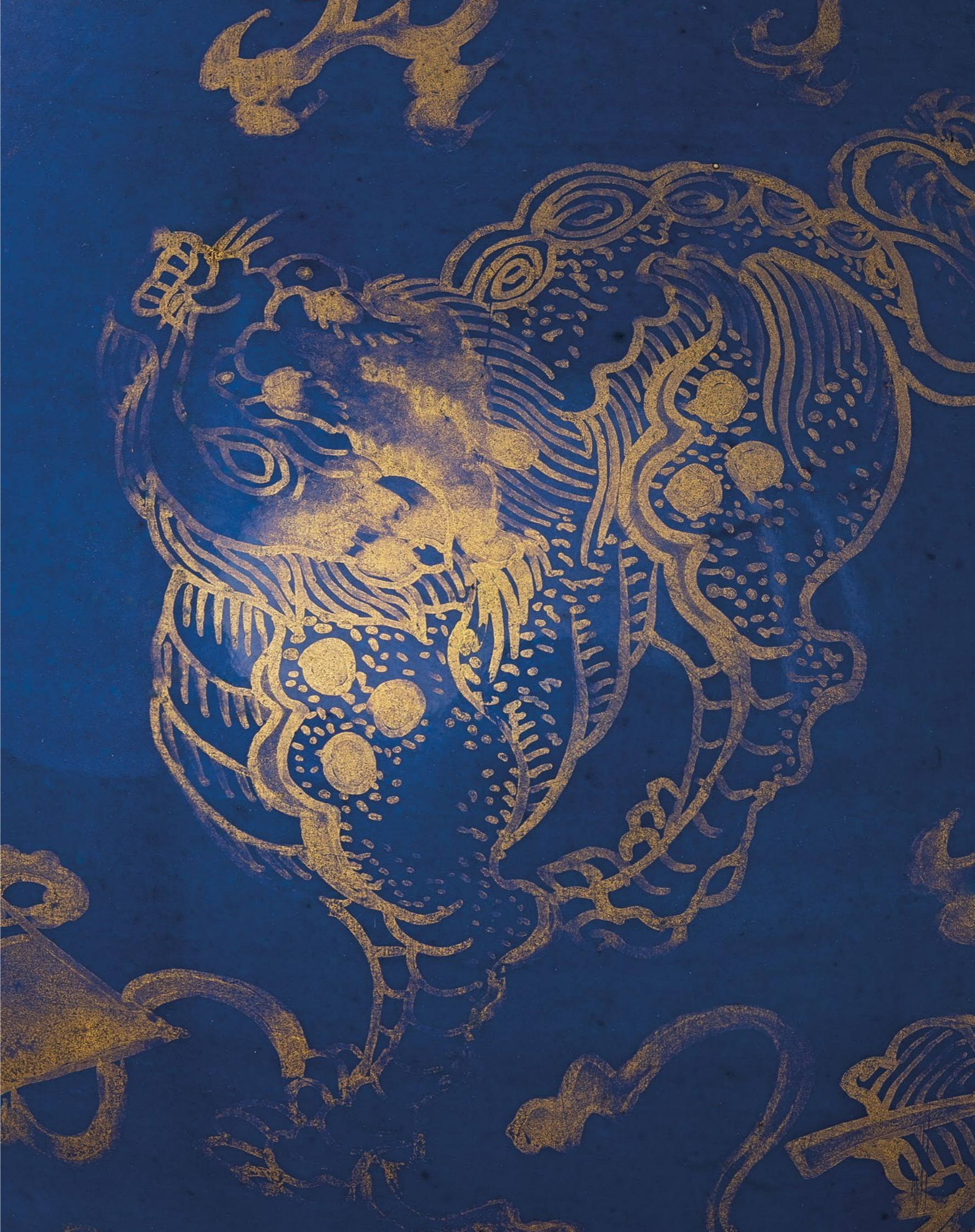


FIG. 52

Ewer (*Zhihu*), 1279-1368, porcelain with copper-red underglaze design, 29 x 21 cm, BROOKLYN MUSEUM, THE WILLIAM E. HUTCHINS COLLECTION, BEQUEST OF AUGUSTUS S. HUTCHINS, 52.132.



¹ Zebrowski, 1997, p. 135.
² Jorge Welsh (ed.), 2020, p. 66.
³ Shimizu (coord.), 2003, p. 162.
⁴ Shimizu (coord.), 2003, p. 162, no. 106; Castelluccio, 2013 (b), p. 97, fig. 76.
⁵ Porzellansammlung, Dresden, inv. nos. PO 4239 and PO 4240.
⁶ Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 1975.1.1694.
⁷ Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 1975.1.1695.
⁸ Howard and Ayers, 1978, vol. I, p. 70, no. 28.
⁹ Hobson, 1976, pl. 89, fig. 1.
¹⁰ Loesch, Pietsch and Reichel, 1998, pp. 54-55.



25 Dish



Porcelain decorated in underglaze powder blue, overglaze *famille verte* enamels and gold.

China — Qing dynasty, Kangxi period (1662-1722)

Ø 40.5 cm

Large circular dish with a wide rim and a deep cavetto, painted in underglaze powder blue, overglaze *famille verte* enamels and gold. In the centre is a multilobed panel, decorated with a fenced garden scene, where a Chinese lady, holding a flywhisk with one hand while lifting the other above her head, interacts with a Chinese man, who has one hand raised and holds a fan behind his back with the other. They are both standing next to a table with an incense burner on it and a stool to the side, near perforated rocks and flowering trees. In the background, peeping from behind a tree, another Chinese man discreetly observes the scene. The panel is set against an underglaze powder blue ground, with scattered

flower sprays painted in gold. Around the rim, eight irregularly-shaped oval cartouches, each enclosing a flower spray with insects and reserved against the powder blue ground, alternate with similarly-shaped panels enclosing bushes and flower sprays, all in gold and reserved against dense floral scrolls also outlined in gold. On the underside, in the centre, is an underglaze cobalt blue mark of a mirror, a symbol of the Eight Treasures (*Babao*), within two concentric circles, while around the exterior rim are three scattered flower sprays in iron-red and green.

Please refer to entry no. 26 for more details on the central scene. •



This model was originally inspired by larger Ottoman metal models,¹ which were also made in Iznik pottery during the 16th century (fig. 73). With a bulbous body and a long flaring neck, sometimes with a bulge in the middle, these water bottles known as *surahis*, were considered important in Islamic culture, symbols for abundance and good fortune through their association with the ‘waters of fertility’.²

Two similar pairs of powder blue bottles are in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.³ Another pair is in Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire. There are also bottles of this shape but decorated in blue-and-white, such as those in the Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul.⁴ •

¹ Suebsman and Antonin, 2015, p. 278.
² Zebrowski, 1997, p. 185.
³ Philadelphia Museum of Art, inv. nos. 1955-50-282, 1955-50-283, 1955-50-280 and 1955-50-281.
⁴ Krahel and Ayers, 1986, vol. 3, pp. 988-89, no. 2087-88.



FIG. 73
Bottle, Turkey, c. 1575-1580, silicious ceramics painted under clear glaze, H. 40 Ø 20.5 cm, Provenance: Louis Huth Collection, 1917, © FUNDAÇÃO CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN, LISBON - MUSEU CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN, INV. NO. 847. PHOTO: CATARINA GOMES FERREIRA.

47 Pair of Bottles



Porcelain decorated in underglaze powder blue, overglaze *famille verte* enamels and gold

China — Qing dynasty, Kangxi period (1662-1722)

H. 18 Ø 8.5 cm

A pair of pear-shaped bottles with a globular body and a slender neck with a bulge below the flaring rim, standing on a short, straight foot. Each bottle is similarly decorated with two large quadrilobed cartouches in the centre, on one side enclosing flowering chrysanthemums among leaves and branches, painted in blue, iron-red, yellow and green, and on the opposite side, branches of flowering plum blossoms and bamboo trees in a similar colour palette. Between these cartouches are two smaller quatrefoil cartouches, one with symbols from the Hundred Antiques, namely a tripod vase, an artemisia leaf and an incense burner, and the other with a blossoming flower

sprouting from the ground. There are two further fan-shaped cartouches on the neck of each bottle containing similar floral designs. All panels are reserved against an underglaze powder blue ground, with scattered flower sprays painted in overglaze gold. Around the foot, and below the bulge of the neck and rim, is a spiral pattern border painted in gold. The bulge of the neck is decorated with stylised chrysanthemums, also painted in gold. The rim shows traces of gold paint. The underside is glazed but undecorated.

This pair of bottles is similar in shape and decoration to the bottle in entry no. 46.

The two larger lozenge-shaped cartouches combine a decoration of plum tree (*meihua*) blossoms and bamboo (*zhu*), while the other cartouche is decorated with chrysanthemums (*juhua*).

The plum blossom heralds spring, as it is the first to bloom each year, representing renewal and, consequently, perseverance and purity. The branch of plum blossoms means ‘may the blossoms bring you the five blessings’, an association with the five petals of the blossom and the five blessings: longevity, wealth, love of virtue, health and a peaceful death.¹ The bamboo stands for vitality and longevity and is also an emblem of integrity, humility and fidelity because it bends but does not break during winter storms.² Additionally, the sections of a bamboo stalk are associated with levels of higher knowledge.³

The chrysanthemum represents autumn and is also a symbol of longevity due its health-giving characteristics. It has been a highly-prized symbol and motif since the Tang dynasty, so it is common for it to be represented with other motifs.⁴ When represented together with bamboo it means ‘birthday greetings’ (*zhushou*), as the word bamboo can be made into a pun with ‘congratulate’. The chrysanthemum and plum blossoms are ‘Two friends of Winter’ (*suihan eryou*), and combined, can be made into a pun with the word for longevity.⁵

These three flowers, together with cymbidium (*lanhua*), known as ‘si Junzi’, which translates as ‘the four gentleman’, each representing a different virtue, are also a cherished theme in Chinese painting and decorative arts.⁶ •

¹ Bartholomew, 2006, p. 35.
² Bartholomew, 2006, p. 230.
³ Pei, 2004, p. 18.
⁴ Bartholomew, 2006, p. 175.
⁵ Bartholomew, 2006, p. 176.
⁶ Bartholomew, 2006, p. 177.



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Jogos Cruzados. *Viagens entre Oriente e Ocidente*, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon

2021
Japão e Portugal: Fusão das Artes e das Letras no Século XVI, Biblioteca Geral da Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra

2020
The Porcelain Room, *Chinese Export Porcelain*, Fondazione Prada, Milan

2019
Um Rei e Três Imperadores — Portugal, a China e Macau no Tempo de D. João V, Museu de São Roque, Lisbon

2018
Três Embaixadas Europeias à China, Museu do Oriente, Lisbon

Contar Áfricas!, Padrão dos Descobrimentos, Lisbon

Uma História de Assombro. Portugal — Japão, Séculos XVI a XX, Galeria D. Luis, Palácio Nacional da Ajuda, Lisbon

2017
The Blue of the Seas, Dialogues between China, Persia and Europe, Baur Foundation, Museum of Far Eastern Art, Geneva

Portugal — Drawing the world, Musée National d'Histoire et d'Art (MNHA), Luxembourg

A Cidade Global. Lisboa no Renascimento, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon

2016
Namban: os bárbaros do sul e o encontro de culturas, Museu da Quinta das Cruzes, Funchal

2015
The dragon is dancing! *Kangxi / China Contemporary*, Hetjens-Museum — Düsseldorf, Deutsches Keramikmuseum, Düsseldorf

Onde os nossos livros se acabam, ali começam os seus... O Japão em fontes documentais dos séculos XVI e XVII, Museu do Livro — Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal, Lisbon

2013
O Exótico nunca está em casa? A China na Faiança e no Azulejo portugueses (séculos XVI - XVIII), Museu Nacional do Azulejo, Lisbon

Portugal, Jesuits, and Japan: Spiritual Beliefs and Earthly Goods, Boston College's McMullen Museum of Art, Boston, Massachusetts

2012
Line and Colour — Japanese Arts and the European Connection, Museo degli Argenti, Palazzo Pitti, Florence

2010
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2009
Fascination with the Foreign: China — Japan — Europe, Hetjens-Museum, Düsseldorf Deutsches Keramikmuseum, Düsseldorf

Encompassing the Globe — Portugal e o Mundo nos séculos XVI e XVII, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon

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2008
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2007
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2006
São Francisco Xavier — A Sua Vida e o Seu Tempo (1506-1552), Centro Cultural Nacional, Lisbon

2005
Dresden, Spiegel der Welt, Die Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden in Japan, The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo

A Porcelana Chinesa nas Coleções do Museu Quinta das Cruzes, Museu Quinta das Cruzes, Funchal

2004
Encounters — The Meeting of Asia and Europe 1500-1800, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

2003
Peregrinações — Homenagem a Maria Helena Mendes Pinto, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon

Province Plates, a Cultural Dialogue between Two Civilizations, Museum Geelvinck Hinlopen Huis, Amsterdam

Hybrides, Porcelaines Chinoises aux Armoiries Européennes, Musée National d'Histoire et d'Art, Luxembourg

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O Mundo da Laca, Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon

1999
Fundamentos da Amizade — Cinco Séculos de Relações Culturais e Artísticas Luso-Chinesas, Centro Científico e Cultural de Macau, Lisbon

Escolhas — Objectos Raros e de Coleção, Paços do Concelho, Câmara Municipal de Lisboa e Associação Portuguesa de Antiquários, Lisbon

1998
Vasco da Gama e a Índia, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Sorbonne Chapel, Paris

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OTHER PUBLICATIONS

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