

### A bottle (or vase) from China – 13<sup>th</sup> century AD



Since the stone age, it seems that people have liked pottery with painted decoration. Cultures around the world were willing to spend the extra time and effort to decorate earthenware pottery with geometric designs or figurative images. For most of pottery history naturally occurring pigments and clays have been used for this decoration. With purely decorative objects, or those made for a single use, such as burial as part of a funeral rite, these could just be painted onto the fired pot. More usually, pots were painted before firing so that the decoration would be more permanent.

With the discovery of glazes and the development of stoneware, painted decoration became more difficult. Under a glaze, painted decoration can diffuse and spread during firing and be obscured by a lack of transparency in the glaze. Also, some of the bright colours obtainable in lower temperature glazes, such as the strong greens and turquoises produced by copper, were not easily achievable in stoneware glazes. In northern China, around the start of the tenth century AD, potters started experimenting with ways of getting the bright colours of low temperature glazes together with the greater strength of stoneware. They had been making earthenware pottery with brightly coloured areas of glaze for some time (sancai pottery) and it appears that they discovered a market for this type of pottery in the Middle East. To survive the rigors of transport, these export wares were fired to a higher temperature before glazing to give the body extra strength, and then refired at a lower temperature after the coloured glazes were brushed on.

Around the same time, in the tenth century, a new pottery tradition started in northern China. Called Cizhou (pronounced tsoo-joe), after one of places where it was made, the tradition spread across a large area of northern China. Unlike much of the glazed pottery which had been made previously, the Cizhou potteries made glazed stoneware pottery for everyday use by ordinary people – not just luxury ware for the imperial elite. Unrestrained by the strict specifications of imperial

officials, these potteries were hugely inventive and varied in their products. One of their most attractive wares involved coating the pots in a white slip and then painting a freely-brushed and dynamic decoration onto this using a black slip. By careful optimisation of the materials used for the black slip and the clear glaze on top of it the Cizhou potters managed to avoid any diffusion or smudging of their designs in the firing.

In the twelfth century a small group of Cizhou potteries started experimenting with techniques similar to those used by the sancai potters of the tenth century. They fired their unglazed pots to stoneware temperatures and then applied a bright green lead glaze, refiring the pot at a lower temperature. Towards the end of the twelfth century there was a key development for the future of ceramics, when these potteries fired a clear glaze on their pots in the first, high temperature, firing and then painted designs in coloured lead glazes over this high-fired glaze, before re-firing at a lower temperature. So-called 'enamel' decoration on pottery had been born, allowing detailed crisp multi-coloured painted decoration on stoneware and porcelain. This discovery would lead in time to some of the most decorative, elaborate and valuable ceramics ever made. A similar (but not identical) process appeared in Iran at about the same time - it appears this was an independent discovery.

The bottle or vase (23 cm tall) in the picture at the head of this note is an example of these first Chinese enamelled wares. It was thrown on the wheel – quite possibly in two parts which were then joined, as there is a slight change in profile about 6 cm up from the base. The rim was rolled over during throwing, to create a generous outward curve, and a tall foot ring has been turned. The rim and most of the exterior was coated in a creamy-white slip, to make the subsequent coloured decoration appear brighter (the body clay itself fires to a greyish buff colour). This white slip was then covered in a clear glaze. A band 3 cm up from the bottom was left without white slip or clear glaze and most of this has had a black glaze brushed on, leaving just a narrow unglazed band between the black and the white and also leaving the bottom of the foot ring unglazed. At this point the pot received its high-temperature firing to vitrify the stoneware body and melt the glazes.

After its first firing the pot was decorated with brushwork using two lead-based glazes and re-fired at a lower temperature. Most of the decoration has used an iron saturation glaze, which is red due to an excess of iron oxide which precipitates as red iron oxide particles suspended in the glaze. Highlights have then been added in a green lead glaze, where the colour comes from copper dissolved in the glaze. In some of these wares they also used yellow highlights, which were probably made using a lead glaze with a lower iron content, where all the iron remains in solution. It is usual in these wares for the bulk of the line decoration to be done using the red glaze and it has been suggested that this is because the red glaze, where the colour is caused by a precipitate, is inherently more opaque. On my pot the small areas of green glaze have generally been quite thickly painted, so there is no lack of opacity in the green colours.

Bowls are the most commonly occurring form for this type of pottery, but vessels such as mine are also found. Books and museums often refer to these forms as 'vases', but I suspect that the term 'bottle' might be more appropriate. The Cizhou potteries developed in an important wine area in China and a major source of business for these potteries was the demand from the wine industry for various vessels associated with storing and serving wine. I can easily imagine the first owner of my bottle pouring wine from it into his guests' cups.

The painted decoration on my bottle is dominated by a broad band showing three large flowers and associated foliage, with small leaves coloured in green. The auctioneer where I bought the pot said that these flowers were peonies, and it is true that peonies were one of the most popular flower designs for this type of pottery. For example see the left hand image below of a very similar bottle

with a decoration of peonies, held by the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm. However, I suspect that the flowers on my bottle are actually chrysanthemums. At that time, images of peonies on Chinese pottery were almost always shown side on, to emphasise the tall mound of petals. In contrast, decorations using chrysanthemums usually showed those flowers face on to emphasise large regular halo of many petals encircling the flower (see the image on the right below).



*Peony decoration*



*Chrysanthemum decoration*

In Chinese symbolism the chrysanthemum represents the season of Autumn and is used to represent a wish for a 'radiant middle age'.

Because Cizhou ware was made for the general population and not the imperial elite, the Cizhou potteries didn't suffer too badly when tribes such as the Jurchen (12<sup>th</sup> century) and the Mongols (13<sup>th</sup> century) invaded northern China. Potteries focussed on imperial wares were naturally badly affected, when the previous emperor was no longer in charge. However, the fact that these Cizhou wares were made for the popular market did influence the way that Chinese connoisseurs viewed this pottery in future centuries. Led by the taste of the imperial court, Chinese connoisseurs prized precise designs and exquisite finishes and did not rate Cizhou pottery highly (or at all). However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ceramics enthusiasts in Japan, where imperfections were often treasured, and in Europe began to praise Cizhou pottery for its freedom and graphic energy. The enamel-painted Cizhou pottery, though less well known than other Cizhou decorative styles, was also rated highly in Japan and the West, and I have read that some critics would place this early enamelled pottery in the first rank of Song Dynasty ceramics.

This colourful painted ware was only made by the Cizhou potteries for about a hundred years. By the end of that time, porcelain being made in Jingdezhen for the mass market was taking over. Then in the 14<sup>th</sup> century the Jingdezhen potters themselves started using enamelled decoration, almost certainly having learned the technique from the Cizhou potters. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, coloured enamel decoration on porcelain became popular in the Chinese Imperial court and a research programme started in Jingdezhen to develop new colours – a process of development which continued for centuries. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, stimulated by seeing beautiful Chinese porcelain, enamelled

decoration was enthusiastically taken up in Japan and in Europe (initially on tin-glaze pottery and later on European porcelain) and it became an essential technique in the production of the large and elaborate coloured porcelain vases of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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April 2023