

A Chinese jar with carved decoration – 13th or 14th century



Two of the greatest potters of the twentieth century, Bernard Leach and Michael Cardew, loved Chinese Cizhou (pronounced Tsoo-Joe) stoneware pottery. In his autobiography Cardew says that it was 'always one of my main inspirations'. Named after potteries in Ci county in Northern China, Cizhou pottery was actually made across most of Northern China from the 10th century until modern times, though its peak was during the Song dynasty (960 – 1279 AD). After the Song dynasty, increasing competition from the porcelain juggernaut that was Jingdezhen in Southern China caused many potteries making Cizhou wares to close.

Cizhou potters used a wide range of decorative techniques, including carving (sgraffito), contrasting slips and coloured glazes, iron oxide brushwork, modelling, inlay and marbling. In the Song dynasty, other more prestigious potteries, making work for the Imperial Government, were controlled very closely in the techniques they used and were required to meet exacting Imperial standards. However, the Cizhou potters were making pots for everyday use by ordinary people, so they didn't have these constraints and they were very innovative and imaginative in their styles and designs. Because they had to keep their costs down, the designs are usually simple, rough and quickly executed. It was this feeling of coarse freedom that appealed to British potters, collectors and modernist art critics in the early twentieth century.

This small jar is just 10 cm tall and it is difficult to know precisely what it was used for. Its shape is described as a 'pou'. The earliest pou vessels were Chinese bronze ritual wine containers from the second millennium BC, but they were three or four times the size of this pot and it is difficult to imagine this small jar was used to contain wine. It seems more likely that it was used to store and serve small quantities of food items. It may have had a lid at one time – the edge of the rim shows signs of wear and it is usual for lids to be lost from very old pots.

Inside and out this jar has a dark brown iron glaze of the type that the Japanese call temmoku (or tenmoku). On the outside the glaze has been carved away in places to reveal the bare clay, creating a floral decoration that scrolls around the pot. In the late 11th century the Cizhou potteries started making pots which were first coated with a white slip and then, over that, a black slip. By carving through the black slip to reveal the underlying white slip they could produce strongly contrasting areas of design. Then when the design was finished the whole pot would be given a clear glaze. This was quite a laborious process and in the 13th century they switched to using a black or dark brown glaze instead of a black slip and leaving the white areas unglazed, saving the trouble of a final coating of clear glaze. In some areas they even did without the white slip layer, relying on the light colour of the stoneware itself to provide the contrast with the black glaze. That is the method used for the jar in the photo.

The jar will have been thrown on a wheel, but oddly the outside of the clay body seems to have been finished manually in places, carving small irregular facets. Where the glaze is thin these finishing marks have been made more visible as facets of glaze, and this is particularly noticeable on the outside of the rim. I can't believe that this was a deliberate decorative technique, but I find it rather attractive.

I mentioned in my introduction that Cizhou pottery has a continuous tradition in China from the 10th century until modern times – possibly the longest tradition of any glazed stoneware. When Bernard Leach was in China in 1915 he found that he could buy modern Cizhou ware 'almost as good as they were in those Sung days six hundred years earlier'. Ten years ago I visited a pottery village in Northern China and saw that they were still making black and white cut glaze pottery (see photo below). This raises the question - how do I know when my jar was actually made? The answer of course is that I don't know for certain. In the book that I trust most on this type of pottery there is a discussion of a very similar jar which dates it to the 13th or 14th century. The particular style of design on my jar seems to have become popular around 1200. This dating is supported by the overall look and feel of the jar. However, I'm sure I could be fooled by a carefully made and distressed modern replica or 'fake' and I have accepted that somewhere in my collection there is probably a pot that is not as old as I think it is.



Pots stacked outside a pottery in Shanxi Province, China. 2010

Kevin Akhurst