

Show and Tell with SEACS February 24 2011

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At our first meeting in the Year of the Rabbit, a dozen or so members present shared their knowledge and their treasured ceramics with one another in a fun and relaxed atmosphere. We handled, peeked into and turned over a variety of pots, vases and bowls as we probed our experts with questions.



One member brought along a dish from her mother's very large wedding dinner set especially commissioned in Jingdezhen, China, in 1939 when the family resided there. How did we know the date so accurately? It was from the inscription on the dish, from one sister gifted to her younger sister *for her amusement*, coincidentally in the Year of the Rabbit. The treasured dinner set decorated in its palette of overglazed enamels of coral red oxides was a reminder of the past, yet even today, one can commission dinner sets from Jingdezhen.



A guest to the evening's meeting had lugged an heirloom coral red vase belonging to her grandmother all the way from Australia for some informed opinion. She discovered the shop mark on the base which indicated that it was from the Republican period of China after 1949 for the export market. Whilst it was hand thrown, in a handsome baluster shape and decorated in overglaze enamels with lotus border and sporting a sinuous emerald green five-claw dragon writhing around its side, of course it was not imperial ware. Nonetheless, it is a much loved piece.



Gasps of admiration greeted a small, elegant *Dehua* or *blanc de chine* bottle shaped vase enhanced with a small sculpted and applied split-tailed dragon biting a sprig. Originating from the kilns in Fujian Province in China, such wares were produced from as early as the Song Dynasty (960-1279). The provenance was clear as the vase was brought over by the member's grandfather from China and later passed to his son and now is his. It dated from the Kangxi Emperor period of the Qing Dynasty (1662-1722) and is very similar to one in the renowned Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art in London. Perhaps it was no coincidence that Percival David was good friends with our member's grandfather. Such special pieces often had stands made to complement and this vase was no exception.



Another refined vase, imitating an ancient Shang bronze *gu* or drinking vessel, came from the great ceramic centre of Jingdezhen in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). This tall, slender vase with a trumpet mouth, narrow body and high splayed foot was painted with a bird on a twig in a realistic style manner reminiscent of an imperial piece.



We admired a fine, flowered *famille rose* bowl produced for the export market from the Yongzheng period (1723-1735) of the Qing Dynasty. The experts discussed the enamel palette noting it would not have been made for the imperial market, being too gaudy for imperial taste. We learnt the date of this piece must be after the Kangxi period because pink was not used prior.

More enthusiastic murmurs occurred with the unveiling of a pumpkin-shaped box with stem finial from the Southern Song Dynasty of China (1127-1279) sourced in Indonesia. The cargo of numerous shipwrecks off Java and Sumatra are constantly revealing evidence of ancient trade routes. Although these small boxes for containing cinnabar or mercury used in cosmetics are relatively common, we were told us this piece was unusual because the potter's name, *Jian*, was on the base. The powdery glaze had a tiny iron spot indicating that the clay was not ground adequately before potting. Even the lid had a tiny notch mark so that it enabled a neat fit with the base.



A collector of some thirty years displayed a small caramel glazed Cambodian Khmer container dating from 13th-14th century. The globular shaped form fitted neatly into one's hand alluding to its former function of holding lime. Lime is an essential component used in a quid for betel chewing, a tradition which has been widespread through Southeast Asia for centuries.



An example of a carp motif representing prosperity adorned a Yuan (1280-1368) sherd with a thick, green Longquan or celadon glaze was complemented by a small bowl with paired fish in its base in golden celadon. Both the glaze and the symbol remained popular for centuries in China and Southeast Asia.



Excitement from some members as a mollusc encrusted blue and white plate sherd from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) was placed on the table. It had been found just three days previous in the low tide waters off Fort Siloso, Singapore. This was formerly known as *Longyamen* or Dragon's Teeth Gate to the ancient Chinese travellers. This Zhangzhou export ware is further evidence of trade patterns in this region.

What I enjoyed in this show and tell session was the range and time periods from which the various ceramics originated. An added bonus was the opportunity to handle such ceramics thanks to the generosity of SEACS members.