

Two Yuan Dynasty Qingbai Vases

By Tara Manser

The National Museum of Indonesia in Jakarta, has an impressive ceramic collection which was formed primarily from the collection of Egbert Willem Van Orsey de Flines (1886-1964). He was a Dutch national who arrived in Indonesia in 1913. He donated his collection of over a 1,000 pieces to the museum in 1929 and continued to build on it as curator of ceramics until his permanent return to Holland in 1959. By the time he left Indonesia, the ceramic collection totalled around 5,000 pieces. He collected 'foreign' ceramics from across the Indonesian Archipelago, not only for their beauty but primarily for what they could tell us about the history of a place – socially, culturally, economically and politically. Therefore the majority of his collection was acquired from within Indonesia.¹ Ceramics had, for many centuries, been the treasured possession of the local Indonesian people. They became precious heirlooms known as *pusaka*, looked after and kept from generation to generation, both as prestige items demonstrating family status and as ceremonial objects used in traditional religious rites.

Within the museum collection are two beautiful, pear-shaped *qingbai* glazed bottle vases, which will be used to explore what they might be able to tell us about the social, cultural, economic and political environment of Indonesia in the 14th century. One is mounted in silver with a cover, the other reveals a cut-down neck (Figs 1 & 2).² Four sunken quatrefoil cartouches outlined with beading, ornament the belly and frame the high relief designs of flowering plants on one and flowering plants with lions playing with a brocade



Figs 1 & 2: Qingbai pear-shaped bottle vases, Yuan dynasty, ca. 1300, Jingdezhen, China, Museum Nasional. Fig 1 found in Kediri, H: 30.25 cm, Inv. No.: 1101 and Fig 2 found in Malang, H: 24.5 cm, Inv. No.: 2993 (Images authors own)

ball on the other. Made in China at the Jingdezhen kilns, they date to the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) circa 1300. Floral relief work was an innovation of the Yuan era and the beading ornamentation was used only on export wares or Buddhist figures.³ It is not known why or when the necks of these vases were cut down; it was possibly for the application of mounts. The British Museum also has an example with a cut-down neck (Fig 3). The original shape would have looked much like the famous 'Fonthill' vase (Fig 4).

So what is Indonesia's connection to the Chinese Yuan dynasty? Having conquered China and formed the Yuan dynasty, the Mongols, led by Kublai Khan, then turned their attentions to the Southeast Asian mainland, requiring submission to their over-lordship. Meanwhile, in East Java the king of Singosari, Kertanagara (1286-1292), had expansionist designs of his own and with the conquest of Jambi in Sumatra, obtained hegemony over the Melaka Straits for Java. Kublai Khan, perturbed by this development, sent an embassy requesting that members of the Javanese royal family be sent as hostages to Beijing. Kertanagara, not one to bow to intimidation, refused the demands and the Chinese envoy was sent back to China with a disfigured face. In retribution, a large Mongol expedition was then sent to Java in 1293. The journey was long and arduous for the Mongols and on their arrival in East Java the expedition became embroiled in a confused political situation. Ultimately, they were expelled by their erstwhile Javanese ally, Raden Wijaya, and they sailed back to China the same year. After Kublai Khan died in 1295, relations with Java returned to normal and trade flourished. Raden Wijaya, after expelling the Mongols, went on to found the Majapahit dynasty (1293 – ca. 1527), the largest empire to ever form in maritime Southeast Asia.

It is into this golden era of Javanese history that these *qingbai* vases potentially arrived. Large quantities of ceramics from the 14th and 15th centuries are known from Trowulan, the capital of Majapahit (Fig 5). Both of these vases were acquired from the core Majapahit territory of Kediri and Malang in East Java. Although we have no proof of when



Fig 3: Yuhuchun ping, qingbai glaze, Jingdezhen, Yuan dynasty, found in China, H: 27.5 cm, British Museum, Inv. No. 1961,1021.1 © Trustees of the British Museum

¹ Ekowati Sundari, 'The Ceramics Collection of the National Museum', *Arts of Asia*, Sept.-Oct. (2003), pp. 85-97

² Ridho, Abu, *The World's Great Collections, Oriental Ceramics Vol. 3*, Museum Pusat Jakarta. Kodansha International Ltd., Tokyo, Japan (1982), p. 160

³ Vainker, Shelagh, *Chinese Pottery and Porcelain*. The British Museum Press, London (1991), p. 143; Medley, Margaret, *The Chinese Potter: A Practical History of Chinese Ceramics*. Phaidon Press Ltd, London (2001), pp. 172, 174

they made their actual arrival, huge volumes of shards recovered from the Trowulan area, shipwreck finds, the location they were acquired from and the tradition of preserving heirloom objects down the generations, allow us the licence to conjecture that they were exported and arrived in the 14th century.

Majapahit was at the peak of its glory in the 14th century. Huge wealth was generated from its surplus rice production and trade in spices. The population became much more socially mobile and there was a boom in demand for luxury foreign goods as evidence of a higher standard of living and status. The rapid appropriation of the goods and style of the court by a prosperous new elite provoked the need for the state to generate rules on consumption. Some luxury items were claimed as monopolies of the ruler himself, a way of distinguishing the king from his subjects. The rulers in the early Majapahit period, carefully controlled the distribution of imported goods throughout the realm. Luxury items of foreign origin played a major role in ensuring the Javanese ruler's hegemony. Items such as these two vases would have been coveted by the wealthy as status symbols as well as evidence of taste and culture, much as Chinese ceramics still are today.⁴



Fig 4: The 'Fonthill' vase, c. 1300, Yuan Dynasty, Jingdezhen, China, National Museum of Ireland © National Museum of Ireland, Dublin

One interesting thing to note about these vases is that they are very similar to one of the earliest recorded Chinese porcelains exported to Europe. Made around 1300, the 'Fonthill vase' as it is known (Fig 4), had definitely reached Europe by 1381 and became the prized possession of the Anjou kings of Hungary and Naples in the 14th and 15th centuries, and even passed into the possession of Louis, Grand Dauphin of France (1661-1711). Like one of the National Museum vases, this vase was also mounted and its new form was captured in a watercolour for François Roger de Gaignières in 1713 (Fig 6). It changed hands again over the years, surviving the

French Revolution before coming into the possession of the owner of Fonthill Abbey in England, giving the vase its name. In the 1860s it came to its current resting place in the National Museum of Ireland.⁵



Fig 5: Map showing the Majapahit empire and the location of its capital, Trowulan

The Fonthill vase indicates the extraordinary value placed on the first few porcelains to reach Europe during the 14th century. As Europeans were unable to make porcelain until over four centuries later, such objects were treated with great reverence. With few exceptions, such as this vase, the porcelains that travelled westwards in the 14th century remained in the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia.⁶ They were the premier export market for Chinese ceramics whose markets absorbed it all. Europe had to wait until the 16th century, when the Portuguese established trade routes to the Far East, for Europe to gain access to the quantities of porcelain that the rest of Asia and the Middle East already took for granted. Whilst Europe had little access to porcelains at this time, the same was not true for Indonesia, whose archipelago received large quantities of Chinese ceramics owing to it being a fulcrum in the world trade system of the 14th century.

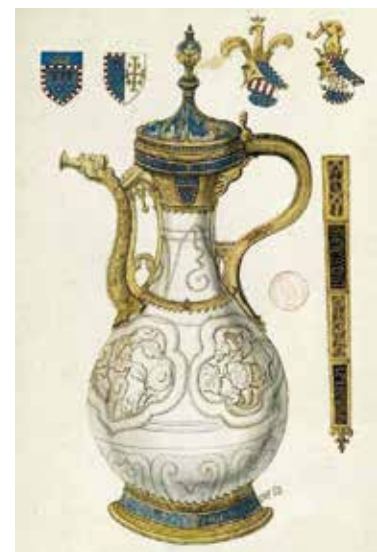


Fig 6: Watercolour of the 'Fonthill' vase made for François Roger de Gaignières by Barthélemy Remy, 1713, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris © Bibliothèque nationale de France

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⁴ Hall, Kenneth, 'Personal Status and Ritualised Exchange in Majapahit Java', in *Archipel*, Vol. 59, (2000), pp. 52-56, 71; Hall, Kenneth, *A History of Early Southeast Asia: Maritime Trade and Societal Development, 100-1500*, Plymouth UK (2011), pp. 259 & 271; Flecker, Mathers, *Archaeological Recovery of the Java Sea Wreck*. Pacific Sea Resources (1997), pp. 8, 23

⁵ Harrison Hall, Jessica, *A Catalogue of Late Yuan and Ming Ceramics in the British Museum*. British Museum Press, London (2001), pp. 59-60; National Museum of Ireland and the Fonthill vase: <http://www.museum.ie/Decorative-Arts-History/Exhibitions/Current-Exhibitions/Curator-s-Choice>; Lane, Arthur, 'The Gaignières-Fonthill Vase; A Chinese Porcelain of about 1300', in *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 103, No. 697 (Apr. 1961), pp. 124-133; Watson, F.J.B & Wilson, Gillian, *Mounted Oriental Porcelain in the J. Paul Getty Museum, California* (1982): pp. 2-3; Fuchs II, Ronald W., *A History of Chinese Export Porcelain in Ten Objects*: <http://www.chipstone.org/article.php/691/Ceramics-in-America-2014/A-History-of-Chinese-Export-Porcelain-in-Ten-Objects>; Pierson, Stacey, *Collectors, Collections and museums: The Field of Chinese Ceramics in Britain, 1560-1960*, Peter Lang AG, Bern (2007): p. 17-18; Rose Kerr, 'Chinese Porcelain in Early European Collections', in *Encounters: The Meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500-1800*, edited by Anna Jackson and Amin Jaffer, V&A Publications, London (2004), pp. 44-51

⁶ Finlay, Robert, *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History*. University of California Press, Berkeley (2010), p. 156