

The China syndrome

It's the mother of all modern ceramics: simple, functional and imbued with a Zen-like humility. Long prized in the West, now Chinese collectors are catching up with Song Dynasty ware

Words Alan Harper

**'Silver hare's fur'
Jian tea bowl,
with 16th-century
lacquer stand.
Sold in 2011 for
£1.1 million.**

On a chilly January day in 1994 I saw something on a stall in London's old Portobello Road market that stopped me in my tracks. It was a small dish of fine white porcelain, decorated with a few incoherent squiggles under a pale, translucent, blue-green glaze. It was light and delicate in the hand and I could feel, more easily than see, the slight upward bulge to its bottom, and the white of its unglazed rim.

The market trader, muffled against the cold in his overcoat and scarf, answered my questions patiently. The bottom was domed, he explained, because the dish had been stacked among many others upside-down in the kiln – hence the unglazed rim – and as glaze and clay melted together in the heat, the thin, flat base surrendered to the pull of gravity. It was Chinese. He didn't know where exactly it had been made, but said was a *yingching* piece from the Southern Song period – when I looked blank he added, “around the 12th century”. That seemed impossible. It didn't look old. I was intrigued. He named his price, and I wrote out a cheque for £120.

Song Dynasty objects seem so familiar to Western eyes because of their role in launching the studio pottery movement in Europe and the US, led by the English potter Bernard Leach. He was captivated by the ceramics he saw on trips to China and Japan before the First World War, and inspired by their simplicity and spontaneity. A spate of large construction projects and railway building in China unearthed troves of early Chinese material which found their way onto the market to excite the more adventurous collectors.

An exhibition mounted at Burlington House in

London in 1910 was followed by another at the Met in New York in 1916. Contemporary cultural critics such as Herbert Read, Roger Fry and Clive Bell viewed these items in the context of Post-Impressionism, and praised what they perceived as the work's naiveté, primitiveness and purity. By the 1920s and early 1930s, according to potter and writer Julian Stair, these ancient artefacts were regarded as Modernist: pottery as a form of non-representational art. Bernard Leach wrote of being transfixed by a cabinet of Song wares in a Tokyo museum, “wondering how an individual potter of today could possibly appropriate to himself a beauty so impersonal.”

The answer, of course, is that they can't: we know what they're up to. In the words of Adam Mars-Jones, “Studio pottery often seeks to compensate for its roots in craft, the shaming kinship with kitchen utensils, by cultivating a Zen humility – which isn't humility at all but a stealthy appeal to the sublime.”

Western collectors of Song had the field to themselves for a century, but now the Chinese want to play. “Prices for the best Song wares have certainly taken off in a very big way,” confirms Robert Bradlow, head of the Chinese Works of Art Department at Sotheby's in London. “The general scarcity of great material is one of the major drivers. Vast amounts of money can chase the very best pieces.” Although still eclipsed by the better-known imperial and blue-and-white ceramics, which have been esteemed in China since time immemorial and collected by wealthy Europeans since the 17th century, the market for what used to be regarded as Chinese porcelain's unsophisticated country cousin has rocketed in recent years.

Auction catalogues tell the tale. For example, one of



Cizhou bowl, sold in Hong Kong this year: HKD75,000. Right: Jizhou bowl with 'tortoiseshell' glaze, which realised HKD275,000 in 2016. Below: Yaozhou jar, sold in London in 2016 for £10,625.



\$11,701,000. "However, Song ceramics are still an undervalued collecting area with good quality examples available for under \$10,000," Hunt adds.

The current auction record for Chinese porcelain was set at Sotheby's in Hong Kong in 2014 by the so-called 'Meiyintang Chicken Cup', a tiny 15th-century Ming bowl naively decorated with chickens. It might have struggled to get your attention in Portobello Road market, but it sold for a barely believable \$36 million. In the same sale, the 'Clark Ding', an ivory-glazed Ding ware bowl from the Northern Song period, eight inches across and with subtle carved decoration, went under the hammer for \$18.8 million, while two years earlier in the same auction rooms, a small Ru ware dish reached \$26.8 million.

Specialist London dealer Roger Keverne explains: "There was lots of volume ten to 20 years ago, and then Song went off the boil," he says. "But it's very much back in favour now. The good pieces have gone up a lot." According to Robert Bradlow this surge "has been partly fuelled by greater interest from the mainland Chinese". And indeed, the Meiyintang chicken cup was sold to Mr Liu Yiqian, from Shanghai, while the Clark Ding went to "an Asian private collector".

Experts refer to the 'Northern' and 'Southern' Song periods, introducing a slightly confusing element of geography into the historical timeline, caused by the Song court's retreat southwards across the Yangtze during the Jin-Song Wars in 1127. But geography was always a factor: there were existing differences in pottery production between north and south, which the dynastic shift merely serves to highlight.

From the north we find great variety in the bold vessels and dishes from Cizhou, decorated with free, inky-black brushstrokes, carved patterns, or 'sgraffito' designs carved out of the unfired glaze. Some are splashed with green or brown, some dipped in turquoise, others painted delicately with enamels.

Northern types also include lustrous sky-blue Jun ware, the translucent olive greens of Yaozhou, Ding's creamy ivory glazes on carved or moulded designs, and the fantastically rare and delicate-hued Ru, manufactured for the Northern Song court. The more workaday 'northern black wares', are characterised by their practical, no-nonsense shapes, often enlivened by russet-brown splashes of iron against the dark glaze.

In the south of China, meanwhile, mysterious black tea bowls emerged from the kilns in Jian, whose iron-rich brown streaks translate poetically as 'hare's fur'. Other lively glaze effects were known as 'partridge feather', 'oil spot' or 'tortoiseshell', while in Jizhou, wax or paper 'resist' patterns were applied to the stoneware body. The potteries at Longquan gave their name to elegant bowls, ewers and vases notable

the most popular of the classic Song ceramics types, a small green dish from Longquan decorated with two moulded fish, was listed in London in 1995 with an estimate of £800 to £1,200. Twenty years later in New York, a virtually identical dish sold for \$23,750 (approx £16,023). It's the same story with a pair of Jian ware tea bowls: one was estimated at £200 to £400 in 1995, while another sold for \$47,500 (£32,047) in 2015. A pale blue Jun ware bowl was estimated at £1,000 to £1,500 in 1996, while a similar example, a little larger, recently fetched \$225,000 (£151,801).

Top-quality Ming-period porcelain still commands the high ground, but Song is on the march. "We have had landmark sales of late, where the best quality pieces of Song porcelain with great, old provenance have made very high prices," explains Christies specialist and head of sale Kate Hunt. Provenance doesn't come much greater than that of an 'oil spot' Jian ware tea bowl which came up for auction with Christie's in New York last year. Registered in Japan in 1935 as an 'important art object' (p42), it sold for for



Longquan jar and cover, Southern Song. Far right: rare Ding ware bowl, sold for \$18.8 million in 2014. Top: Guan ware lobed dish, which fetched HKD12.1 million this year.

ROGER KEVERNE



"MING PORCELAIN STILL COMMANDS THE HIGH GROUND, BUT SONG IS ON THE MARCH. A DING WARE BOWL RECENTLY SOLD FOR \$18.8 MILLION"

for their unctuous green glazes, while the best of the beautiful and delicate white porcelain known as *qingbai* ('blue-white') or *yingching* ('shadow-blue') was made in the great ceramics centre of Jingdezhen.

To attend an auction viewing of Song ceramics, or to visit one of the specialist dealers in London, can be a dazzling experience for the collector. Even the professionals occasionally admit to getting caught up in the excitement of examining an object of transcendent rarity or quality. For Roger Keverne, a specialist in Chinese art for 50 years, one item in particular (p41) still lingers in his memory, years after the event: "I got it from a dealer, who got it in from a private collection in Asia, but beyond that nothing was known about where it came from," he recalls. In the dispassionate language of his catalogue, it was "a fine and rare Longquan celadon jar and cover," little more than four inches (10cm) high, barrel-shaped with a moulded decoration.

But Keverne could see it was special. "It is extremely rare and very high quality," he says. "Even after 50 years in the business it gave me a frisson – it is good enough for any museum. Had I been a very rich man I would have kept it. It's now in a private collection."

Over at Sotheby's Robert Bradlow had a similar experience as he prepared lots for a sale back in 2011. The object in question was a Jian 'hare's fur' tea bowl (p38) whose iron glaze streaks were not the usual russet brown, but by some quirk of the kiln an iridescent silvery-blue – not an unknown phenomenon, but nevertheless a surpassingly rare one. The bowl was also beautifully potted, unmarked by age or wear, while the characteristic bulge of glaze gathered above the foot was particularly pleasing. It was a masterpiece – or, in the laconic terminology of the professional auctioneer: "still one of the nicest bowls I have had in my hands."

Estimated at £500,000 to £700,000, it sold for £1,105,250 – and in more recent auctions, sales of Song have continued to surpass expectations. "The Chinese are pushing the market," Keverne states. "It's very resilient. In auctions you know they're there." Bradlow agrees: "There is still room for the Song market to continue growing," he says, still some catching up to do before it scales the heights: "It has not been the strongest area for collecting by the mainland Chinese, with their interests more focussed on Ming and Qing imperial porcelain and jade."



CHRISTIE'S

The Song 'oil spot' Jian ware bowl which sold in New York in 2016 for \$11.7 million. Below: carved qingbai bowl, sold this year for HKD125,000.

My Portobello Road market trader was called Eric Hudes. I remember his name not only because I wrote him a cheque, but because my purchase proved to be the first of many entries in a blue notebook that I still have. That little *qingbai* dish inspired me to read about old Chinese pottery, visit the spectacular collections hoarded in London's museums, and seek out affordable examples not just in antiques markets like

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Portobello Road and Bermondsey, but among the dealers tucked away in Mayfair and Kensington Church Street, whose rooms were like arcades of buried treasure.

Next time I saw Mr Hudes I made a point of stopping for a chat, and told him about my adventures in the world of Song. He looked at me approvingly and said, "I'm glad I got you started."