

SLAATS

FINE ART

*EARTH & FIRE:
EARLY CHINESE POTTERY &
CERAMICS*



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Published by Slaats Fine Art



PRINTEMPS
ASIATIQUE PARIS

The Pagoda, Paris
5 - 12 June 2025

Foreword

It is our pleasure to welcome you to ‘*Earth & Fire: Early Chinese Pottery & Ceramics*’, an exhibition that explores the rich and enduring legacy of ceramic traditions in early China. These works—formed from earth, shaped by hand, and transformed by fire—speak not only to the extraordinary skill of their makers but also to the cultural, spiritual, and everyday world in which they were created.

The objects in this exhibition are part of an important private European collection, acquired from Giselle Croës, Brussels and Spink & Son, London, in the 1980s ranging from excellent examples of domestic vessels to more refined ceremonial wares. These objects invite us to reflect on the intimate relationship between people and materials, and on the quiet power of craftsmanship across centuries. Each piece offers its own window into the past—into the lives, beliefs, and practices of those who made and used them.

We hope this exhibition offers not only a deeper appreciation of early Chinese ceramics, but also a quiet moment to contemplate during these times, the enduring human impulse to shape, create, and connect through art.

Mark Slaats

London

May 2025

1

A large painted pottery jar

Neolithic period, Majiayao culture, Machang type, late 3rd millennium BC

Dimensions: 37.5cm high

Provenance:

Gisèle Croës Oriental Art, Brussels, 5 February 1987 (invoice)

A private Belgian collection

The large pottery jar decorated with circles and an anthropomorphic motif. The top section of the body decorated with a motif that most likely represents a seated figure, legs apart and with raised arms and five fingers. The body is further decorated with five leaf-shaped elements, generally interpreted as cowrie shells, on either side of the figures. The sides of the body are flanked by two handles.

Above the handles, two large concentric rings in a two-tone design, along with a crown of small reserved dots, encircle a large hatched central circle. The remaining surface is decorated with a motif likely depicting a seated figure, with legs spread and arms raised- each of the five fingers clearly outlined. If we accept this interpretation, the head of the figure would align with the jar's opening. Similar jars from the earlier Banshan phase (c. 2600 - 2300 BC) feature comparable designs, though with more distinctly human figures, suggesting this may be a more stylised version of a shared motif. It is worth noting that human representation was neither especially prominent nor enduring in the Banshan and Machang cultures.

An identical jar from the Avery Brundage Collection is in the Asian Museum of Art in San Francisco; another is published by Nils Palmgren, *Kansu mortuary urns of the Pan Shan and Ma Chang groups*, *Palaeontologia Sinica*, Stockholm, 1934, pl. XXXIX, fig 6. Compare a very similar jar, but without the added 'leaf' design, sold at Christie's New York, 22 September 2023, lot 1046.





2

A painted pottery jar

Neolithic period, Majiayao culture, Machang type, late 3rd millennium BC

Dimensions: 16.5cm high

Provenance:

Gisèle Croës Oriental Art, Brussels, 6 February 1987 (invoice)

A private Belgian collection

The pottery jar of bulbous form with a rounded body and sloping shoulders, tapering towards the flat base. The short neck flaring outwards towards the everted rim, flanked by two handles applied to the shoulders of the vessel. The main body decorated with a frieze of diamonds, above the central section with a 'leiwen' or 'thunder' motif. The neck bears a decoration of vertical parallel lines on the outside, and finely drawn dots and wavy lines on the inside.

Compare a wide-necker jar with similar decoration in Palmgren, N. in 'Kansu mortuary urns of the Pan Shan and Ma Chang groups', pl. XXX, fig. 8 and pl. XLI, fig. 4.

3

A painted pottery head of a young woman

Western Han dynasty, Shaanxi or Henan, 2nd-1st century BC

Dimensions: 15cm high

Provenance:

Gisèle Croës Oriental Art, Brussels, 24 October 1984 (invoice)

A private Belgian collection

Published:

‘Orientations’, Volume 15, Number 9, September 1984, p. 70

Exhibited:

International Ceramics Fair and Seminar, London, 15-18 June 1984

The result of Oxford Authentication Ltd thermoluminescence test no. 366g15 is consistent with the dating of this piece.

The finely modelled head with a serene facial expression and delicate features. Overall covered in white slip, with subtle lines of black and red pigment accentuating and breathing life into the figure.

Since the Qin dynasty (221–206 BC), ceramic figures known as *mingqi* (明器, ‘bright objects’) have been used in burials as substitutes for human sacrifice, intended to provide for the needs of the deceased in the afterlife. These *mingqi* took a wide variety of forms, including architectural models such as houses, towers, gates, and granaries; utilitarian items like wells, stoves, and storage vessels; and domestic or ritual objects such as dishes, incense burners, and lamps. They also included figures of animals, horses, dogs, and anthropomorphic creatures, as well as people, ranging from officials and guardians to servants and entertainers. By the Han dynasty, *mingqi* had expanded to represent scenes of everyday life, including commoners engaged in activities like cooking. Tombs in southern provinces such as Sichuan and Shaanxi have revealed an abundance of these figures, often depicted in animated, even humorous, poses. As grave goods, *mingqi* were meant to ensure a smooth and comfortable journey into the afterlife, with some tombs containing just a few pieces and others housing several hundred.

They were produced using moulds, with the head of this example being hollow and the seams clearly visible on the shells of the chignon and behind the ears, which were added and pierced to inset a movable jewel.

Compare a similar terracotta head, sold at Bukowskis, 2 December 2014, lot 73.





4

A 'Yue' celadon-glazed 'bixie' waterpot

Western Jin dynasty (265-316 AD)

Dimensions: 14.2cm long

Provenance:

Spink & Son, London, 20 March 1986 (invoice)

A private Belgian collection

The Chimera, or 'bixie' proudly standing in a recumbent pose on four clawed feet, head held high with its open mouth revealing two rows of fangs. The figure is finely decorated with a modelled mane extending over the back of the animal with further features carefully incised on the body. The animal overall covered in an olive-green glaze.

Moulded Yue-ware vessels like the present example were made in large quantities in the Jin dynasty (265–420 AD). They would have been produced in two halves, the joint still visible on the animal's muzzle, with the legs attached separately. However, the exact function of this particular Yue-ware example remains unclear. The aperture on the back of the body of the 'bixie' may have held a candle, a possible prototype lamp or candle holder can be seen in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, but it has been previously suggested instead scholars used the vessel to dip their writing brushes in the water-filled interior.

In the Jin dynasty, mythical lions, with exaggeratedly curled manes, and winged chimeras were protective images. Although this particular form was only first produced in the mid-third century, they clearly refer to past depictions, for instance in Han funerary ware where huge stone examples guarded important tombs.

Compare an identical example in the collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art, accession number F1919.93. A similar example was offered at Sotheby's New York, 19 March 2024, lot 292.

5

A 'Yue' celadon-glazed 'frog' waterpot

Western Jin dynasty (265-316 AD)

Dimensions: 8cm long

Provenance:

Spink & Son, London, 1983

A private Belgian collection



The compressed body is raised on a short straight foot, the body of the waterpot crisply moulded with beady eyes on the head, the legs and warts, further decorated and accentuated with incised decoration.

The Jin dynasty ((265–420 AD) was a period marked by political instability and fragmentation, which paradoxically created an environment of artistic freedom and experimentation for potters and the flourishing of the Yue ware kilns in Zhejiang province, during the period. This artistic freedom gave rise to a distinctive array of ceramics, including vessels and figurines with striking animal shapes, both real and mythical, including the current example.

Compare two similarly modelled frog-shaped water pots, one in the Zhejiang Province Cultural Relics Bureau, Jinhua City and another in the Shanghai Museum, both illustrated in ‘*Zhongguo mei shu fen lei quan ji: The Complete Works of Chinese Ceramics*’ Vol.4, Shanghai, 2000, no.131 and 132. Compare a closely related example at Sotheby's Hong Kong, China/5000 Years, 5 June 2020, 336.

6

A pottery Bactrian camel

Northern Wei dynasty, early 6th century

Dimensions: 24.5cm high, 23.5cm wide

Provenance:

Gisèle Croës Oriental Art, Brussels, 9 May 1985 (invoice)

A private Belgian collection

Exhibited:

Antiekbeurs Brussels, 1985

The result of Oxford Authentication Ltd thermoluminescence test no. 366j32 is consistent with the dating of this piece.

The slender animal is depicted carrying two baskets on either side of the body. The figure delicately rendered with a slightly thrown back, small head and a half-open mouth and dilated nostrils, suggesting the animal is chewing his food. The pottery with traces of white pigment.

While pack-saddled Bactrian camels became common in Northern Wei funerary ware, few of them are depicted with round baskets. On this rare example, the material, probably made from basketry or woven leather, is rendered with small incisions, further detailing the heads, humps and the fleece above the forelimbs.

A similar, stockier and less-stylised camel carrying two rounded baskets from the C.C. Wang Collection is illustrated in Anette L. Juliano, *Bronze, Clay and Stone*, 1988, pl. 39. Compare a similar pair of camels, from the Simone and Alan Hartman Collection, sold at Bonhams New York, 18 March 2024, lot 272.





7

A pottery figure of a standing courtier

Tang dynasty (618-907 AD), early 8th century

Dimensions: 38.5cm high

Provenance:

Gisèle Croës Oriental Art, Brussels, 25 October 1984 (invoice)

A private Belgian collection

Exhibited:

Biennale des Antiquaires, Paris, 1984

The result of Oxford Authentication Ltd thermoluminescence test no. 366h6 is consistent with the dating of this piece.

The elegant figure standing straight, her left hand holding the collar of her long, loose robes, her right hand held out at chest level. The courtier's face with delicate features and blushing cheeks below an elaborate chignon. Overall covered in a white slip.

This full-figured female represents the beauty ideal during the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD), often linked to Yang Guifei, one of China's renowned beauties and an influential concubine of Emperor Xuanzong (712–756 AD). A related pottery figure of a court lady, also dated Tang dynasty in the collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing, is illustrated in '*Diao Shi Ru Sheng: Gugong Cang Sui Tang Taoyong*', Beijing, 2006, no.41, p. 95. Another pottery figure is illustrated in the '*Museum of Oriental Ceramics: Exhibition of Oriental Ceramics*', Osaka, 1982, p.21, no. 4. Compare a similar figure, offered at Christie's New York, 21 March 2022, lot 108.

8

A 'sancai' glazed pottery figure of a bearded groom

Tang dynasty (618-907 AD), late 7th century

Dimensions: 58.4cm high

Provenance:

Collection of Ezechiel Schloss

Gisèle Croës Oriental Art, Brussels, 9 May 1985 (invoice)

A private Belgian collection

Exhibited:

Biennale des Antiquaires, Paris, 1984

The result of Oxford Authentication Ltd thermoluminescence test no. 366j34 is consistent with the dating of this piece.

Depicting an elderly groomsman, the figure stands on a small rectangular base with his hands raised in an active pose, trying to rein in a horse or camel. He is dressed in an amber-glazed tunic falling to the knees, a green and amber jacket with epaulettes and long, tight sleeves, held at the waist by a wide belt. The head is left unglazed, the pottery body incised to reveal the distinctive facial features of the foreign groom, including the eyebrows, deep sunken eyes, a wide mouth and a beard.

The standing pottery figure depicts a foreign man, probably a camel driver accompanying a caravan. Part of a group of foreign grooms, they are immortalised in a pose typical for camel drivers, with one arm raised, muscles tensed, with a rope that would have passed from the raised hand to the lowered (left) hand.

Compare a slightly larger figure with a similar pose, exhibited by Eskenazi Ltd., London, *Ancient Chinese Bronzes and Ceramics*, Eskenazi Ltd, New York, 1999, cat. no. 15. A similar, albeit more static figure of a groom was sold at Bonhams London, 12 May 2022, lot 46. A related sancai-glazed figure of a groom dated to the Tang dynasty is illustrated in Liu Liang-yu, *A Survey of Chinese Ceramics: Early Wares: Prehistoric to Tenth Century*, Taipei, 1991, p.251.



9

A cream-glazed pottery jar

Tang dynasty (618-907 AD)

Dimensions: 28.5cm high

Provenance:

Gisèle Croës Oriental Art, Brussels, 25 October 1984 (invoice)

A private Belgian collection

The jar of inverted, pear-shaped form with a rolled rim above a short, waisted neck. The cream-coloured glaze stopping halfway down the body, finished with a flat, unglazed base.

Produced in Henan or Hebei province, in the 7th or early 8th century during the Tang dynasty, the present example is one of the larger pieces of its kind and is unusual for the presence of a white slip, probably intended to mask the light colouring of the paste of the body.

Compare a similar example, offered at Bonhams San Francisco, 30 August 2011, lot 6284.



10

A 'sancai' pottery figure of an equestrian musician

Tang dynasty (618-907 AD)

Dimensions: 40.5cm high

Provenance:

Spink & Son, London, 10 October 1984 (invoice)

A private Belgian collection

The result of Oxford Authentication Ltd thermoluminescence test no. 366h71 is consistent with the dating of this piece.

The moulded figure seated on a horse, sitting upright with his right hand raised to play the flute, wearing a long, round-neck tunic, long trousers, boots and a cloth cap. The light beige terracotta body is covered in green, amber and colourless glaze, highlighted with red and black pigments. The Ferghana horse is stationary, with its head slightly turned to the left. The mane, knotted tail and stockings of the superb, robust animal covered in a cream-coloured glaze. Beneath the dark-glazed saddle, the saddlecloth is adorned with a subtle interplay of green, amber and cream glaze, invoking the richness of the fabric.

This figure belongs to a mounted band that was part of a pottery funerary procession; lavish displays of status and wealth. Introduced to China from the Fergana Valley in Central Asia during the Han dynasty, Ferghana horses, also known as 'heavenly horses', were a highly prized breed among China's elite. They were known for their power, speed and endurance and became symbols of power and prosperity. The present example therefore can also be seen as a symbol of the ruling aristocracy at the height of the Tang dynasty.

Compare an identical piece, from the same mould but with different glaze and pigments in the Musée Guimet, Paris, illustrated in William Watson, *Tang and Liao Ceramics*, New York, 1984, p. 214, fig. 245. A very similar piece was offered by Christie's New York, *The Aurelius Parenti Collection of Chinese Ceramic Sculpture*, June 3, 1988, lot 224. Another similar equestrian figure, a drummer, was unearthed in Loyang, and is currently in the Henan Provincial Museum, see *Tang Sancai, zhongguo taoci quanyi*, vol. 7, 1983, pl. 88 left.





11

A shallow Cizhou bowl with dotted design

Five Dynasties-Northern Song dynasty, 10th-11th century

Dimensions: 7.5cm high, 12.5cm diameter

Provenance:

Spink & Son, London, 15 September 1983 (invoice)

A private Belgian collection

The small Cizhou bowl of open, globular form above a small short foot. The rounded body with a thick inverted rim and decorated with six flowerheads to the exterior, in the form of five olive-brown dots around a sixth dot in the centre. The body covered in a creamy slip with a clear overglaze, stopping above the foot.

The Cizhou kiln in modern-day Handan, Hebei Province produced porcelain featuring white glaze and black patterns which was exported to the Middle East on a large scale. Craftspeople drew experience from gold handicrafts, applying gilding and carving techniques in creating porcelain. They used tools to engrave patterns on the surface instead of using brush pens. These innovative products soon gained popularity across the north part of China and were then exported overseas. Many of the vessels produced by the Cizhou kiln were intended for daily use and include teapots, wine containers, bowls and vases, reflecting the lifestyle of the people in the Song Dynasty.

Compare a similar example exhibited by Kaikodo, New York in *'Elegant Solutions'*, March-April 2015, no. 4. Another, near identical bowl is in the collection of the Cizhou Kiln Museum, and was included in the Hangzhou Museum exhibition *'Cizhou Kiln Porcelain'*, 2020-2021.

12

A 'Qingbai' glazed ewer

Song dynasty, late 10th or early 11th century

Dimensions: 10.5cm high

Provenance:

A private Belgian collection

The globular body set above a short foot, rising to a short, everted neck and flanked on the sides by a moulded flattened strap handle opposite a curved spout. The handle is incised with two characters in archaic script, reading '*wang shi*' or '*wang xi*'. The ewer is covered in a blueish-white glaze that stops just above the foot. The centre of the base left unglazed with a burnt pale brown colour from the firing.

It is possible this piece dates to the early 11th century, when the earliest known Qingbai was produced in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province. The quality of the extremely fine paste and of the glaze contrast with the slight imperfections of the shape, which evolved further during the Song dynasty. The inscription on the handle can be read as either '*wang shi*', meaning 'house of the imperial prince' or '*wang xi*', a family name.

A similar piece, possibly dated to the Five Dynasties (907-960), can be found in the collection of the Musée Guimet, Paris, illustrated in '*Oriental Ceramics; the World's Great Collections*', Tokyo, New York and San Francisco: Kodansha International Ltd., 1980-1982, vol. 7, pl. 69.



13

An incised lobed 'Qingbai' bowl

Southern Song dynasty, 11th/12th century

Dimensions: 7cm high, 19.7cm wide

Provenance:

Spink & Son, London, 10 October 1984 (invoice)

A private Belgian collection

The thinly potted bowl of conical form with a six-lobed rim, supported by a small, straight foot. The interior of the bowl is freely carved with a large, blooming peony spray, highlighted with waves of fine lines. The bowl is covered overall with a crackled glaze of aquamarine colour, the centre of the base left unglazed with a burnt pale brown colour from the firing.

Compare a near identical bowl, exhibited by Eskenazi Ltd., London, *'Chinese Art from the Reach Family Collection'*, 8-22 December 1989, no. 28 and offered at Christie's New York, 20 September 2013, lot 1508.



14

A rare Cizhou carved pear-shaped bottle vase, 'yuhuchunping'

Jin dynasty (1127-1234)

Dimensions: 27.3cm high

Provenance:

Spink & Son, London, 3 February 1987 (invoice)

A private Belgian collection

The vase has an elegant pear-shaped body rising from a short spreading foot to a slender neck before with a flared mouth rim, carved through the lustrous, thick brown glaze contrasting with the pale white slip. The wide, central band of scrolling foliage, set between two smaller bands on the lower neck and lower body.

The carving technique employed on this vase was among the most meticulous and technically demanding. The process began with the application of a pale slip to the vessel, which was allowed to dry before a second layer of dark slip was applied over it. Once dry, portions of the dark slip were carefully carved away to reveal the underlying pale surface, creating a striking contrast in which the decorative elements appeared in dark brown against a light background. Executing this technique required considerable skill and precision to ensure that the carving did not penetrate too deeply and removed both layers of slip. Additional details, such as the finely incised lines within the foliage seen on this vase, were introduced using a sharp point to enhance the visual depth and intricacy of the design.

Compare a near identical vase, offered at Christie's Hong Kong, 27 November 2013, lot 3284. Another example from the Feng Weng Tang Collection, offered by Bonhams Hong Kong, 9 October 2014, lot 193. A similar vase from the collection of Captain Dugald Malcolm is illustrated by Margaret Medley in *'The Chinese Potter, A Practical History of Chinese Ceramics'*, New York, 1976, p. 134-135, no. 97 ss and another illustrated by Mitsuru Uragami, *'The 30th Anniversary of Uragami Sokyū-do'*, Tokyo, 2009, p. 44.



15

A 'Qingbai' grain measure cup

Southern Song dynasty, 12th/13th century

Dimensions: 6.5cm high, 10.5cm diameter

Provenance:

Spink & Son, London, 10 October 1984 (invoice)

A private Belgian collection



The slightly bulbous stoneware body of the measuring jar rising from a flat base toward a slightly everted neck and rim. The lower body with incised decoration, the lower part of the neck with painting in brown slip. Covered overall in a bluish-white glaze with the base partly glazed.

This highly unusual Qingbai cup is part of a group of silver, hardstone, and ceramic vessels thought to have been made in imitation of basketwork rice measures. Vessels of this type first appeared in silver during the Tang dynasty- for example, one shown by Yamanaka in 1925 and illustrated in R.L. Hobson's article, '*A Tang Silver Hoard*' in *The British Museum Quarterly*, May 1926, pl. Xa. That example may have served as a prototype for similar cups produced during the Song dynasty.

Compare a near identical example in the collection of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Accession no. LI1301.55. A slightly smaller example was offered by Christie's, 29 September 2022, lot 41.

16

A pair of miniature 'Qingbai' 'vases, 'hu' and integral stands

Yuan dynasty, 13th/14th century

Dimensions: 17cm high

Provenance:

Spink & Son, London, 10 October 1984 (invoice)

A private Belgian collection

The pair of 'hu' vases with a bulbous body, rising from a tall, truncated foot, decorated on the sides of the neck with s-shaped handles. The vases are raised on integral openwork stands of hexagonal shape, imitating a wooden support. Covered overall in a greyish-blue glaze.

Part of a five-piece alter set, these miniature vases were intended to contain flowers or peacock feathers and would have been complemented by an incense burner (no. 17 in this catalogue) as well as a pair of candelabras. Together, they would have formed the 'wugong', five offerings, a traditional altar set made for the southeast Asian market.

17

A miniature 'Qingbai' censer, 'ding' and integral stand

Yuan dynasty, 13th/14th century

Dimensions: 11.5cm high

Provenance:

Spink & Son, London, 10 October 1984 (invoice)

A private Belgian collection

The incense burner in the form of a bronze tripod sacrificial vessel known as a 'ding', the body set on three legs with handles rising from the side of the neck to above the rim. Covered overall in a blueish-white glaze.

Part of a five-piece alter set, this miniature incense burner would have been complemented by a pair of 'hu' vases (no. 16 in this catalogue) as well as a pair of candelabras. Together, they would have formed the 'wugong', five offerings, a traditional altar set made for the southeast Asian market.



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