

ANTIQUE CHINESE PORCELAINS

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LEIBER MUSEUM





Pair of Famille Verte  
Beaker-Shaped Vases Decorated in  
Precious Antiques, Flowers  
K'ang Hsi Period,  
1662 – 1722 AD

## THE ANTIQUE CHINESE PORCELAIN COLLECTION OF JUDITH & GERSON LEIBER

*By J. B. Sussman*

Judith and Gerson Leiber have finely developed artistic sensibilities. She is a world-renowned designer of handbags and other fashion accessories, many of which are in the permanent collections of such important museums as The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Smithsonian, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, among various others.

Gerson Leiber is a highly regarded fine artist who has produced acclaimed paintings, etchings, and drawings. His work has been displayed in numerous galleries and is represented in important museums throughout the country, and several years ago his paintings were the subject of a one-man show at Guild Hall.

Sixty-two years ago, the Leibers began collecting antique Chinese porcelains. They have long been interested in the high degree of civilization attained in China, dating back thousands of years when many parts of the world were in a state of barbarism.

Now, the Leibers have assembled approximately 140 of their best porcelain pieces for their first public exhibition. This eclectic collection of Chinese porcelains contains pieces that date back thousands of years, as well as pieces that were created in the first years of the 20th Century. The exhibition offers vital cultural and artistic insights into China's glorious past, demonstrating its magnificent contribution to the art and craft of porcelain pottery.

It is interesting to reflect that for centuries, a single kind of manufactured material has been closely identified with China. In homes throughout the English-speaking world, people speak of fine China when referring to plates, platters, cups, saucers, bowls, and vases and various other items. China is the most enduring and respected name not only for porcelains, but also for earthenware and pottery. The country's master potters have long been esteemed for their artistic skills.

Beginning thousands of years ago, the potter in China held a unique position as both artist and artisan, creating objects that were valued by royalty, by households, and by collectors. The potters' creations were prized as examples of both applied and fine art. Their creations were utilitarian and beautiful. Their vessels were used for storage, for cooking, for drinking, for serving food, and even during the course of religious rituals. Whatever the purpose, each object was regarded as integral to the culture of diurnal life, indeed even to one's very survival.

In our time, collectors of fine Chinese porcelains regard their prized objects as being primarily decorative, yet the original users found pieces, such as those in the Leiber Collection, to serve household and ritual needs. Many of the pieces in the Collection were created to be buried with the dead; others were integral to the creation and serving of meals and still others were used as pillows, as architectural decorations, as integral to the interior design of rooms, as brush holders, as finger bowls, etc.

While utility was the original purpose for early earthenware vessels, function was soon followed by personal expression. Artistry developed its own set of aesthetic principles. The first signs of artistic ornamentation consisted of painted or carved images of flowers, fish, and birds, all of which can be seen on very early pieces of pottery.

Decorative techniques varied from region to region as well as from one dynastic period to another. For those pieces intended for royalty, there are often images of dragons and phoenixes.

Technical advances in the manufacture of pottery developed as subjects for artistic renderings broadened. And simple pottery led to glazed pottery, which led to porcelain.

One should know, before going on, that pottery is a generic term: the products of potters include vessels of earthenware, stoneware, porcelain, and fritware. Basic clay is used for pottery, while kaolin is used for the manufacture of porcelain. Pottery is the oldest handicraft about which historians have a continuous knowledge.

Many pieces in the Leiber Collection were created in the following dynasties; therefore, I have included information about how porcelains developed during those periods while also providing an historical context.



Glazed Red Pottery Figure of a  
Bactrian Camel Modelled  
in the Full Round  
Six Dynasties/Early T'ang Dynasty,  
6th – 7th Century

## THE DYNASTIES

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### *The Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 221 AD)*

Represented in the Leiber Collection are several exquisite pieces from the Han Dynasty which are mainly unglazed earthenware objects, such as the imposing *Watch Tower*. During this period, many varieties of porcelains, often representing human forms (e.g. dancers), buildings, domestic equipment, and animals, were used for religious rituals and were buried with the dead. Indeed, many pieces of early Chinese pottery that have survived into present times had been buried in tombs, and though much of those earthenware objects were not glazed, others were covered with a soft lead-silicate glaze that was tinted green or brown.

The Han Dynasty was ruled by a prominent family known as the Liu clan, and its reign continued for more than 400 years. Historians consider it to have been a great period for the development and advance of Chinese culture and art. To this day, many in China still refer to themselves as the Han People.

### *The Six Dynasties (AD 220 – 589 AD)*

Following the collapse of the Han Dynasty, what is known as the Six Dynasties came into power. The Six Dynasties is actually a collective noun for six dynasties during the periods of the Three Kingdoms (220 – 280 AD), Jin Dynasty (265 – 420), and Southern and Northern Dynasties (420 – 589). The Six spanned a period of disunity, instability, and warfare; yet it was a rich period for the development and creation of porcelains as kilns proliferated in north and south China. Glazed stoneware gained in popularity during this period. Its manufacture became increasingly localized, and new refined forms of jars, ewers, dishes, and bowls evolved that were better suited for utilitarian purposes, and were frequently covered with olive or grey-green glazes. Many had incised features but tended to be lacking in greater ornamentation. Figures of warriors, camels, and cavalry horses in unglazed grey earthenware became popular, but pacific images of large Buddha heads were also quite popular.

In this exhibition is a glazed red pottery figure of a Bactrian Camel that was typical of both the Six Dynasties and the early T'ang Dynasty.

The Six Dynasties ended when Emperor Wen of Sui reunified southern and northern China, and the Sui Dynasty began.

### *The Sui Dynasty (581 – 618 AD)*

The Sui Dynasty solidified its power and control by ending four centuries of division and conflict between rival regimes. However, it lasted for a comparatively short period of time. The dynasty was founded by the Emperor Wen who declared that Chang'an (now Xi'an) would be his capital. He successfully re-united northern and southern China and oversaw the construction of the Grand Canal. He encouraged the further development of porcelains, and imperial patronage of the products of kilns increased under his rule. This impetus continued and grew during the T'ang Dynasty.



Figure of a Standing Horse in Unglazed Red Clay Pottery with Vestiges of Polychrome  
Early Tang Dynasty,  
Ca: Early 7th Century

### *The T'ang Dynasty (618 – 907 AD)*

The T'ang Dynasty is regarded by historians as a high point in Chinese civilization, exceeding that of the Han Dynasty. Indeed, no other period evokes a more potent sense of splendor, which is certainly evidenced in its production of beautiful porcelains. Potters, at that time, produced many heads of Buddha, one of which can be seen in this exhibition. Not only pottery and other applied and fine arts flourished, but so did poetry. Indeed, two of China's most famous historical poets, Du Fu and Li Bai, wrote during this period, as did the poets Meng Haoran, Du Mu, and Bai Juyi.

Chinese territory was greatly expanded through military conquest. And the Grand Canal (the longest in the world), which was built during the previous dynastic period, resulted in the building of new urban settlements along its route and proved a boon to commercial traders among mainland markets. The number of kilns increased and trade in porcelains grew dramatically.

By the 9th Century, the dynasty and its centralized government began to decline, losing much of its earlier accrued power. Yet, art and literature continued to flourish, and potters produced some of their most treasured pieces. The number of kilns continued to expand dramatically, along with proliferation of new varieties of porcelains, which were exported to nearby countries in Asia and Mesopotamia. Many wine jars and vases, with graceful shapes and single color glazes, were created during the T'ang period. In addition, tombs contained small, finely created porcelain figurines that were delicately hand painted.

There are many fine whitish earthenware pieces created during the T'ang period that are covered with a pale colored lead-glaze, which is a revival of a practice developed during the Han period. The extremely hard, brilliant white porcelains of this period owe their translucency to the high temperatures at which kaolin clay and feldspar were combined; feldspar is a principal ingredient for a highly brilliant glaze.

A delicate and graceful piece from this period is of the unglazed Court Lady holding a bird in her right hand. Such pieces were buried in imperial tombs. Another striking piece is that of a Standing Horse in unglazed red clay pottery with vestiges of unglazed polychrome.

### *The Sung Dynasty (960 – 1279 AD)*

A variety of modern elements of later civilizations were first created during the Sung Dynasty, such as the introduction of paper money and the invention of gun powder. It was also the first government to establish a permanent standing navy. The government withdrew from heavily regulating the economy, setting the basis for a free market economy.

In 1234, forty-five years before the end of the Sung Dynasty, the Mongols invaded and conquered northern China. By 1259, the Mongols were ruled by Kublai Khan. Twenty years later, the Khan's armies conquered southern China and united the country, and Kublai Khan had become the emperor of all of China.



Unglazed Pottery Figure of  
a Court Lady Holding a Bird  
T'ang Dynasty, 618 – 907 AD



Prior to the Mongol conquest, social life had been vibrant, and art and literature played an important role amongst the educated elites. They purchased prized objects, and traded those objects amongst themselves. Painted and carved porcelains were primary objets d'art that the elite treasured.

Both art and literature gained further prominence with major developments in woodblock printing and movable type setting. In addition, small

paintings which captured realistic scenes of nature became widely popular, and such images, employing a new fluency of line, also appeared on a wide variety of porcelains. Images of animal heads, dragons, fish, various flowers, and clouds, some of which were dark and threatening and issued flashes of lightening, also became popular on porcelains. Such images were highlighted by a wide range of new glaze colors. Colors varied from grey through dark purple to a bright red as striking as the color of crushed raspberries. Interior glazes were blue or clair de lune, and bases were glazed in a brown-green color. Lead-silicate glazes, which had once been very popular, were now replaced with high-fired feldspathic glazes, which were rapidly applied and resulted in a depth and richness of colors, which had not been seen before that time. Many of the most prized porcelains of the period were produced in the Chun Chou factories where potters had developed new skills in the regulation of kiln temperatures and atmosphere; they created beautifully vivid glazes for imperial vessels such as flower pots and bulb bowls. It was also a period that produced beautiful celadon wares.

### *The Yuan Dynasty (1271 – 1368)*

Under this Mongol dynasty, the manufacture of porcelains precipitously declined. Countless kilns were abandoned, artisans were left without their means of productivity, and a thriving art form faced its first threat. Yet, potters continued to meet whatever demand remained for porcelains, and certain pieces gained much popularity, such as blue-and-white porcelain dishes with fish and flowing water designs, examples of which can be seen in this exhibition. In addition, various jade carvings became quite popular, such as jade belt plaques featuring carved designs of dragons.

The last years of the Yuan Dynasty were marked by struggle, famine, and bitterness among the populace. The dissolution of the dynasty had become apparent.

### *The Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644)*

The last of the nine successors of Kublai Khan was expelled from Dadu (present-day Beijing) in 1368 by Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of the Ming Dynasty. He had led a militant group known as the Red Turbans, which fought against and ultimately defeated the Mongol armies. Following his victories, Zhu declared himself Emperor Wu.

#### **Left:**

Blue & White Ovicylindrical Vase & Cover Decorated in Precious Antiquities  
K'ang Hsi Period,  
1662 – 1722 AD

#### **Below:**

Blue & White Incense Burner in the Form of a Standing Kylin with Removable Head  
Ming Dynasty, Wanli Period,  
1522 – 1566 AD



Previous freedoms were returned to society, and art and literature flourished. The number of kilns dramatically increased, as did the manufacture of porcelains, which became known for their more ornate images and delicate craftsmanship.

During the Ming Dynasty, there was a greater range of porcelain surfaces than during the prior periods. Stoneware declined, and porcelain became increasingly popular. Colors for porcelain became more varied, and dark blue and dark purple dominated, with white variegating opalescence. A new cobalt oxide pigment became popular. Often, glazes were quite thick. As a result of improved manufacturing techniques, the porcelains achieved a greater delicacy and had a more shiny, glass-like surface. Though there were many advances made during the Ming period, there are also countless pieces that seem almost indistinguishable from those produced during the Sung Dynasty. Many of the



Famillie Noir Temple Jar & Cover,  
Both Decorated with Rockeries,  
Trees & Flowers  
K'ang Hsi Period,  
1662 – 1722 AD

most beautiful pieces created during the Sung and Ming periods owe their charming allure to graceful shapes and brilliantly rich glazes. The decorative repertoire for porcelains comprised leafy plants, flowers (peony and lotus) and animal figures. Much of the ornamentation found on Ming porcelains can be attributed to the most talented artists of the times.

Among the most beautiful porcelains ever created are the Celadon vessels from the Sung and Ming periods. Specimens have been prized by collectors the world over, and there is no absence of such pieces in the Leiber Collection. If there is one word that best describes the color attributes of Celadon porcelains, it is harmony. Typical examples are heavy plates, bowls, platters, and large vases often covered with thick glazes.

During the Ming period, numerous individual potters became renowned for their artwork, such as He Chaozong in the early 17th century for his style of white porcelain sculpture. The major production centers for porcelain items were Jingdezhen in Jiangxi province and Dehua in Fujian province. The Dehua porcelain factories catered to European tastes by creating Chinese export porcelain. While sending a small percentage of porcelains to Europe, a much larger percentage was exported to Japan and South East Asia.

A singular example of exceptional Ming porcelain in this exhibition is the blue and white incense burner in the form of a Standing Kylin (a mythical monster) with removable head.

### *The Qing Dynasty (1644 – 1912)*

The Qing (meaning clear, or pellucid) Dynasty, also known as the Manchu Dynasty, was the last imperial dynasty of China. The dynasty was founded by the Manchu clan in what is today northeast China. Starting in 1644, it expanded into China proper and surrounding territories, establishing the Empire of the Great Qing. The Qing period was the last great era in the history of Chinese porcelains.

During the Qing Dynasty, the emperor encouraged a dramatic increase in the number of kilns for the manufacture of porcelains for use in the emperor's palace,

which – in turn – led to the development of a greater number of private kilns, as the manufacture of fine porcelains reached new heights. More thick, richly colored glazes became popular, especially complex enamel and rose colors. Many pieces were created for scholars, especially beautifully painted writing boxes, ink stones, brush rests, small lamps, incense burners, and hat stands.

Painted porcelains had developed a sprightly elegance during this period. Many blue-and-white objects were created and painted with a brilliant cobalt. Powder blue glazes were often used as a ground color for decoration. Famille verte glazes were superseded by famille rose glazes. And then there was the famille noir, which can be seen in this exhibition in a sumptuous brilliant black vase as well as in several other pieces.

In addition, there is a famille noir Temple Jar and Cover decorated with rockeries, trees and flowers. It is Ta Ching kaolinic porcelain made at the Ching-te-chen kilns of Kiangsi.

There is also a pair of famille verte Beaker Shaped Vases decorated in precious antiques, flowers. It, too, is a Ta Ching kaolinic porcelain made at the Ching-te-chen kilns of Kiangsi.

Also during the Qing period, Celadon glazes were revived in numerous tones and tints and frequently had meticulously carved designs. Other glazes included a greenish-brown glaze known as “tea dust” and a speckled robins egg blue, as well as a range of single color glazes.

In Europe, during the late 17th Century and early 18th Century, a vogue for collecting Chinese porcelains developed. The porcelains were an integral part of elite interior designs, and that high regard for Chinese porcelains led to the creation of porcelain rooms in many elegant houses. The most devoted collector of Chinese porcelains was Augustus The Strong of Saxony and Poland (1699 – 1733), who was a great patron of the Meissen porcelain factory. He conceived of a project of ornamenting an entire palace in Dresden with Chinese porcelains.

The zenith of porcelain manufacturing was reached in the 18th Century. After that, there was a long, slow decline in the quality of production. By the 19th Century, the Industrial Revolution had taken hold in Europe, and its impact was felt in China. Now Europe was rapidly catching up to the latest developments of Chinese ceramics. During this period, a division occurred in the manufacture of porcelains: those made for the palace, and those made for export. The former were considered to be of a higher quality.

Unfortunately, a great period was about to end. Though the Qing Dynasty had highly integrated the very best in Chinese culture, its military power grew weak in the 1800s and was faced with international pressure, massive rebellions, and decisive military defeats. After the mid-19th Century, the Qing Dynasty was on a course of rapid decline. The dynasty was finally overthrown following the Xinhai Revolution, when the Empress Dowager Longyu abdicated on behalf of the last emperor, Puyi, on February 12, 1912.



Brahma Bull Grey Pottery Figure with Vestiges of Original Red & Black Polychrome  
Northern Wei Dynasty,  
Ca: 386 – 534 AD





Unglazed Red Pottery Figure of a Boar Modeled in the Full Round  
T'ang Dynasty, 618 – 907 AD

## LOOKING BACK

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The manufacture of Chinese porcelains would never have started had it not been for the development of kilns that could reach exceedingly high temperatures, and the ability of artisan potters to control those temperatures to achieve a variety of desired effects. As the art of the potters developed, they became open to new influences from the Near East, India, and Central Asia. As the centuries passed, the skills of the potters developed. Forms became increasingly more graceful and refined, and ensured a comparable sophistication in decoration. Form and aesthetics were in harmonious balance. The Chinese potter was an individualistic artist, an esteemed master of his material, who adapted his talents and skills to changing times and tastes. Yet, as time passed, the porcelain factories became more technically sophisticated operations, and the potter lost much of his cherished individuality. He had to submit to the ethos of the factory and the commerce it generated. The potter learned to execute the wishes that others imposed on him, though many of those people knew nothing of the intricacies and problems that the potter had faced through the centuries. Extreme technical accomplishments now replaced purely aesthetic endeavors. The potter, though still an accomplished artist, had to submit to the demands of a changing time. And so the extraordinary and luminous history of Chinese porcelains came to an end. Yet, here in the Leiber Museum, the Chinese porcelain art of centuries past lives on.

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### Acknowledgement

The Leibers thank Josh Dayton for his work in setting up the exhibition of antique Chinese porcelains. His skills and talents have been nothing less than instrumental in its success.

