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CHINESE EXPORT PORCELAIN AND ORIENTAL ART



Chinese export porcelain Punchbowl painted en grisaille with the Battle of the Saintes

Qianlong period circa 1785

English Market

Diameter: 15 inches; 38cm

A rare Chinese export porcelain marine subject punchbowl painted *en grisaille* with a scene showing the Battle of the Saintes on one side, the other with two seated figures staring aggressively at each other.

This finely painted bowl is one of a small group of such bowls that were made to celebrate a significant naval battle. The first order of these punchbowls would appear to be a small number directly for the English market, these having this satirical image of the two figures. The bowl belonging to Admiral Rodney himself had this satirical scene on the reverse and is now in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich (No AAA4358).

Others have a different scene on the reverse, which shows a group of figures and a coastal scene, rather roughly painted and derived from a Vernet engraving of Caudebec (see details illustrated here). Other examples have inscriptions.

The maritime scene is taken from a 1783 engraving by Francis Chesham (1749-1806) and John Peltro (1760-1808), Published: Sayer & Bennett (Robert Sayer and John Bennett who traded as Sayer & Bennett between 1774-84). This engraving is after a painting, one of a pair, by Robert Dodd (1748-1815), a version of which sold at Christie's South Kensington, 24 November 2010. The ship right of centre has been identified as the St Albans, a 64-gun ship commanded by Captain Charles Inglis, whose brother was a Director of the East India Company and may have been instrumental in the ordering of these bowls. A plate with an image of just this ship was in the collection of Peter H B Frelinghuysen, sold Christie's New York, 24 January 2012, lot 36. That collection also had a pair of these bowls, one with an inscription: 'Breaking of the Line on the ever Memorable 12th of April'.

The satirical scene is after an engraving Politeness which is known in several versions and is attributed to James Gillray (1756-1815) although this version is signed ‘JN fecit et Invt 1779’ for John Nixon.

The Battle of the Saintes was an important naval battle in the Caribbean, near the islands of Les Saintes, between the British and the French that took place 9-12 April 1782. The British fleet under Admiral Sir George Brydges Rodney (1718-92) defeated a French fleet under the Comte de Grasse. Rodney is credited with introducing the tactic of ‘breaking the line’ which defeated the French fleet on the third day.

This was a significant event in the American Revolutionary War following the Siege of Yorktown the previous September, 1781, when Cornwallis had been defeated by the American forces (although recent reports that this had involved taking over the airports are not thought to be accurate).

The battle disrupted the French and Spanish plan to capture Jamaica and reasserted British dominance at sea at a crucial time when they were negotiating with the American Colonies following the Revolution.

Admiral Rodney accepted the surrender of De Grasse and took him to London as a prisoner to present to the King in person. Such a high profile humiliation is echoed here in the use of this satirical image. Rodney was created a peer in June 1782.

References: Hervouët & Bruneau (1986) p49, No 2.38 a bowl, later sold Sotheby’s Monte Carlo, June 1987; Godden 1979, p87, No 12, a bowl having an inscription: ‘The Gift of a Commander of an Indiaman, a small but grateful Testimony of Respect to Lord Rodney’s Merit and Services’; the Victoria & Abert Museum has a bowl with the French scene (C.18-1951) and another with just the centre right ship, the St Albans, (C.19-1951); The Royal Maritime Museum at Greenwich has an example with this Gillray scene (No AAA4358 - this was originally owned by Admiral Rodney himself and was sold by the family in 1906) and another with the arms of Sir Charles Douglas Bt (d.1789), Rodney's Captain of the Fleet (No AAA4357); Howard 1977 *The Sailing Ship on Porcelain Catalogue of the Ellis Memorial Antiques Show*, Boston, fig 10 and pp49-52; another example is exhibited at the National Trust property of Berrington Hall in Hereforshire with an inscription ‘Breaking the line on the ever memorable 12th April [1782]’ - Berrington was the Rodney family home, originally belonging to Anne Harley who married Admiral Rodney's son George, although the actual bowl owned by Admrial Rodney was sold by the family in 1906 to the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.