COHEN&COHEN
CHINESE EXPORT PORCELAIN AND ORIENTAL ART

Chinese Blue and White porcelain Charger decorated with Animals

Daoguang period circa 1830

European Market

Diameter: 14½ inches; 36.5cm

Priced in GB pounds sterling

£15,000

This item is located in the UK. Shipping from there is at the buyer's expense.

A Chinese export porcelain blue and white charger painted with a range of unusual animals around a central dragon-phoenix chimera all on a ground of waves, the rim a lappet border, the reverse with four Daoist precious objects and an apocryphal Kangxi mark within a double circle.

This extraordinary dish is previously unrecorded and might have been a special commssion. The animals are a curious selection and in several cases probably the only examples of their type to be found on Chinese porcelain. They are very likely taken from one of the many Natural History illustrated books that were produced from the mid-eighteenth century onwards and which multiplied substantially in the early nineteenth century as the study of biological systematics developed.

At this time there was also a revival of interest in Kangxi porcelains and many items were made in the earlier style or with Kangxi marks. The style of this dish is somewhat mixed as it also borrows from a Ming period decoration with the animals reserved on a stylised 'wave' ground. This is a homage to the past rather than any attempt at deception but the result here is a very curious mixture of artistic origins.

In Canton in the eighteenth century many of the European traders were also naturalists but their focus was more economic - collecting specimens and taking them back to Europe. By 1780 Sir Joseph Banks FRS (1743-1820) was installing people in Canton to study Chinese Natural History, including Alexander Duncan, Surgeon to the English Factory and later George Thomas Staunton, who was Banks' main agent in Canton from 1799-1820. In the early nineteenth century there was a growing focus on taxonomy and a purer scientific study, though still within the framework of trade.

By the 1820s there were many Natural History scholars in Canton, producing drawings and collecting specimens of Chinese flora and fauna for European Museums and some of them made use of the artistic expertise developed in the workshops producing pith paintings for export to the West. Notable among these was John Reeves FRS FLS (1 May 1774 – 22 March 1856) an employee of the English East India Company and a professional Naturalist and Tea Inspector. He was later joined by his son John Russell Reeves (1804-1877) who inherited his father's collection of thousands of drawings of plants, animals and geological specimens and then left them to the British Museum (Natural History) in London.

This charger was created within this milieu of flowering scientific expertise in Canton. The sources for the drawings are uncertain and likely from several different sources. It is probable that drawings using these printed sources were made in Canton to be sent to Jingdezhen with the order - all blue and white decoration had to be done there as only the overglaze enamel decoration was possible in Canton itself.

Early Natural History publications included those by George Edward FRS (1694-1773) and Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707-1788) and from 1792-1830 the extensive Bilderbuch für Kinder by Friedrich (Johann) Justin Bertuch (1747–1822). There were 237 parts combined into 12 volumes with a total of 1187 copper-engravings. These were engraved with illustrations copied from multiple sources by the students of the Kupferstecherschule (School for Engraving) in Weimar under the supervision of Johann Heinrich Lips (1758–1817) and Georg Melchior Kraus (1737–1806).

Some suggested possible sources are given on the next page (see images) but it is difficult to be certain about them as these drawings were constantly being copied and many of the poses are simple. In any case the Chinese artist has clearly shown an artistic freedom in the lively painting of these animals and not followed the models too closely.

The choice of animals is peculiar and it is not possible to be sure whether this is deliberate or more random. There are two birds, three quadrupeds, three fish and an insect. In the centre is a Chinese mythical animal, a flying winged dragon (*yinglong* - a rain dragon, fitting for the watery background) but with a feathered tail like a phoenix (*fenghuang*) - an unusual combination. In some myths the yinglong is the progenitor of many animals including birds, quadrupeds and scaly animals. So possibly this scheme is therefore some allusion to a creation myth?

The inclusion of the Great Auk (*Pinguinus impennis*, L. 1758) is surprising though this species, which had been widely known across the Northern Hemisphere was, by the time of the creation of this porcelain, becoming much scarcer and was extinct by 1846. This wonderful bird, almost two foot tall and flightless was the original penguin ('pinion-wing') though it is not related to the penguins of the southern hemisphere that were named after it. The print source is not certain.

The Pelican is likely taken from an edition of the Bertuch Bilderbuch (plate VI) but could also be from The Naturalist's Pocket Magazine. However on the porcelain the bird has a noticeable crest on the back of its head which is only found on the Spot-Billed Pelican (*Pelecanus philippensis*, Gmelin, 1789) a species that was then found in parts of China and might therefore have been more familiar to the Chinese artist who could have altered the drawing accordingly. It is now endangered and extinct in China.

The Rhinoceros depicted here is the Black Rhinoceros, *Diceros bicornis* (L. 1758) and is likely taken from the illustration in Bertuch. It is not the only example of a Rhino found on Chinese export porcelain (see image).

The Hippopotamus is painted with its mouth wide open - an unusual pose in the naturalist drawings though Bertuch's illustration at least has the mouth open somewhat.

The Ass or Donkey (*Equus africanus asinus*, L., 1758) is finely painted in a blue wash and is illustrated in most books in a similar pose.

The 'Spur-fish' is copied from an engraving by George Edwards from his Gleanings on Natural History (1758-64). It was repoduced in The Naturalist's Pocket Magazine, Harrison (1798-1802). There is no scientific consensus which actual fish this is meant to be. It could be a Humphead Parrotfish (*Bolbometopon muricatum*, Valenciennes, 1840) or a Humphead Wrasse (*Cheilinus undulatus*, Rüppell, 1835) also known as a Napoleon Wrasse. They are both large fish but neither of these was formally described until 1840 and 1835 respectively though Edwards' drawing is much earlier, etched in 1755. Alternatively it might be the Butterfly Blenny (*Blennius ocelaris*, L. 1758) which is smaller and was described by Linnaeus in 1758.

The second fish is probably a Sail Fish (*Scomber gladius*, G. Shaw, 1792), illustrated by Bertuch and the third is the Painted Frog Fish (*Antennarius pictus*, Shaw, 1794) a relatively common and voracius carnivore, up to twelve inches long, found on the sea bed in the coral reefs of the Indo-Pacific, it is also illustrated by Bertuch and both of these follow his images.

The male Elephant Beetle (*Megasoma elephas*, Fabricius, 1775) is probably also taken from the Bertuch illustration though most illustrations look very similar.