

SÃO ROQUE

Antiques & Art Gallery

Aquamanile — Portuguese faïence, Lisbon, 1620–1640



AQUAMANILE

Portuguese faïence
Lisbon, 1620 – 1640
Height: 26.5 cm
C634

Provenance: M.P. collection, Lisbon and Sangreman Proença collection, Évora



Extremely rare Portuguese faïence aquamanile dating from the first half of the 17th century, decorated in cobalt-blue pigment on a tin-white enamelled ground. The unusual vessel is moulded and shaped as a fantastic chimera of equine head and neck and pronounced female torso of marked waistline, fused onto a hybrid lower body with lion paws, bird wings and a long robust fish tail that curves upwards, to join the back of the head, forming a handle.

The decorative composition is highlighted and enriched by a bright cobalt-blue pigment in a variety of shades and ornamental motifs reflecting the influence of European prototypes, such as the elaborate jewel-like necklace, the grotesque mask bodice, the scrolled acanthus shoulders and the two large abdominal fleuron cut by a keel like blade. The tale's floral decoration however, albeit of looser and freer character, suggests the aesthetic grammar of contemporary Chinese porcelain prototypes.

This rare piece, undoubtedly produced by a Lisbon pottery workshop, was conceived with particular care, both in its shape and ornamentation, and was destined to an aristocratic and erudite clientele. In fact, it takes inspiration from the monster in Horace's 'Poetic Art', designating extravagant artistic creations that go beyond the bounds of reason. This piece would be displayed in the courtly washing of the hands ceremony that preceded the meals. Identical use had the various extant bronze examples of equally extravagant shapes and aquatic allusions.

The fantastic character of this aquamanile, distinct from medieval creations and from other contemporary European pieces, was only conceivable due to the wide diversity of cultures and exotic objects from far-away lands that merged in Lisbon, and overlapped with Italian Renaissance elements and Mannerist grammars characteristic of early-17th century Portuguese art.

It is also relevant to refer the close decorative relationship between this piece and contemporary tile productions, namely in relation to the grotesque ornaments, and other simpler popular motifs that reflected the naïve character of Portuguese ceramic painters of the early to mid-17th century, such as some tile borders and other freer ornamental compositions.

This piece is associated to a small extant group, identical in shape and decorated in similar blue and white motifs, such as an aquamanile formerly in the José Maria Jorge collection and later in the Mário Roque collection, and others in Portuguese and overseas museums. In this group we would also refer a polychrome example in the M.P. collection in Lisbon. Other extant mermaid or fish shaped aquamanilia, normally of polychrome decoration, can be dated to the same period and quite possibly, originate from one single pottery workshop.

A similar piece was exhibited at *Un Firmament de Porcelaines, de la Chine à l'Europe*, in the Musée National des Arts Asiatiques — Guimet in Paris (March – June 2019). ➤ TP





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