

SÃO ROQUE

Antiques & Art Gallery

Two-Handled Large Urn — Portuguese Faïence, Lisbon, 1630–1640



TWO-HANDLED LARGE URN

Portuguese faïence

Lisbon, 1630 – 1640

Height: 40.0 cm

C440

Provenance: Private collection, Lisbon
Eduardo Coelho Collection, Oporto
Vasco Valente Collection, Oporto

Exhibited at: 'Un Siècle en Blanc et Bleu, Les Arts du feu dans le Portugal du XVIIe siècle', Galerie Mendes, Paris, 2016

Imposing and rare wheel-thrown 17th century faïence urn of oval, bulbous profile with curving shoulder and well defined neck. The sophisticated and unusual shape is decorated in cobalt-blue pigment applied to a tin-white glaze background.

The decorative scheme, filling the whole surface, is dense, reflecting a *horror vacui* inherited from Islamic prototypes. However, the artist chose to depict the two human figures in a western manner albeit within a typically oriental landscape. On one side the elaborate depiction of a female figure with a fruit headdress, holding a large 'Horn of Plenty' or Cornucopia — symbolizing the Earth — on a ground of trees and blossoming branches, two hares shading under a bush and a Buddhist wheel by two birdcages, all the elements in perfect symbiosis.

On the opposing side another female figure, in a long skirt and tight waist long sleeved bodice with lace cuffs and ruff, sits on a terrace holding a bird, surrounded by plants and flowers, a pomegranate tree and a large flying bird of Paradise, suggesting the possibility that the figure portrays the noblewoman that commissioned the piece. However it is clearly noticeable that the costume is in an out of fashion style from an earlier period, and therefore it might instead represent an allegory to spring, probably copied from an existing contemporary engraving.

The two scenes are separated by vertical rectangular panels placed beneath the handles, decorated with grotesque mask ornaments in a field of scrolls on a cobalt-blue ground. The shoulder

is encircled by a wide band of daisies topped by a narrow band of filleted framed scrolls reaching up to the flaring lip.

The lower part of the urn is ringed by a band of lanceolate cartouches with palm leaves, inspired by the *ruyi* head patterns found on decorative Ming period pieces.

For most of the 16th and 17th centuries Europeans had attempted to replicate the imported glazed hard paste porcelain. Unable to unravel the manufacturing secrets for that desirable and precious material, European potters, namely the Portuguese, settled for the production of fine paste faïence pieces, which they decorated by adapting and reinterpreting the Ming porcelain decorative designs of deer, birds, flowers, fruits, figures or Buddhist symbols.

In the specific case of this urn it is possible to identify a combination of inspirational sources, which reveal a complex web of meanings. The Baroque period favoured the use of allegory and symbolic language propagated by illustrations and printed books, from which the artisans copied symbols to be decoded by the viewer, simultaneously turning them into a type of immaterial collective heritage. In this symbolic language, the Earth is portrayed by an abundance of flowers and fruits, translating the ephemerality of substance as well as the evanescence of things and of earthly pleasures.

In his 'Treaty of Iconology', Cesare Ripa uses them as symbolic attributes of senses, inasmuch as they allow us to savour, smell and





observe. Both flowers and fruits are symbolic of nature's beauty and creative power, as opposed to man-made, thus inspiring us to aim for the sublime and the divine. In this context, the female figure is placed in an idyllic setting with flowers, fruits and exotic flying birds, interacting with the bird that sits candidly on her hand, which in this context represents the spiritual, while the bird in flight inspires an escape from the earthly world that, on separating from earth, becomes almost ethereal.

The flowers surrounding the figure with exposed frontal or profiled corollae, allude to Hope, growing from deep inside the

earth but blossoming in Light, in an analogy to the Lost Paradise Garden, while the two hares taking cover under a tree, stand for symbols of fertility.

The ripe, naturally red coloured pomegranates allude to Resurrection and Hope, while the palms, Christian conventional iconographic models, refer to the Victory of Christ over death. ✓

