

# The Wilson Art Gallery & Museum

## Information Sheet



### Chinese Ceramics at The Wilson



The Wilson holds a large collection of ceramics from China, much of it from the collector Stanley Berley Smith. Collecting started soon after the museum opened in 1907 and in 1922 Berkeley Smith loaned over 800 pieces from his collection to the museum. Part of his collection came to the museum at his death in 1955. Berkeley Smith, a banker, was originally from Gloucester, and his father worked as a solicitor in Cheltenham. Berkeley Smith worked in India and what is now Pakistan all his life, and his

collection was put together in India. It includes ceramics from the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. He particularly liked the bold, multi-coloured wares of the Ming and Qing dynasties : 18<sup>th</sup> century 'ginger' jars became a distinctive part of the collection. Originally used for transporting spices such as ginger, they became a decorative feature in people's homes in Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Since 1955, the art gallery and museum has added pieces to its Chinese ceramics collection, concentrating on early ceramics such as Tang dynasty earthenware from the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, and 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary pieces.

#### Early ceramics



China started making pottery very early – possibly 20,000 years ago. It was used in the home and in burials extensively from the Neolithic, after 5000 BC. The earliest pieces in the collection are from the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). At that time, and through the Tang dynasty (613-960 AD), people were buried with everything they might need in the afterlife. Important people had a whole range of ceramic servants, animals and officials buried with them. This 7<sup>th</sup> century

earthenware head would have once had a body, and depicts a dignitary.

### **Song dynasty (960-1279)**



By the Song dynasty pottery had become an important art form in its own right. A stoneware with a green glaze (called celadon in the west) that had developed during the Tang continued to be popular. This slightly later example from the 14<sup>th</sup> century is decorated with carved imperial dragons. Simple shapes and subtle glazes were prized both at home and in a growing global market. The small stoneware tea bowl on display was made in Northern Fukien. The flecked pattern is created

with an iron glaze and is known as 'hare's fur'.

### **Blue and white**



Blue and white porcelain became popular in the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) and its popularity continues today. The cobalt for the blue colour probably came through trade with Iran, and is painted onto the pottery before the piece is glazed and fired. By this time Chinese ceramics were sought after worldwide – even as far away as Europe. Most porcelain was made in Jingdezhen, in the north eastern Jiangxi province. This large dish decorated with deer was made for export in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), when

porcelain was first being exported to Europe.

### **Qing dynasty (1644-1911)**



During the long-lasting Qing dynasty a range of new styles and colours were introduced to decorate porcelain. Chinese porcelain became immensely popular in Europe. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was a craze for all things Chinese. European ceramics manufacturers discovered how to make porcelain, but people still prized the more superior ceramics from China. Contact

with Europe also influenced China. This late 18<sup>th</sup> century teapot is in what's called the famille rose colour scheme, the pink is made with gold imported from Europe. In China the style is called fencai – foreign colours. Simple colours and shapes were also popular for China's home market, like this 18<sup>th</sup> century blue bottle.

### Chinese ceramics today



After the overthrow of the Emperor in 1911, Chinese ceramics continued in very similar styles to those of the past. After the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, much Chinese art took inspiration from fellow communist state Russia, showing Communist heroes and peasants working productively. However, in recent years there has been both a return to the old styles and also a new generation of contemporary artists working with ceramics. Clone baby, 2012, is part of a series by Xu Hongbo. He is exploring the relationship between the idea of cloning humans as an extreme outcome of the digital age, and the production methods of ceramic casting. He uses moulds based on four parts of a baby's body. Hongbo says: 'When the four parts are luted and randomly joined with slip, the pieces become smooth and look very 'natural'. Actually they are not natural at all. This is an expression of the alienation caused by technological excess.'

To find out more about the collections held by the museum contact:  
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