
Koopman Rare Art

Director's Choice - Timo Koopman **A Large Chinese Dragon Bowl**

To celebrate Year of the Dragon, I thought it would be the perfect time to start my weekly choice of object. The world will celebrate Chinese New Year on the 10th and 11th February. The most famous of the Chinese Zodiac animals, the Dragon is strong and independent and is a great leader, yet they seek support and reassurance from others.

We are proud to present this magnificent Chinese dragon punch bowl, which exemplifies extraordinary abilities in design and execution.



A Large Chinese Dragon Bowl
Shanghai, Late 19th Century
By DA JI 大吉 [cantonese TAI KUT]

Retailed by Luen Wo

Weight: 186 oz 5 dwt, 5797 g,

Diameter: 41.25 cm, 16.25 in

This fabulous piece is raised on four cast dragon feet, the bowl embossed and chased with six cloud dragons on stippled matted background amongst a cloud ridden sky. One dragon breathing water to create fog. The cast handles formed as whole dragons resting on their bifurcated tails. The bowl hallmarked underneath with Shanghai, Luen Wo, the artisan chopmark and quality mark 90.

Exhibited:

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, CA, Cat. No. DA-36-52

DA JI 大吉 [cantonese TAI KUT];

Da Ji was by far the most prolific workshop that supplied Luen Wo, they also supplied Wang Hing and six other Canton or Hong Kong-based retailers.

Luen Wo – (Lianhe) (retailer)

Luen Wo is recorded as being at, Guangzhou in the 1860s and one of the largest and earliest retailers. They were also located at Nanking Road Shanghai from the 1870s -1920s.



China has 2500 years of silversmithing history, and has always been rich in silver, basing its monetary system on this precious metal, most of which was mined internally in Yunnan and Sunshing. The country protected its great asset by limiting the export of silver and only permitting it in the form of coin, bullion, or manufactured wares. Its reserves were further bolstered by foreign trade with the west, and with America and Britain in particular, this trade was conducted in silver trade dollars.

There was a fashionable trend of chinoiserie in Europe during the seventeenth

and eighteenth centuries. These chinoiserie imports were highly appreciated and pursued by the royalty and nobility. At the time, handicrafts made in Europe demonstrated certain "Oriental" elements such as Chinese flowers, figures and architecture seen particularly in the artistic styles of Baroque and Rococo.

However, early Chinese Export Silver was incredibly rare, and it was only special commissions by Royal households, Ambassadors and nobility that one sees in the late 17th and early 18th century including Europe, India, and Arabia as well as to a select number of wealthy American merchant families, mostly on the eastern seaboard. The appeal of the exclusivity and exoticism must have been intoxicating.



The Canton system served as a means for China to control trade with the west within its own country by forming all trade on the Southern port of Canton (now Guangzhou). The policy arose in 1757 as response to a perceived political and commercial threat from abroad on the part of successive Chinese Emperors.

Many fortunes were made at this time through the China Trade. This system permitted local Hong merchants to govern and secure commercial trade with foreign merchants. They governed the trade of the main commodities such as tea, silk, sugar, and spice. However, it was the 'outside shopmen or merchants' in Canton that provided items for personal use and these, of course, included items made from silver.

Foreign companies and sea captains were attracted by the relatively low price of said silver items. The highly skilled labour of the Cantonese silversmith was so much cheaper than in the west that even with the additional duties and cost of transport, these purchases were still a very appealing proposition. The Hong merchants maintained an incredible and sumptuous style of living with silver very much in evidence. They presented their 'foreign friends' with many gifts from the many silversmiths that surrounded the compound, catering of course to the Western tastes. The almost royal status of these Hong merchants was certainly impressionable and this influence of Oriental luxury on the merchant and sea captains passed on when they returned home in the many trappings, they filled their houses with to display their newfound wealth.

The early clipper sail boats also only had seasonal access to the ports followed by long and precarious journeys to their final destination. This meant a year-round trip for the merchant with lengthy periods of waiting patiently for the right conditions to sail. Part of that time was certainly spent visiting the most fashionable retail establishments cleverly situated around the compounds. Many competitions also were organised to pass the time including sailing, rowing, and later horse racing. These all would have had cause for their individual silver prizes.



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