

Margaret Medley

## A Chinese blue and white dragon *kendi*

The recently acquired notable Chinese blue and white *kendi* represents a fairly late stage in the development of this distinctively Southeast Asian water vessel (Fig. 1 and cover)<sup>1</sup>. The earliest examples made by the Chinese go back to the fourteenth century and were apparently produced in Ching-tê Chên in Kiangsi, and at Tê-hua in Fukien, those from the latter kiln being unusual in having a rather wide neck. The Ching-tê Chên type had the narrow neck with small flanged mouth similar to those normally found in Southeast Asia and Indonesia at that time, although the spout was not of the pronounced mammiform kind more commonly found. These Ching-tê Chên specimens seem, as far as the record is known, to have consisted only of the highest quality underglaze red decorated pieces, represented by six surviving examples, all of them decorated with floral sprays or scrolls<sup>2</sup>. After the end of the fourteenth century there seems to have been a break in the trade in this form of vessel, and it does not re-appear until the end of the fifteenth century. During the following century the forms became more varied, and it is to the latter part of the century that the new handsome piece in the Rijksmuseum belongs. By this time the Tê-hua kilns in Fukien had undergone considerable development and the type of *kendi* made there was given up by the potters as they concentrated on the figures which were to make the kilns famous. The only

kilns in southern Fukien which now began to make the *kendi* shape were those associated with the name Swatow. Sullivan suggests that the potters had difficulty with the shape, which he supposes accounts for the rather squat profile of the example in the Museum Pusat in Jakarta, but in fact other known specimens indicate that there was no problem in controlling the profile<sup>3</sup>.

What is much more interesting is the sudden appearance in the Wan-li period of a range of animals, birds and reptiles alongside the relatively normal shapes with mammiform spouts then being produced at Ching-tê Chên, and perhaps also at other kilns in the vicinity. The toad and the elephant seem to have been the most popular, and these occur only in blue and white, and in the main are thin bodied and rather light in weight in relation to size, and indeed are very similar in character to Kraakporselein in suffering from the same glaze fault, with the glaze cracking off on any sharp edge. The decoration of the toads is somewhat whimsical, the back of the creature being painted with prunus florets on a finely spotted ground of pale blue. From the centre of the back rises the filling neck, roughly equal in height to the body at this point<sup>4</sup>. It may be round or hexagonal, and is usually painted with a bird on a prunus branch or with a small landscape scene. The elephant, a most unlikely looking creature, is normally treated in an abbreviated manner being composed only of body and

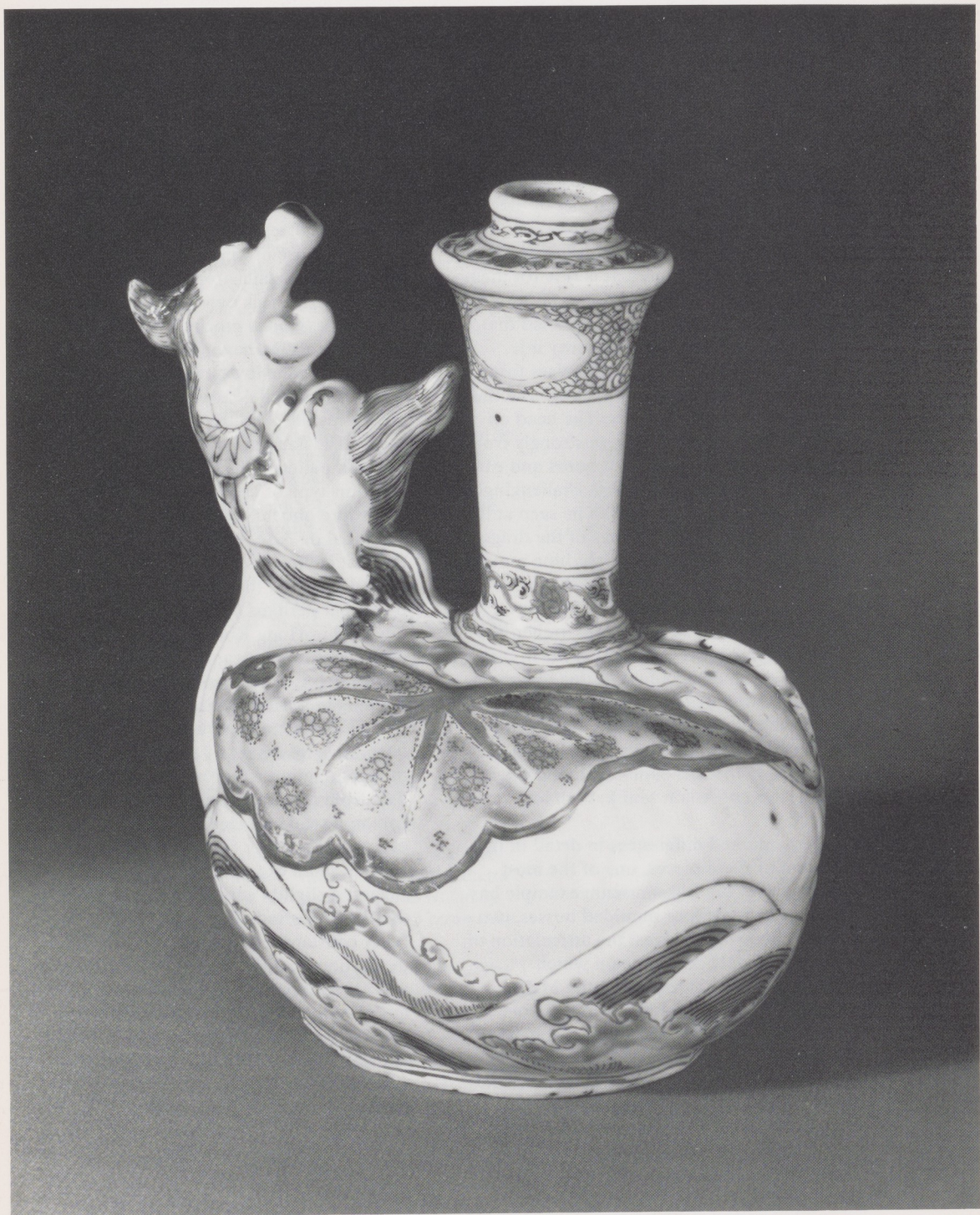


*Fig. 1. Dragon kendi, porcelain decorated in underglaze blue, late 16th century. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.*





Fig. 2. Dragon kendi, porcelain with polychrome decoration, late 16th century. Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, London.





head, with the tusks forming the spout with the trunk hanging weakly down between. The only concession to decoration is the fringed howdah cloth, which has small panels of landscapes or plants<sup>5</sup>.

Very different in character and much more impressive are the powerful, sturdily made dragon and phoenix types. These are altogether more gorgeous than any of the others. Most are decorated in brilliant polychrome as is indeed appropriate to the most splendid of creatures. It is rare for them to be painted in blue only like the Rijksmuseum piece. It should be noted that when the dragon is used in this way it is always the winged variety, and it rises from the waters, which break in waves around the lower part of the coiled body. The head on the long writhing neck emerges strongly from the breaking waves, and, with horns and ears laid well back, the snout points challengingly to heaven. The spout itself is to be seen at the tip of the lower jaw. The wings of the dragon are speckled dark blue on a light blue ground with finely outlined white ribs. What is unusual is the scalloping all around the edges. This makes the wings look rather like limp and dying lotus leaves. There is in fact a very general tendency towards this treatment also in the other examples such as the polychrome one in the David Foundation, London (Fig. 2)<sup>6</sup>, and in the plain blue and white ones in the Museum Pusat<sup>7</sup> and the in the collection of Adam Malik, both in Jakarta<sup>8</sup>.

There are marked differences in detail in the treatment of these pieces, one of the most striking is that the Rijksmuseum example has what appear to be four moulded bosses, two on each side which suggest the articulation of the legs. The only other one on which something similar is seen is on the Malik collection specimen, but here on the front section the whole concept is transformed quite ludicrously into a fish's tail, as though a fish were plunging back and down under into the water below the emerging dragon. Perhaps the craftsman was intending to produce a fish-dragon leaping through the dragon gate, but this does not then account for the wings.

The painting of the dragon scales is another notable difference between the pieces in the series. The David example has moulded unpainted scales, but the others are elaborately painted. The modelling of the heads also differs, the David Foundation and Museum Pusat pieces being closer to each other than to the Rijksmuseum one, which has a head almost identical with that in the Malik Collection. These two are distinguished by the careful use of differing tones of blue to pick out the details around the eyes and whiskers. The neck by which the Rijksmuseum vessel was filled is much more elaborate than is usual, the area having been divided into three bands, the lowest filled with pendant leaves, the middle one with diaper patterns in shaped panels, and the top one with a floral scroll. The flanged lip is decorated with chevron pattern. The only other example with this type of chevron band is the blue and white phoenix *kendi* in the Museo Nacional de Arte Antigua in Lisbon, a piece of great charm, also with more elaborate neck decoration than is usual. A comparable piece, but perhaps a little earlier in date, is one sold in Hong Kong in 1975<sup>9</sup>. This form of lip does not appear to be the traditional one, which is characterized by a rather small opening in a flattened top surface. It is a feature which together with the rather more decorative treatment of the neck suggests that the group might either be of slightly different date from the others and from the more common toad and elephant type, or that they came from another factory. Certainly the Rijksmuseum example has features which suggest a slightly earlier date, though still in the Wan-li period. The shaped panels are a fairly constant element in Chia-ching decoration, and the more sturdy build of this and other dragon and phoenix specimens might support this, but more evidence is necessary. What is abundantly clear is that the whole group of dragon and phoenix *kendi* were made for the upper end of the market, and must have been much sought after in terms of both novelty and quality.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Inv. No. R.A.K. 1981-1; H. 22.4 cm. Cat. *The animal in Chinese art*, 19 June-19 July, 1968, The Art Council Gallery, London, Pl. 3, E 48.
- <sup>2</sup> Six late fourteenth century *kendi* are recorded at present. Two are in the Victoria and Albert Museum, C132. 1928 and C54. 1937 illustrated in *Oriental Ceramics: The World's Great Collections*, Vol. 6, fig. 140 and Plate 42 respectively; one in the Musée Guimet, Grandidier Collection, G4700, also illustrated in the above work, Vol. 8, Plate 22. The Garner collection example is illustrated in *Sekai Tōji Zenshū* 1976, Vol. 14, Plate 138. This piece was later sold at Sotheby's Hong Kong on 18th May, 1982. The Kunstindustrimuseum in Copenhagen has a rather dark brownish red painted example, B152/1936, illustrated by D. Lion-Goldschmidt in *Ming Porcelain*, London, 1978, Plate 23. And the sixth, in the Dreyfus Collection, is illustrated by M. Medley in *Yüan Porcelain and Stoneware*, London, 1974, Plate 56A.
- <sup>3</sup> M. Sullivan, 'Kendi', *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America* 11 (1957), p. 47.
- <sup>4</sup> Margaret Medley, *Illustrated Catalogue of Porcelains decorated in underglaze blue and copper red in the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art*, Section 3, London, 1963, No. A669. Comparable (but damaged) pieces in the Rijksmuseum, see *The Ceramic Load of the 'Witte Leeuw'*, Amsterdam, 1982, p. 133 and *Nederlandse Rijksmuseum in 1980*, Vol. 102, 's-Gravenhage, 1981, p. 29, Fig. 30.
- <sup>5</sup> Medley, *op.cit.* (Note 4). No. A665.
- <sup>6</sup> Idem, *Illustrated Catalogue of Ming Polychrome Ware in the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art*, Section 5, London, 1966, No. A757.
- <sup>7</sup> *Oriental Ceramics: The World's Great Collections*, Vol. 3, fig. 218, From Calela, Halmahera Island, Maluku, No. 3552, also in E.W. Orsoy de Flines, *Gids voor de Keramische Verzameling*, Batavia, 1949, Pl. 45.
- <sup>8</sup> Sumarah Adhyatman, *Antique Ceramics found in Indonesia, Various uses and origins*, Jakarta, 1981, No. 140, p. 262.
- <sup>9</sup> Sotheby Parke Bernet, Hong Kong, 17th November 1975, Lot 192, illustrated in colour.