

BLUE AND WHITE FACETED PORCELAIN BOTTLE WITH BAMBOO DESIGN

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Of the rich variety of fine art of the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), porcelain is said to best represent the culture of that time. Although the history of pottery, which began with humans baking clay to make sturdy earthenware vessels, stretches back thousands of years, it is no more than a dozen centuries that glazed ceramics fired at high temperatures came into general use.

Koreans used porcelain, including celadon-glazed wares, from the early days of the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392) and thus came to enjoy a tradition of fine ceramics some 700-800 years before Japan and Europe, at least in terms of the regular production of porcelain. Goryeo celadon is renowned worldwide for its diverse array of decorations under a clear jade-colored glaze, while the Joseon Dynasty's pure white porcelain enhanced by underglaze cobalt designs is also revered for its characteristics that are clearly distinct from Chinese and Japanese porcelain.

Although the white porcelain tradition began more than a thousand years ago in Korea, it was only about 600 years ago during the Joseon period that it came into full bloom. A porcelain culture of unique tradition was able to flourish during Joseon due in large part to its political, social and economic situation; however, one of the most significant aspects of

understanding the nature of Joseon porcelain is that most of the white porcelain was produced for royal use at designated kilns under a highly systematized production process. As a result, most of the porcelain wares produced during this period were of exceptionally high quality.

The royal wares were produced in the area that is now Gwangju, Gyeonggi-do province. Kilns specializing in the manufacture of porcelain to be used by the royal household and court were established in the area from the early Joseon period, with some 380 artisans working from spring to autumn under the supervision of government officials. This system continued throughout the dynasty. Nearby trees were used to fuel the kilns. When the surrounding woods were depleted, which usually took about ten years, the kiln was moved to a new location with an ample supply of wood, which also enabled the forests at former sites to be restored. Because kilns were relocated regularly throughout the Joseon era, there are numerous sites of royal kilns in the Gwangju area, with more than 500 sites identified through archaeological excavations. It is unusual indeed to have so many royal kilns clustered in one area over 500 years.

Naturally, the date that each kiln was operational varied while their products differed in style, color and decoration. The Blue and White Faceted Porcelain

Bottle with Bamboo Design introduced here was created at a royal kiln in Geumsa-ri, Gwangju, as confirmed by porcelain shards found there that are identical in style, decoration and glaze. There were royal kilns in the Geumsa-ri area that were in operation from 1726 to 1751, the sites of a dozen kilns are still evident today. The royal wares produced here during the "Geumsa-ri period," which are known as Geumsa-ri porcelain, represent the finest porcelain of the late Joseon period (1600-1910).

With the Blue and White Faceted Porcelain Bottle with Bamboo Design being one of the most exceptional examples of Geumsa-ri porcelain, it has been designated a national treasure. It is a true masterpiece that embodies an elegance and quality which distinguish the royal wares of this period from those of other periods. In all likelihood used as a wine bottle, it has eight faces cleanly cut with bold sweeps from the bottom up to the neck. The style of cutting six or eight facets into the surface, which originated in Geumsa-ri, significantly influenced porcelain decoration, remaining a popular style in later periods.

A bold cobalt line symbolizing the ground runs horizontally around the bottle near the bottom, from which bamboo stalks spring forth in masterly brushwork that is more likely to be seen in an ink painting than a surface decoration. The

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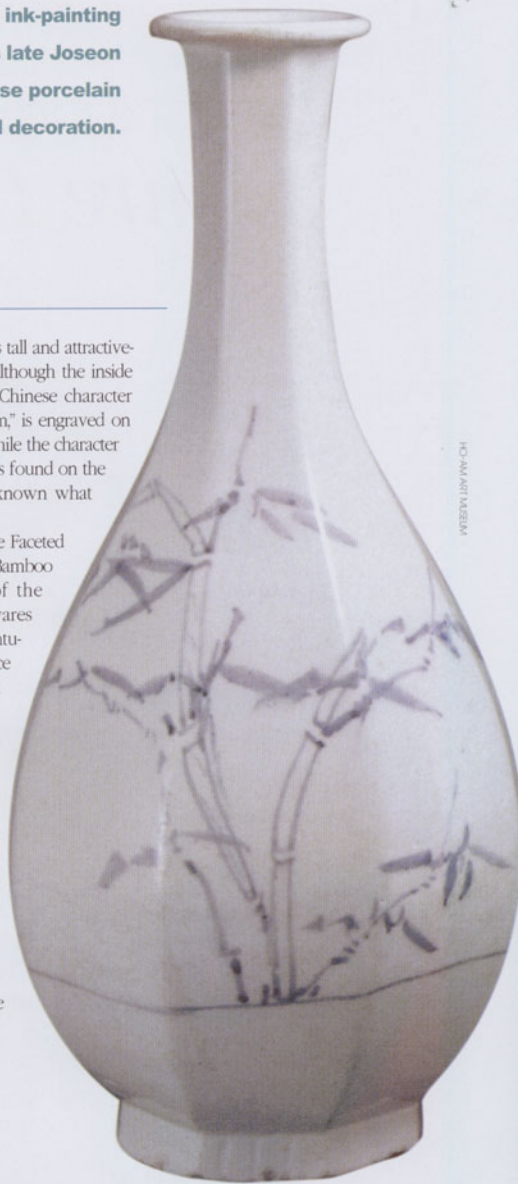
painting was actually done by a professional court artist retained to render paintings for the royal household. Decorations for royal ceramics were all created by such painters and were naturally influenced by contemporary painting styles. The use of symbolic motifs such as bamboo and simple rendering that left a good amount of open space is a decoration style that first appeared in Geumsa-ri. This minimal, symbolic decoration of an ink-painting style is a unique feature that differentiates late Joseon porcelain from the 18th century Chinese porcelain characterized by lavish, colorful decoration.

Another feature that enhances the Blue and White Faceted Porcelain Bottle with Bamboo Design is the understated elegance of its white glaze. The whiteness of Joseon white porcelain is the combined result of the clay and the glaze that varies subtly by kiln and the year of its production. The Geumsa-ri porcelain is marked by a pure whiteness that, like feathery snow, exudes a comforting feeling of abundance. It is this whiteness that creates a vivid contrast with the underglaze blue decoration while also highlighting the sense of form in plain white wares, as exemplified by the unique "moon jars" for which Geumsa-ri is famed. The "moon jars" are so named because of their ultra-whiteness and voluptuous roundness reminiscent of a full moon. The subtle whiteness of the Blue and White Faceted Porcelain Bottle with Bamboo Design is also representative of Geumsa-ri porcelain.

In keeping with its handsome body,

the foot of the bottle is tall and attractively cut in an octagon, although the inside is a neat circle. The Chinese character *cheon*, meaning "stream," is engraved on one side of the foot while the character *jeong*, meaning "well," is found on the bottom, but it is not known what the characters signify.

The Blue and White Faceted Porcelain Bottle with Bamboo Design is just one of the countless porcelain wares created in the 18th century, but it is a masterpiece that tells much about the history and characteristics of the royal wares of the Joseon period. It is a truly exceptional work of art that reflects the aesthetics of restrained beauty which differentiate Joseon porcelain from the porcelain of Japan and China that tend to be more ornate. ♦



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Blue and White Faceted Porcelain Bottle with Bamboo Design, Joseon Dynasty, 18th Century, Height: 40.6 centimeters, Diameter of mouth: 7.6 centimeters, Diameter of base: 11.5 centimeters, National Treasure No. 258, Ho-Am Art Museum