

**Lot 102**

**A Rare Doucai Square Tea Caddy**

**Qing Dynasty**

**Porcelain**

**Height: 24 cm**



**Fig 1. Lot 102 next to a European tea caddy**

The present tea caddy, with its underglaze color palette of doucai enamels and its elaborate scenery depicting blossoming gnarled prunus branches beside sprigs of bamboo and rocky outcrops, is representative of porcelains that were created during the late 17th to early 18th centuries of the Qing Dynasty. It was also around this period that tea was introduced into Europe. At the time, it was considered an extremely expensive import, necessitating that it be kept under lock and key. As its popularity spread, storage containers for tea also grew in expense, evolving from simple locked boxes to elaborate decorative objects that held court amongst the most important pieces of a room's furnishings. Figure 1 shows lot 102 alongside an 18th-century silver tea caddy from Belgium in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York. While the two mediums are greatly different, the form and function remain the same.



**Fig 2. Prunus Tree with Rocks and Bamboo, Wang Jiyuan, Republic Period**

The decoration of lot 102 depicts blossoming gnarled prunus branches besides bamboo and rocks. As illustrated in the scroll painting in figure 2 from the St. Louis Museum, prunus and bamboo have long been favorite subjects of Chinese poets and painters. Both plants can endure the harsh winter and often life-threatening conditions brought on by extreme weather. The prunus is the first to awaken from winter around the time of Chinese New Year, with blossoms bursting forth on branches bare of leaves, issuing a subtle fragrance predicting the onset of spring, and announcing the start of the new life cycle. The bamboo, meanwhile, is evergreen throughout the bleak winter, a rare sight of hope in the otherwise desolate landscape of defoliated flora. Both plants are symbols of fortitude in the face of adversity and have been admired by Chinese poets and painters for centuries. The rocks, which may be symbolic of many different forms, remain steadfast and unchanging throughout time.



**Fig 3. Doucai glaze with underglaze blue outlines and overglaze enamels**

The doucai color palette of lot 102 was both a difficult and expensive technique to produce. After potting and drying each vessel, a fine underglaze cobalt blue outline was painted onto the unfired body. As the cobalt immediately soaked into the unfired clay, no mistakes could be rectified. Each vessel was then given a transparent glaze and fired. After the initial firing and cooling, overglaze enamels had to be carefully applied within the underglaze blue outlines, and then each vessel had to be fired again at a lower temperature. As each firing could produce a number of failures, and with rectangular vessels more susceptible to warping and splitting in the kiln, it was an expensive undertaking to create a vessel like the current lot that maintained a high set of standards.



**Fig 4. Kangxi & Yongzheng period Imperial doucai porcelains**

Porcelains with similar imagery can be seen on known Imperial wares dated to the Kangxi and Yongzheng reigns, such as the rectangular box (unmarked) and flower vessel above offered by Christie's in figure 4. While the doucai technique was invented at the Imperial kilns during the Ming dynasty, it wasn't until the Yongzheng period, with advances in glazes and firing techniques, that we really began to see a resurgence of this type of ware. This knowledge, coupled with related pieces bearing similar decoration, provides a sound basis for placing lot 102 within the Kangxi to Yongzheng periods.



**Fig 5. Kangxi period famille verte tea caddies**

This dating is further substantiated by a known pair of rectangular tea caddies shown in figure 5 with famille verte decoration dated from 1661 to 1722. Given that the majority of tea caddies that we encounter in this form were clearly intended for export and painted with non-traditional imagery, we must conclude that the current lot was part of a small commission, probably for a member of the nobility, limited in size by the great expense of manufacture and intended patron.

Tea Caddy. Wikipedia. Retrieved February 21, 2023, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea\\_caddy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea_caddy)

Pair of Chinese Famille Verte Tea Caddies. British Antique Dealers' Association. Retrieved February 21, 2023, from <https://www.bada.org/object/pair-chinese-famille-verte-tea-caddies-kangxi-1662-1722>

Tea Caddy. The MET. Retrieved February 21, 2023, from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/200123>

Fragrant and Fresh, Resolute and Steadfast: Prunus Tree with Bamboo and Rocks. Saint Louis Art Museum. Retrieved February 21, 2023, from <https://www.slam.org/collection/objects/36341/>

Dish with Lotus Pond. The MET. Retrieved February 21, 2023, from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/42303>

A Doucai 'Bird and Flower' Rectangular Box and Cover RECTANGULAR BOX AND COVER. Christie's. Retrieved February 21, 2023, from <https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-6210127>

A Small Doucai Vase. Christie's. Retrieved February 21, 2023, from <https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-5477817>