

Lot 50

AN EXTREMELY RARE PAIR OF 'CONTINUOUS LANDSCAPE' CONNECTED JADE PLAQUES  
CHINA

18TH TO 19TH CENTURY

NEPHRITE

5.9 cm x 4.2 cm (each)



Fig 1. Detail of both plaques in lot 50

The current lot, shown in figure 1, exemplifies the Imperial style of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, whereby the Qianlong Emperor advocated that jade panels should carry the spirit of literati landscape paintings by famous old masters. While the carvings of the current plaques apply this principle, they take it a step further with the use of a continuous landscape across two plaques, giving the feeling of looking at a single unified object.



**Fig 2. Detail of a painting by Wu Zhen of Fisherman, Yuan Dynasty circa 1341**

The painting in figure 2 is a representation of the type of literati landscape that was appreciated and collected by scholars, nobility, and emperors during the later Ming and Qing dynasties. It is part of a painting tradition in China that dates as far back as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Notice the similar nature of the craggy tree on the left and the high peak of the mountain on the right with those depicted in lot 50.



**Fig 3. A Kangxi period rouleau vase from Lai Loy & Son Ltd., Hong Kong**

Figure 3 shows an underglaze blue and white vase with a landscape scene dating from the Kangxi reign. During this period, we start to see the prevalence of this type of imagery expand from scholarly paintings to other forms of artwork. We can attribute this to the Kangxi Emperor's fondness for the varying landscapes surrounding the Chengde Summer Palace, a 560-hectare park-like residence where he spent much of his time.



**Fig 4. The Chengde Summer Palace in 1875**

The Kangxi Emperor even commissioned a book, entitled 'Thirty-Six Views: The Kangxi Emperor's Mountain Estate in Poetry and Prints,' with paintings of the palace's landscapes to celebrate the completion of the palace around his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. This publication introduced copperplate engraving to China and the concept of a Chinese garden to Europe. There is no doubt that the desire of the Qianlong Emperor to depict this type of scenery in the contemporary art of his period was out of his reverence for and closeness to his grandfather, the Kangxi Emperor.



**Fig 5. A pair of Qianlong period jade plaques from the collection of Stephen Junkunc, III**

The technique utilized in lot 50 is more commonly seen in objects like the 18<sup>th</sup>-century celadon jade table screens shown in figure 5. Such imagery on small pendants is rarely encountered due to the artistic skill required to work such small objects and the valuable nature of white nephrite as a raw

material. This type of work is characteristic of palace workshop artisans. Notice the similarities in the overall shape of the much larger table screens compared with the current lot. The small size of the pendants limits the depth and openwork of the carving but should not be a factor in judging their quality or value. This alone can be measured by their material.



**Fig 6. Katharine Carl, The Empress Dowager, Cixi, 1903**

Figure 6 shows a painting of the Empress Dowager during the reign of the Guangxu Emperor in 1903. She is depicted wearing a pair of simple green jade bangles, which are recorded as being purchased for 420,000 taels of silver.



**Fig 7. Raw jade boulders**

We can only imagine the effort and financial requirement necessary to create and obtain a pair of detailed pendants from nephrite of such a pure white color, but surely the sum must have been significant. The intended use is also unknown, but one can further imagine the pair of plaques, subtly demonstrating the forces of balance and harmony, would've been intended as a special Imperial gift, perhaps for a noble or Imperial wedding, carrying with them the symbol of a couple's interdependence and the importance that jade has held in China over the millennia. Finally, we must wonder if the image depicted on lot 50 represents one of the 'views of heaven' envisioned by the Kangxi Emperor from the landscape around the palace at Chengde and revered throughout the Qing Dynasty.

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