LOT 2601
AN OUTSTANDING 'GUAN' MALLET VASE
SOUTHERN SONG DYNASTY

THIS IS A PREMIUM LOT. CLIENTS WHO WISH TO BID ON PREMIUM LOTS ARE REQUESTED TO COMPLETE THE PREMIUM LOT PRE-REGISTRATION 3 WORKING DAYS PRIOR TO THE SALE.

singularly beautiful, the broad swelling cylindrical body rising from a shallow recessed base to an angled shoulder, sweeping up to a tall gently tapering neck with a short everted
dished rim, veiled in an exquisitely rich and silky caesium coloured glaze thinning at the shoulders and around the foot, suffused with random long golden threads of cracklure swirling around the neck, carved through the glaze on the base with the characters Yujin Yuan, with traces of vermilion pigment in the grooves, the mouth and footrim now bound with gold mounts

22.5CM., 8 7/8 IN.

ESTIMATE Estimate Upon Request
Lot Sold: 67,527,500 HKD

PROVENANCE
Acquired in Kansai, Japan, before World War II.

EXHIBITED

CATALOGUE NOTE
The Vase of Jade Stream Garden:
An Imperial Vessel of the Southern Song Dynasty
Regina Krahl
In beauty, rarity and historical importance, this vase ranks among the greatest treasures of Chinese ceramics. In its simplicity of form and minimalist approach to decoration, it could hardly be more contemporary. Yet it was made in China some eight hundred years ago by the official kilns of Hangzhou, possibly for the Gaozong Emperor (r. 1127-62), the first emperor of the Southern Song period (1127-1279).

Guan yao, the fabled ‘official ware’ of the Southern Song court is perhaps the most desirable and probably the most copied of all types of Chinese ceramics. Of the best Song guan ware no two vessels are alike, since glaze colour and crackle pattern vary from piece to piece, the unpredictable outcome being part of its attraction. The lush glaze of the present vase with its smooth pleasing texture, luminous bluish tint and delicate large-scale crackle can undoubtedly be called one of the kilns’ outstanding successes. In addition, this vase bears on the base an incised identification of its former location at the Southern Song Imperial court - tangible evidence of its erstwhile Imperial ownership as is otherwise virtually impossible to find.

Guan ware embodies the epitome of avant-garde taste in Chinese ceramics. The effect of artless simplicity that was so highly coveted, in fact required from the potters immense technical know-how and the utmost care in its application. The well-proportioned form of the present piece emanates maturity and a superb balance. With its thin, long neck it necessitated complex construction in parts. According the Nigel Wood, “... fine-quality Guan wares represent one of the most sophisticated combinations of glaze and clay in the history of Chinese ceramics.”¹ This exquisite, rich milky glaze was achieved through gradual application of multiple layers and successive firings, and its attractive crackle was provoked by a well-controlled cooling process after the last firing, which required the highest temperature. Despite the expertise of the Song craftsmen, a satisfactory outcome such as seen here was certainly a great exception. And although this cracked bluish-green ware became one of China's most admired ceramic styles and inspired imitations ever since, the style and finesse seen in this Song example were never equalled again at any later period.

Guan ware is mentioned and lauded already in contemporary texts of the Southern Song period. Two different Song authors record the probably earliest literary reference to it in very similar words². One of them, Gu Wenjian writes in Fuxuan zalu [Miscellaneous Records from Where the Sun is Warming My Back] (quoted after Ts'ai Ho-pi³):
The present administration judged the white porcelain of Dingzhou unfit for use, and thus ordered (the kilns in) Ruzhou to produce celadon ware. Thereafter the kilns in Tangzhou in Hebei, Dengzhou and Yaozhou all followed this order. Ru ware is the finest of them all, whereas the materials from the Longquan district kiln of Chuzhou in Jiangnan are somewhat coarse and thick. In the Xuanzheng period (1111-1125), a kiln was established in the capital itself [i.e. Kaifeng in Henan], to fire porcelain, called Guan ware. After the movement of the capital across the river [to Hangzhou] (i.e. the beginning of the Southern Song in 1127), a certain Shao Chengzhang was put in charge of production in the Rear Garden, which came to be called Shao's Bureau, and which adopted the system that had been used in the old capital. A kiln was established in Xiuneisi to make celadon ware, called Inner ware (nei yao) and made by use of refined-clay moulds, creating an extremely exquisite effect. The color is clear and transparent, and greatly treasured by the present generation. Later a new kiln was set up in Jiaotanxia, but its products were a far cry from those of the old kiln. Other wares such as Wuni ware, Yuyao ware and Xu ware do not compare with Guan ware.

According to this text, Xiuneisi, the Palace Maintenance Office, set up a kiln in the new capital, Hangzhou, to produce wares modelled on the official ware of the Northern Song (960-1127). Somewhat later, another kiln at Hangzhou produced a similar but lesser ware. Although this report is not without errors (concerning, for example, the name of Shao Chengzhang8), its basic message appears now supported by archaeological research.

Two different kiln sites have been explored at Hangzhou, one at Wuguishan, south of the former Imperial city; the other at Laohudong on the site formerly occupied by the Imperial city5. Because of their locations and the different qualities of the sherds recovered, the Wuguishan kiln has been interpreted as the (lesser) Jiaotanxia kiln, the Laohudong kiln as the exalted Xiuneisi manufactory.

The Ru kilns, discovered at Baofeng in Henan province, had long been considered the only kilns of the Northern Song that produced for the court6. More recently, however, the reference in the above text to another Northern Song guan kiln has also been corroborated by the discovery of a kiln at Zhanggongxiang in Ruzhou, Henan province, and the identification of at least one extant example of this ware7. Since no other examples of this Northern 'official' ware seem to exist, the term guan ('official') tends, however, to be used solely for the Southern pieces.

Vessels comparable in quality to the present vase were probably always rare. Today not much more than a dozen vases are preserved worldwide, which are in the same class, virtually all in Museum collections: five in Taipei, two in Beijing, five in Japan, two in the UK and one in the US. The five comparable pieces in the National Palace Museum, Taiwan are all in the shape of archaic bronzes or jades: a vase in form of a bronze zun with metal-bound rim (Fig.1); a massive vase in form of a bronze hu with tubular handles; smaller hu of similar form; a vase in form of a bronze fang hu, also with tubular handles; and a vase in form of a jade cong8.

The two vases of similar quality in the Palace Museum, Beijing, include one in form of a bronze hu with pierced foot (Fig.2), and a pear-shaped vase9.

Among the guan vases in foreign collections are to mention: a large vase or jar in the MOA Museum of Art, Shizuoka10; a cong-shaped vase in the Tokyo National Museum11; a hu-shaped piece in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.12; a meiping in the British Museum, London13; and the famous slender pear-shaped vase in the Percival David Foundation, London (Fig.3)14.

Only three items of comparable quality have ever appeared at auction, today all in Japan: an octagonal bottle from the collections of F. C. Harrison, Sir A. Daniel Hall, Robert C. Bruce, later in the Ataka collection and today in the Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Osaka, was sold in our London rooms, 1 July 1943, lot 70 and again 12 May 1953, lot 60 (Fig.4)15; another from the collection of John Henry Levy was sold in our London rooms, 8 July 1975, lot 6816; and a fang hu with tubular handles from the collection of Mrs. Alfred Clark was sold in our London rooms, 25 March 1975, lot 10117.

It is more difficult to link the present vase and these related examples to the kiln finds. In quality and beauty they do not seem to be matched by any of the fragments found at the supposed Xiuneisi kiln at Laohudong. It is still too early to say whether such outstanding examples were made there, but have not turned up at the excavation site, since nothing reaching this quality would ever have been discarded; or else, whether they may have been made at yet
another, superior and perhaps smaller kiln in Hangzhou, which may have been active for a shorter period and has not yet been discovered.

Guan ware was copied already in its own time by the Longquan kilns in Zhejiang province, and ever since has inspired a vast production of crackled wares, which still continues today. Many Ming dynasty (1368-1644) writers have evoked the fame of Southern Song guan ware and the most important copies were made at the Imperial kilns of Jingdezhen in Jiangxi province, both in the Xuande period (1426-35) and in the Chenghua reign (1465-87)\textsuperscript{18}. In the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), the Yongzheng Emperor (r.1723-35) sent originals from the Imperial collection to the Jingdezhen kilns as models to copy. The Qianlong Emperor (r.1736-95), who was a particularly keen collector, received a large number of tribute pieces, which entered the Imperial collection, were accepted as genuine guan wares and sometimes even provided with his own inscriptions. These tributes to the Qing court and the Qianlong Emperor's inscriptions have for a long time blurred our vision of the true identity of Southern Song guan ware. Only recently, later copies among them have been identified as such. The National Palace Museum exhibition in 1989, for example, contained 143 items of so-called guan ware, including thirty vases, of which only four were considered to be genuine Southern Song guan wares\textsuperscript{19}.

The present vase clearly illustrates the dependence of the Southern Song production on its Northern prototypes. The simple mallet shape represents an innovation of the Song dynasty, but has a firm place in the evolution of 'official' wares from the Northern to the Southern Song. For a piece of Southern Song guan ware, the piece is unique in shape; but it has direct predecessors in three Ru ware bottles: one of them excavated from the Ru kiln site in Baofeng, see the exhibition catalogue Taipei, 2006, no.23; and two others preserved in the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, both with cut-down rim, ibid., cat.nos 24 and 25 (Fig.5)\textsuperscript{20}. The Northern Song 'official' kiln at Zhanggongxiang also created a related shape\textsuperscript{21}. Its direct modelling on the fabled Imperial products of the North suggests that it represents one of the early products of Southern Song guan ware, done for the Gaozong Emperor, for whom the memory of the lost past was still vivid.

Due to the shortage of fine ceramics at the beginning of the Southern Song, when the Gaozong Emperor established his new head-quarters in Hangzhou, the wares of the North were still greatly appreciated. High officials, such as Zhang Jun (1096-1164), are recorded to have offered pieces of Ru ware as tribute to the court so as to gain the favour of the Gaozong Emperor\textsuperscript{22}.

One of the Ru vases of this shape in Taiwan (Fig.5) in fact bears on the base an inscription suggesting its presence at the Southern Song court. Besides a finely engraved inscription of a poem by the Qianlong Emperor, it shows two larger characters reading feng hua, which have been more coarsely scratched through the glaze and bear traces of cinnabar. These characters, which are also known from other Ru pieces as well as some Ding, Jun and Ge wares, have been identified in Qianlong's inscription as reference to the Fenghua Hall, the residence of the Gaozong Emperor's highest-ranking concubine, surnamed Liu, adjacent to Deshou Hall, the residence of the Emperor himself\textsuperscript{23}. They might therefore attest to the piece thus inscribed to have been part of the accoutrements of the Southern Song court.

It has long been debated whether these and similar inscriptions, which are equally scratched into the glaze after firing, might indeed have been applied during the Southern Song period, or whether some of them might have been added by later connoisseurs. Although some of the feng hua inscriptions, namely those written in a more elegant style, are by some experts believed to be later additions, the more roughly scratched ones which are similarly inscribed as some other place names on Ding ware fragments, are considered genuine\textsuperscript{24}. This view is further supported by the publication of the base fragments of seven guan ware vessels discovered during the past thirty years in Hangzhou itself, which are similarly inscribed with the names of Imperial Residences and Palace Gardens of Hangzhou and confirm the use of pieces marked in this way at the Southern Song Imperial court\textsuperscript{25}. The Hangzhou sherds include references to the Palace Park (nei yuan) (Fig.6), to some unidentified park (yuan), to the Deshou Hall and its garden (yuan de shou and de shou hou yuan, jia) (Fig.7), where the Gaozong Emperor died in 1187, as well as to the Kunningdian, the Hall of the Empress Dowager (kun ...and ...ning dian as well as tai hou ...). They are believed to date from the period between 1138 and 1174 to 1189, when the capital was reconstructed in the south, but porcelains from
the official kilns were still rare and special, and were therefore identified with their place of use. The inscription on the base of the present vessel reads yu jin yuan. The deftly incised characters, whose awkwardness reflects the difficulty to cut through the hard material, are scratched into the glaze in similar unevenly spaced, large-scale characters as those on the fragments above. The inscription suggests that the vase formed part of the Gaozong Emperor’s collection in Hangzhou. The three characters refer to one of Hangzhou’s Imperial Parks, Yu Jin Yuan or Yu Jin Yu Yuan, ‘Jade Stream (Imperial) Garden’, which had been built by the Gaozong Emperor in the 17th year of the Shaoxing period, that is, in AD 1147, modelled on an Imperial Park of the same name in the former Northern Song capital, Kaifeng in Henan. Located four miles (li) to the south of the Jiahui Gate of the walled Imperial city of Lin’nan (modern Hangzhou), it was situated at a ravishingly beautiful scenic spot, "leaning against hills and following the course of the river" (Fig.8).

The Gaozong Emperor used this park for archery banquets. Every year on New Year’s Day the Emperor summoned his sons and Grand Ministers there for an archery contest. As a reward to record the greatest archery feats, the names of successful participants were engraved in stone on top of the cliffs in this garden.

During the reign of the Ningzong Emperor (r. 1194-1224), in the eleventh month of the 3rd year of the Kaixi period, in 1207, Yu Jin Yuan was the site of a famous dramatic murder plot by Prince Yong and Empress Yang (1162-1232), a former consort of the Emperor, who had managed to be proclaimed Empress. They conspired together with the long-serving high official Shi Miyuan (?-1233), one of the most influential officials in the Empire, to murder an erstwhile adversary of the Empress, Han Tuozhou (?-1207), the main prosecutor of the Neo-Confucianists and Overseer of the troops in their ill-fated attempt to re-conquer lost parts of the empire in the north. With the help of troops, Shi is said to have cornered Han in the Yu Jin Yuan and had him killed there.

The outstanding beauty, rarity and historical importance of the Vase of Jade Stream Garden would always have been appreciated. As an ‘heirloom’ piece, that would never have been buried but treasured and handed down from one collector to the next, its rim and foot were in the past bound in gilt metal mounts to protect them from further damage - a reflection of a long history of appreciation by generations of connoisseurs, as it is characteristic of many of the greatest ceramic treasures of the Song (see, for example, Figs 1 and 6). The vase might in fact have started life as a bottle for holding liquids rather than a flower vase. According to Chen Yuxiu, many Northern Song texts mention rose water being brought by Western Asians as tribute to the Imperial court, and since this shape is related to Western Asian glass wares, she suggests that usage also for ceramic vessels of this mallet shape.

2. There is a slight variation in the date given for the establishment of the Kaifeng kiln.
3. Ts’ai Ho-pi, ‘An Overview of the Exhibition of Sung Dynasty Kuan Ware’, in Catalogue of the Special Exhibition of Sung Dynasty Kuan Ware, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 1989, p.26. The transcription of the Chinese words has been adapted to pinyin romanization, as used throughout this catalogue.
4. As pointed out by Ts’ai, loc.cit., p.28.
8. See the Special Exhibition of Sung Dynasty Kuan Ware at the National Palace Museum, Taipei, 1989, cat.nos 2 and 8-10; and China at the Inception of the Second Millennium: Art and Culture of the Sung Dynasty, 960-1279, Taipei, 2000, cat.no.I-31.
10. Sekai bijutsu tai zenshu/New History of World Art: Toyo hen [Eastern series], vol.6, Tokyo, 2000, pl.121.
11. Ibid., pl.122.
15. Sekai bijutsu tai zenshu, op.cit., pls.124 and 125.
19. This view is expressed by Ts'ai Ho-pi in the catalogue, but in veiled terms.
21. Sun Xinmin, loc.cit., p.85, fig.3.
22. Ts'ai Ho-pi, loc.cit., p.423.