A RARE AND LARGE SUSANCAI ROCK GARDEN
QING DYNASTY, KANGXI PERIOD
Height 18 in., 48 cm

PROVENANCE

EXHIBITED

CATALOGUE NOTE
The artificial mountain (jiashan) or rock garden is an integral element of Chinese classical gardens. The mountain
peak was a symbol of virtue, stability, such as the high peaks on islands of the Immortals, and these small-scale imitations became a central element in many classical gardens.

One of the great gardens of the Tang Dynasty was the Hamlet of the Mountain of the Serene Spring (Pingquan Shanzhuang), built east of the city of Luoyang by Li Deyu, Grand Minister of the Empire. The garden was vast, with over a hundred pavilions and structures, but it was most famous for its collection of exotic-shaped rocks and plants, which Li Deyu collected from all over China. Rocks of unusual shapes, known as Chinese Scholars' Rocks, often selected to portray the part of a mountain or mountain range in a garden scene, gradually became an essential feature of the Chinese garden. It was during the Song dynasty that actual rocks were augmented by larger assembled versions. The Emperor Huizong had exotic plants and picturesque rocks brought from around the empire for his garden, particularly the prized rocks from Taihu. Some of the rocks were so large that in order to move them by water on the grand canal he had to destroy all the bridges between Hangzhou and Beijing. In the center of his garden he had constructed an artificial mountain a hundred meters high, with cliffs and ravines, which he named Genyue, or "The Mountain of Stability." The garden was finished in 1122 but in 1127 the Emperor Huizong was forced to flee when his capital city was attacked by the armies of the Jin dynasty. Upon return, he found his garden completely destroyed, all the pavilions burned and the art works looted. Only the mountain remained. From then onward, varying versions of large, elaborate artificial mountains graced the gardens of emperors, scholars and wealthy merchants.

During the Kangxi period, such man-made mountains enjoyed popularity and fame in Yangzhou, home to extraordinarily wealthy salt merchants, where the ‘mountains’ were painstakingly assembled from boat loads of imported small rocks. These follies symbolized a form of intellectual refuge and a connection with a spiritual realm unattainable to most.

The present sculpture is a particularly fine example of susancai, known in the West as famille-verte biscuit ware. The term ‘biscuit’ first appears in 1862 in Andre Jacquemart, and Edmond Le Blant, Histoire Artistique, Industrielle et Commerciale de la Porcelaine. The authors also originated the terms ‘famille-verte’, ‘famille-noire’, and ‘famille-rose’. The term ‘biscuit’ was used to differentiate the wares enameled directly on to the pre-fired body, or ‘biscuit’, versus the wares enameled over a clear high fired glaze which defines most ‘famille-verte’ decorated porcelains. Once the enamels had been applied, the pieces were re-fired but at a lower heat. The majority of biscuit wares are small scale and molded. The technical challenges of molding, assembling, hand finishing and enameling a large scale item embellished with so many intricate small parts such as the present sculpture, would be formidable and quite costly.