

A Small White Glazed Ding Lotus Bowl from Jin Dynasty (1125-1234)

By Dante Dumont



Diameter 3 ½ in. (8.9 cm.) Height 1 ½ in. (3.8 cm.)

Small enough to fit in the palm of one's hand, the delicacy of this tea bowl's thin wall is gracefully balanced to the touch. Even and thinly coated, the translucency of the yellow-tinted glaze allows one to see some degrees of discoloration in the off-white body clay, which is only exposed along the rim of the bowl, evidence that this piece may have been prepared for a metal band. The interior of the bowl contains a carved and incised lotus pattern, and the lack of precision and embellishment in the carved lines that makeup the sprig below the lotus bloom suggests that it was carved in haste. In the bright emptiness of surface glaze, the lotus pattern is accented by an iron spot—doubtless unintentional. Minute concentric rings attributable to the potter's wheel are visible on the bowl's exterior. It is finished with a short-cut foot ring about an inch in diameter.

Production of small bowls like the present example began during the Northern Song (北宋朝) at the Ding kilns, which continued to produce bowls of this type until the end of the Jin dynasty (金朝). During the Northern Song, Ding potters perfected the techniques involved in producing these lotus bowls, which included the use of ivory white glaze, acquired through the process of coal firing exemplary of post-eleventh-century Ding ware (定瓷), and meticulously hand-carved lotus decoration. In contrast with highly refined Northern Song examples such as the lotus bowl featured in Giuseppe Eskenazi's exhibition *Principal wares of the Song period from a private collection* (see below), the present example displays features that indicate it is most likely of Jin dynasty origin.¹ While it is probably a product of the central Ding kiln, it may have been made at a neighboring Ding-type kiln. The iron spot in its glaze, its hastily carved and incised lotus motif, and overall discoloration, bespeaks the decline in potting and carving quality following the fall of the Northern Song.

The imperfections that indicate this piece was most likely made during the Jin dynasty are also similar to certain characteristics found in pieces made at the Jingxing (井陘) kiln which neighbored the central Ding kiln and produced porcelaneous wares as early as the Sui dynasty (隋朝), and Ding-type wares from the Five Dynasties (五代) through the early Yuan (元朝). Not much has been published about the Jingxing kiln complex, which was discovered in 1989 in Jinxing County about sixty miles (97 km) southwest of the main Ding kilns in Jiancun, Quyang county,

¹ See Table 1 for image. This exemplary piece has been dated by Eskenazi to the “Northern Song Period.” Nigel Wood and Giuseppe Eskenazi, “Glazed Porcellaneous Stoneware Carved Cup” in *Eskenazi: Principal wares of the Song period from a private collection* (London, 2015), no. 9 pp. 56-57.

Hebei (涧磁村, 曲陽, 河北). Both kiln complexes are nestled in the eastern foothills of the Taihang mountain range (太行山) west of the Hebei agricultural plane and both produced porcelaneous wares during the Song and Jin dynasties. Pieces from the Jingxing kiln's Song and Jin strata include Ding imitations or Ding-type wares. A web posting from *The Institute of Archeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences* written in 2016 describes various wares discovered in 1989 from one of the six main Jingxing kiln sites, Dongyaoling, which were active mainly during the Song and Jin dynasty.

Both smooth and rough porcelain fragments were unearthed, which could be classified into three types, white, brown, and black; the daily utensils were in the shapes of bowl, calyx, cup, plate, vase, box, urn, jar, basin, pillow, and censer, etc; the decoration method[s] were scratching, carving, impressing, and stippling, etc, which were mainly flowers. The black glazed ware took up large percentage among them.²

The majority of pieces are described here as “black glazed ware,” but this passage demonstrates that the Dongyaoling kiln (at Jingxing) produced white porcelain, bowls, and pieces with carved decorations—specifically floral designs. This description is reminiscent of the present example.

A more focused view into the Jingxing kiln during the Jin dynasty was provided by the *China Archeology and Art Digest* (June 2000), which describes an excavation at the Hedongpo kiln site (a Jingxing kiln) conducted between 1998 and 1999. The results shed light on both the activity of the kiln during the Jin dynasty, and its historical scope:

Major discoveries include a well preserved bun-shaped kiln stove of the late Jin dynasty and the porcelain remaining inside it, according the first report of the excavation carried in *China Cultural Relics News* of 12 March 2000. The kiln stove measures 8.6 m in length and 6.6 m in width and traces of saggars left on the kiln bed provide valuable information on the output of each firing. Most objects decorated with impressed designs are of high quality and some of the motifs are not seen on objects from the Ding kiln, for example, the pattern of immortals, and ponds, and rocks in gardens. Also collected at the site were blue-and-white porcelains fired in Jingxing in the Ming-Qing periods, examples of the earliest firing of blue-and-white porcelain ever found in Hebei province. In addition, 30 porcelain pieces that had

² Translator: Lang Langtian, “Workshops and wells found at Jingxing Kiln Sit, Hebei Province,” *Chinese Archeology: Institute of Archeology Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*, 2016, http://chinesearchaeology.cn/en/News/New_discoveries/2016/0930/55596.html.

belonged to the local hoards or tombs were recovered; these include white bowls of the Sui dynasty, vases with a mouth in the shape of a phoenix of the Five Dynasties, Jin dynasty pillows with a leaf-shaped surface, and Yuan dynasty small stem cups. These indicate that Jingxing has a history of 1,300 years of porcelain production.³

From this brief and intriguing history, the Jingxing kiln appears to have been well versed in producing porcelain by the Jin dynasty. The discoveries of the Jin dynasty kiln stove with intact porcelain remains and the Jin dynasty pillows among the “30 porcelain pieces that had belonged to local hoards or tombs” demonstrate that the kiln was making porcelain during the Jin dynasty. None of the remains in local hoards and tombs date to the Northern Song, which suggests that the Jingxing kilns may have been more active during the Jin than during the Northern Song. If the present example is from the Jingxing kilns, it seems most likely that it would be from the Jin. The most compelling indication that this piece may be from the Jingxing kiln is the dark spot in its glaze. N.K. Koh provides a brief but valuable description of Jingxing Ding-type ware:

Hebei Jingxing (井陘), discovered more recently in the 1990s, also produced Ding type wares. The good ones are hardly distinguishable from those from Quyang area. But generally they are of poorer quality with presence of dark spots in the glaze.⁴

A clearer image of this piece becomes visible: this small lotus tea bowl is “hardly distinguishable” from Ding ware. Its porcelaneous body clay, delicate potting, warm glaze, and lotus motif are features of identical bowls made at the Ding Kilns, but in other ways it displays a slightly “poorer quality” than those from the main Ding kiln—its dark spot, the grey elements in its glaze and clay, and the hastily applied lotus sprig decoration.

Even though the Jingxing kiln was highly active during the Jin dynasty and N.K. Koh’s general description of pieces from the Jingxing kiln resembles the visible characteristics of this small lotus bowl, it is still most likely an authentic Ding ware from the central kiln at Quyang.⁵ The table

³ Gordan Doar and Susan Dewar, “Recent Archaeological News: January- May 2000” in *China Archeology and Art Digest, Porcelain and Society, Volume 3, Number 4*, ed. Gordan Doar and Susan Dewar, (Hong Kong: Art Text (Hk) Ltd, 2000), 197.

⁴ N K Koh, “Ding Ware,” Koh Antique, 2008, updated 2021, <http://www.koh-antique.com/authenticate/ding.html>.

⁵ I owe this insight to Fuoco B. Fann (personal correspondence).

below (see Table 1) displays examples of lotus bowls from various auctions and collections to observe whether differences can be detected between bowls attributed to the Northern Song and the Jin. Each of these ten comparable lotus bowls have been classified as Ding ware, suggesting that the lotus bowl form itself may be a unique product of the central Ding kiln.⁶ The imperfections visible in the present example suggest that it is of Jin dynasty origin, produced at the central Qiyang kiln after the decay in quality following the fall of the Northern Song.

In terms of the general formulation of Ding glaze and body clay, no major changes occurred between the Northern Song and Jin, but subtle shifts in chemistry have been discovered that aid in dating Ding specimens to the different dynasties. Of specific interest to the current investigation is whether or not the yellow stain present in glaze of this lotus bowl can effectively help dating it to the Jin. An archeological excavation jointly conducted by Peking University and the Hebei Provincial Archeological Institute in 2009 aimed at studying the chemical changes in the glaze and body composition in Ding specimens recovered from various kilns spanning the Five Dynasties, Northern Song, and Jin concluded: “Ding wares of different periods can be distinguished by their chemical compositions,” and that the increases in both the titanium dioxide (TiO_2) and ferric (iron) oxide (Fe_2O_3) in Ding specimens—both “coloring materials”—may have increased the “yellowing effect” of coal firing in the Jin:

Only in the Jin dynasty do titania percentages rise to the levels where they begin to have a yellowing effect on the glazes (> 0.2% titania). Increasing contents of TiO_2 and Fe_2O_3 in the bodies, combined with oxidizing firings, must be the main reason for the later Ding wares’ showing these [creamier] tones.⁷

It then follows that the “creamier tones” observable in this piece’s glaze indicates that it was made during the Jin dynasty after the original Ding glaze and body clay formulas had degraded. This is further corroborated by the imperfections in the lotus pattern of this piece.

After Northern China fell to the Jurchen’s in 1127 AD and became part of the Jin dynasty, the minor shifts in chemistry that created the impure “yellowing effect” in Ding glaze and body clay were accentuated by changes that affected the overall decorative techniques employed by the kiln.

⁶ See Table 1.

⁷ Jianfeng Cui, Nigel Wood, Dashu Qin, Lijun Zhou, Mikyung Ko, Xin Li, “Chemical analysis of white porcelains from Ding Kiln site, Hebei Province, China,” *Journal of Archeological Science* Volume 39 Issue 4 (2012): 823, 826-7, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2011.07.026>.

In the Jin, Ding potters almost completely abandoned the highly skilled hand-carved decorative techniques attributable to the most valuable products of the Northern Song in favor of impressing and molding.⁸ Ding artisans in the Northern Song had already utilized impressing and molding as a means of increasing production of highly ornate ceramics, but in the Jin the technique grew to nearly dominate the entire decorative process. As a result, the potter's ability to carve and incise diminished, and the output of such wares was greatly reduced. The present example is similar to other carved Ding vessels produced during the Jin. Although Ding potters were no longer able to accomplish the fine, flowing decorations below ivory white monochrome glazes, they carried on a less masterful version of the traditional technique of carving and incising.⁹ The joint use of carving and incising as seen in this piece is thus a direct continuity of the original techniques developed at the main Ding Kilns in the Northern Song, although the carvings in the lotus bowls from the Jin lack the fluidity and grace—the spirit—of their Northern Song counterparts. N.K. Koh provides a useful description explaining the traditional carving and incising method:

Ding potters further experimented and developed the carving/incising method and by late Mid/early Northern Song Period, a distinctive form of carved outline with incised parallel line were used for some part of the floral motif. The carving/incising is fluent and spontaneous.¹⁰

If one looks closely at the design of these lotus bowls and other examples that utilize this decorative method, they will detect two lines: there are carved lines that create the lotus shape, and beside them, more pronounced incised lines that embolden the decoration. The combined effect is not only “fluent and spontaneous,” but it lends dimension to the decoration itself. In this case, it brings the lotus pattern forward out of the glaze. This same carving and parallel incising technique can be seen in all but one of the small lotus bowls spanning the Northern Song into the Jin featured

⁸ “Impressed designs became the main form of decoration [in the Jin], but they are not as exquisite as those of the Northern Song.” Liu Yi, “Basic Characteristics of Ding Kiln Porcelain and the Identification of Kilns Firing Imitation Ding Kiln Porcelain” in *China Archeology and Art Digest*, 60.

⁹ “During the Jin Dynasty, molded motif became the main decorative technique and production volume was huge. Only a relatively small number of wares with carved motif continued to be produced. The motifs were more carelessly and sketchily executed as compared with the earlier works.” Koh, “Ding Ware.”

¹⁰ Koh, “Ding Ware.”

in Table 1 (Comparable Pieces).¹¹ In the pieces dated to the Northern Song, the motif tends to be more ornate and delicate; in pieces dated “Song to Jin,” the motifs tend to be simplified but still neatly executed; in pieces dated to the Jin, the motif tends to be less defined.¹² This piece’s lotus pattern most closely resembles those from the “Song to Jin” category. The similarity between the simple and clearly defined lines found within the present example’s lotus pattern and the comparative piece titled “Small Dingyao Carved Bowl” from the “Song to Jin” category in Table 1 makes this apparent.¹³ The main difference between the two can be detected in the line work that creates the floral sprig underneath the lotus bloom, which appears sketchier in the present example than in the comparable piece. The quality of the lotus carving does appear to aid in dating this piece, but the clearest indicator that it is of Jin dynasty origin still appears to be its off-white coloring. For if this piece did display the iconic ivory white glaze color of Northern Song Ding, identifying it solely based off the quality of its lotus pattern would be difficult, and it would probably fall under the ambiguous label of “Song to Jin.”

The historical timeline of this type of small lotus bowl tells the story of a decadent yet resilient continuity. At the Ding kilns, the near disappearance of the fine carving tradition, the shift towards impressed decoration which had begun during late Northern Song and intensified through the Jin, and the shift from ivory white to off-white glaze marks the distinct rift between the prosperous Northern Song and the steppe-nomad-ruled Jin. The ravages of war must have eventually taken their toll on the Jurchen’s fledgling alien regime. Starting in the thirteenth century, the Jin dynasty faced an intimidating alliance between the Mongols in the north and the Southern Song in the south. Costs involved in the vain war-time defense efforts against the Southern Song and the Mongols—the Jin’s ultimate subduers—must have placed an enormous financial and social strain on the inhabitants of Northern China, possibly contributing to the collapse of many non-vital industries and the overall flight of the populace. Production of fine ceramics surely would have suffered under such conditions.

¹¹ See Table 1. “Two Small Carved ‘Ding’ Bowls” from the Sotheby’s auction entitled *Harmony of Form, Serenity of Color: A Private Collection of Song Ceramics*, New York, March of 2011, p. 101, no. 572, identified by Christie’s as Jin Ding ware.

¹² See Table 1.

¹³ See Table 1. “Small Dingyao Carved Bowl” from Christie’s auction entitled *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, September of 2014, Lot 728, identified by Christie’s as Northern Song- Jin Ding ware.

Whatever the case may be, this type of small lotus bowl vanished with the fall of the Jin, never to be made again.

Comparable Pieces

Table 1:

Northern Song	
 <p>Size: 3 5/8 in. (9.2 cm.) diam.</p>	<p>“Glazed Porcellaneous Stoneware Carved Cup” from the Eskenazi exhibition <i>Principal wares of the Song period from a private collection</i>. London, May of 2015, no. 13, identified by Eskenazi as Northern Song Ding ware.</p> <p>Previously published as “A Rare Dingyao Carved Cup” from Christie’s auction entitled <i>The Faulk Collection I: Fine Chinese Ceramics & Works of Art</i>, New York, October of 2001, Lot 53, identified by Christie’s as Northern Song Ding ware. Image is from Christie’s website.</p> <p>https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-3045482?ldp_breadcrumb=back&intObjectID=3045482&from=salessummary&lid=1</p>
 <p>Size: 4 1/10 in. (10.5 cm.) diam.</p>	<p>“Bright Stoneware Bowl” from personal collection catalogue of Kai-Yin Lo entitled <i>Bright as Silver, White as Snow Chinese Ceramics from Late Tang to Yuan</i>, Hong Kong, 1998, p. 122, identified by the author as Northern Song Ding.</p>



Size: 3 7/8 in. (9.8 cm.) diam.

“A Very Rare and Superbly Carved Small Ding Bowl” from the Christies catalogue entitled *The Sound of Jade and the Shadow of a Chrysanthemum—Works of Art from the Song Dynasty*, Hong Kong, May 2014, p. 24, no. 3209 identified by the author as Northern Song Ding.



Size: Unknown

“A Small Carved ‘Ding’ ‘Lotus’ Bowl” from Sotheby’s auction entitled *Important Chinese Works of Art*, New York, March of 2015, Lot 179, identified as Northern Song Ding ware.

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/catalogue/2015/chinese-works-of-art-n09317/lot.179.html?locale=en>



Size: Unknown

“A Small Carved ‘Ding’ White-Glazed ‘Lotus’ Bowl” from Sotheby’s auction entitled *Chinese Art*, Hong Kong, June of 2017, Lot 394, identified as Song Ding ware, which implies it is from the Northern Song.

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2017/chinese-art-hk0732/lot.394.html>

Song- Jin



Size: 3 5/8 in. (9.3 cm.) diam.

“A Small Carved Ding ‘Lotus’ Bowl from Christie’s auction entitled *Important Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, New York, September 2023, Lot 1011, identified as Northern Song- Jin Ding ware.

<https://www.christies.com/Lot/Lot-6439815>



Size: 3 5/8 in. (9.2 cm.) diam.

“Small Dingyao Carved Bowl” from Christie’s auction entitled *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, Unknown, September of 2014, Lot 728, identified by Christie’s as Northern Song- Jin Ding ware.

www.christies.com/lot/lot-5823640



Size: 3 1/2 in. (9 cm.) diam.

“A Small Carved Ding ‘Day Lily’ Bowl” from Christie’s auction entitled *Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, New York, September of 2017, Lot 1132, identified by Christie’s as Northern Song- Jin Ding ware.

<https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-6096755>

Jin



Size: Unknown

“Two Small Carved ‘Ding’ Bowls” from the Sotheby’s auction entitled *Harmony of Form, Serenity of Color: A Private Collection of Song Ceramics*, New York, March of 2011, p. 101, no. 572, identified by Christie’s as Jin Ding ware.

www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2011/harmony-of-form-serenity-of-color-a-private-european-collection-of-39song39-ceramics-n08736/lot.572.html?locale=en



Size: 3 ¾ in. (9.5 cm.) diam.

“A Small Carved Ding ‘Lotus’ Tea Bowl” from the Christie’s Auction entitled *The Pavilion Sale Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art*, New York, March of 2011, Lot 303, identified by Christie’s as Jin Ding ware.

<https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-6281512>