

## Why This Qing Brush-Holder is Not Kangxi

By Céline Andre



**Figure 1**

*Blue and White Brush-Holder with the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove and apocryphal Kangxi (1662-1722) reign marks. Late Qing (1800-1900). H: 6¼ in (15.8 cm). D: 4¾ in (12 cm).*

When we think about blue and white Chinese porcelain or hear the word *Jingdezhen* 景德镇 in contemporary society, we will immediately direct our thoughts to imperial ware in the late dynastic period of China, as it appears to be the most prevalent part of blue and white ware (*qinghua*, 青花) production found within Jingdezhen records. Jingdezhen's iconic blue and white ceramics are known as “porcelain” (*ci*, 瓷), which, according to Anne Gerritsen, refers to “glazed, high-fired ceramics, though not necessarily fired above 1300 degrees Celsius.”<sup>1</sup> Blue and white porcelains gained a reputation of refinement among Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) imperial families, and only wares with high quality clay, clean and approved sizes and shapes, and skilled application of cobalt

---

<sup>1</sup> Anne Gerritsen, *The City of Blue and White: Chinese Porcelain and the Early Modern World* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 18-20.

pigment decorations were worthily branded with reign marks of the emperor. However, not all branded blue and white porcelains were genuine imperial wares due to various contrasting characteristics typically found during the reign periods. The blue and white brush-holder (Figure 1) with Kangxi (1662-1722) reign marks, for example, demonstrates dissimilarities from typical Kangxi blue and white wares.<sup>2</sup> Despite having Kangxi reign marks, the brush-holder is not from Kangxi's reign due to poorly executed reign marks, coarse clay, uneven and unrefined application of cobalt pigment, incompatible execution of decoration and representation of painted figures, and unusual dimensions.

### A Brief Background of Jingdezhen Imperial Workshops

Before delving into reasons why this brush-holder is incompatible with Kangxi *qinghua* brush-holders, understanding the meticulous production process of Jingdezhen imperial kilns is first essential to justify the rejection of imperfectly executed blue and white wares. For a brief time during 1667, Kangxi “issued an edict forbidding the use of his reign mark on porcelain in case the ceramics were smashed and discarded.”<sup>3</sup> As a result, potters would leave empty double rings on the foot or mark the vessels with auspicious symbols, like an artemisia leaf, a *lingzhi* 靈芝 mushroom, or the head of a *nuyi* 如意 scepter.<sup>4</sup> Considering these precautions during Jingdezhen production, porcelains could not have reign marks if they did not meet high level proficiency. In fact, much of the practices associated with creating well-executed blue and white wares stemmed from Ming Jingdezhen workshops, particularly the painters’ workshops that specialized in imperial-commissioned designs.

As the largest industrial complex prior to the eighteenth century, Jingdezhen used a system of up to 23 subdivisions to create blue and white wares, where workers and craftsmen were instructed

---

<sup>2</sup> He Li, *Chinese Ceramics: A New Comprehensive Survey* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1996), 266.

<sup>3</sup> “A guide to demystifying reign marks on Chinese ceramics,” *Christie’s*, last modified April 17, 2023, <https://www.christies.com/features/Reign-marks-on-Chinese-ceramics-An-expert-guide-8248-1.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> “A guide to demystifying reign marks on Chinese ceramics.”

to complete specific tasks.<sup>5</sup> In a seventeenth century image from Song Yingxing's text titled "The works of heaven and the inception of things" (*Tiangong kaiwu*, 天工開物), a depiction of two different painters demonstrates how brushwork precision played a key role in 17<sup>th</sup> century *qinghua* ware. Both painters are seated at tables of different sizes and shapes according to the decoration they apply, such as circular rings or sceneries. For the painter applying circular rings, Gerritsen notes in *The City of Blue and White* how the painter's hand must remain steady to execute an even, clean circle (*da quan*, 打圈) around the vessel. Similarly, French Jesuit Père d'Entrecolles, who was in China from 1689 to 1741 during Kangxi's reign, wrote letters expressing the strains porcelain decorators sustained to perfect the minutest details: "One workman does nothing but draw the first color line beneath the rims of the pieces; another traces flowers, while the third one paints... The men who sketch the outlines learn sketching, but not painting; those who paint [i.e., apply the color] study only painting, but not sketching."<sup>6</sup> Though d'Entrecolles's account of witnessing Jingdezhen kilns seem despairing upon description, he notes the attentiveness to details, like the ring circles and the paintings. His elucidation suggests that reign marks and precise lines of decorations would be no exception to the rule of perfection.

### Elements Incompatible to Kangxi

Emperors' reign marks were significant indicators to date ceramic vessels, and brilliantly painted reign marks represented respect for the emperor. Starting in the Ming, potters inscribed regular script (*kaishu*, 楷書) reign marks on porcelains—most commonly portrayed inside a double-circled ring.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties, reign marks were added to the bottom of porcelains to indicate when the piece was made and under what emperor. By the reign of Emperor Hongwu (r.

---

<sup>5</sup> Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 66; Gerritsen, *The City of Blue and White*, 148. Clunas notes how the division of labor was well established in the Jingdezhen kilns during the Ming dynasty, which eventually carried on to the Qing. Gerritsen notes how many subdivisions Jingdezhen had during the 16<sup>th</sup> century and what each production line was responsible for.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Sullivan, *The Arts of China, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Revised and Expanded* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2008), 277.

<sup>7</sup> "A guide to demystifying reign marks on Chinese ceramics."

1368-1398) of the Ming, “the imperial ceramic productions, whether executed at official workshops or commissioned from private shops, began to use a reign mark of four or six characters, usually applied to the base but occasionally on the inside or outside of a work.”<sup>8</sup> By the seventeenth century, the Qing standardized this process for official ceramic productions.<sup>9</sup> The indented foot of the late Qing brush-holder (Figure 1) reveals a reign mark saying it was “made during the reign of Kangxi” (*Kangxi nianzhi*, 康熙年製) in an underglaze blue pigment. Showing the name of the emperor first, “Kangxi” (*Kangxi*, 康熙), followed by the phrase ‘made in the year of’ (*nianzhi*, 年製), the marking suggests that the piece came from the mid-seventeenth to early eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the circular indentation on the foot is, according to He Li’s *Chinese Ceramics: A New Comprehensive Survey*, a typical feature of Kangxi brush-holders.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, poorly executed reign marks may indicate that a piece did not come from the time it was branded with, such as the blue and white brush-holder with the Kangxi reign mark. According to Christie’s Auction House, “the quality of the genuine reign marks,” especially “commissioned for the Emperor or his imperial household...should be of the highest caliber, matching the finesse of the work of art.”<sup>12</sup> The regular script reign mark on the brush-holder appears less clear and legible than the standard reign marks seen on Kangxi pieces from the National Palace Museum in Taipei (cat. 99.2) as well as Kangxi pieces from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Figure 2).<sup>13</sup> The museum reign marks are carefully written, showing clear and precise strokes of each radical. Such precision in execution authenticates the piece’s origin, while poorly executed reign marks invite skepticism. For instance, the brush-holder (Figure 1) reign marks show flaws with extended radical strokes in *Kangxi* (康熙) and *zhi* (製), demonstrating amateur calligraphic skills. How could imperial

---

<sup>8</sup> Jay Xu and He Li, *Emperor’s Treasures: Chinese Art from the National Palace Museum, Taipei* (San Francisco, California: Asian Art Museum, 2016), xvii, 97.

<sup>9</sup> Xu and Li, *Emperor’s Treasures*, 97.

<sup>10</sup> “A guide to demystifying reign marks on Chinese ceramics”; Li, *Chinese Ceramics*, 271. Both sources refer to the translation of the four-character reign mark. The *Christie’s* article discusses a lengthened translation while Li’s description is simplified to “made during Kangxi period.”

<sup>11</sup> Li, *Chinese Ceramics*, 320.

<sup>12</sup> “A guide to demystifying reign marks on Chinese ceramics.”

<sup>13</sup> “Brush Washer: China: Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), Kangxi Mark and Period (1662-1722),” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Met*, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/42230>  
Xu and Li, *Emperor’s Treasures*, 162.

wares contain sloppy reign marks if the kilns were administratively monitored for the minutest details? It is unlikely that government-hired professionals could produce mediocre results under surveillance. Therefore, it is possible that the brush-holder's lacking quality appears more suitable for the everyday people, or "ware of the people" (*minyao*, 民窯), rather than the imperial collection, or official ware (*guanyao*, 官窯).<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 2**  
*Brush Washer*. Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Kangxi mark and period (1662–1722), ca. 1678–88. Porcelain with peach-bloom glaze (Jingdezhen ware). D: 4 ¾ in. (12.1 cm). Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913. 14.40.385

The brush-holder's clay quality also reveals that it would not be classified as official ware. According to He Li's article "Qing Dynasty (1644–1911): Manchu Emperors and an Empress Attain Extravagant Art" in *Emperor's Treasures*, Kangxi revitalized the Jingdezhen kilns in 1680 and within three years, Kangxi porcelains were known for their "refined biscuit, thin body, and beautifully colored glaze."<sup>15</sup> The description alone highly contrasts from the brush-holder's thick and heavy body. Signs of coarseness appear primarily on the bottom and inside of the brush-holder, revealing bubble marks, indentations into the clay, and a rough ring on the foot. Compared to the Kangxi blue and white brush-holder (Figure 3) displayed in Li's *Chinese Ceramics*, this late Qing brush-holder appears thicker and rounder along the rim as well as less refined overall while its counterpart has a thin clay

<sup>14</sup> "A guide to demystifying reign marks on Chinese ceramics."

<sup>15</sup> Xu and Li, *Emperor's Treasures*, 135.

body. The contrasting descriptions of typical refined blue and white wares of the Kangxi period indicate that the brush-holder does not exemplify authentic Kangxi ware.



**Figure 3**

Brush holder. Porcelain with underglaze-blue decoration. Qing, Kangxi period (1662-1722), Jiangxi (*qinghua*). H: 14.9 cm (5 7/8 in.). D: 18.4 cm (7 1/4 in.). Cat. 586.

Skillful application of cobalt pigment, in both layering and decoration, were also important identifiers of Ming and Qing imperial wares. Steady and consistent brushstrokes on ceramic vessels demonstrated a high level of painting proficiency, and only specialized painters were assigned specific sections to paint on a vessel. The double circular rings on the top and bottom of the brush-holder, for instance, are typical decorations seen in both late Ming and early Qing *qinghua* ware. Like the Kangxi blue and white brush-holder (Figure 3) displayed at the Asian Art Museum, this brush-holder has double circular rings on the top and bottom. Yet, the double rings on the museum piece appear more evenly layered with cobalt pigment along with rich and well-defined blue lines throughout its decoration.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, the brush-holder shows uneven and unsteady cobalt pigmentation applied to the top and bottom double-rings. Though seemingly small, brushstroke quality mattered for imperial commissioned works.

---

<sup>16</sup> Li, *Chinese Ceramics*, 288.

Incompatible execution of decoration and representation of painted figures also support my argument that the brush-holder did not come from Kangxi's time, despite the relevance of the decorative motif to the Qing. The exterior of the brush-holder depicts eight figures—seven reclusive scholars and a small servant boy. The scene captures the enjoyment of company in the reclusive outdoors, with bunches of bamboo, a fence, and signs of crooked rocks and perhaps mountain sides. These larger male figures are the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (*Zhulin Qixian* 竹林七賢), who, according to Patricia Bjaaland Welch's *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery*, “were said to be semi-historical scholars, statesmen, or officials who turned their backs on traditional careers, rife with inherent political dangers and boredom, to spend their lives pursuing their own interests, occasionally gathering together in pleasant discourse, discussing art and literature, listening to music, and drinking wine.”<sup>17</sup> Each of the Seven Sages had his own characteristics, and depictions and clues in Chinese art indicate their identity. Nonetheless, they are all remembered for their ability and willingness to separate themselves from the corruption at court, choosing to live a life disassociated from the quandaries of the world and engaging in personal, cultivating interests reflecting that of Daoist practices. Portrayals of the Seven Sages may allude to situations of overall political unrest or the desire to secede from politics. The political transition from Ming to Qing, for example, put a strain on court support and, like the sages, Ming officials questioned their loyalty and obligations to serve the newly established Qing dynasty. As mentioned in Asia Society's article for the *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest* exhibition displaying Ming and Qing art, a motif like this seemed appropriate for those who were struggling between their political duties and moral convictions.<sup>18</sup>

However, the portrayal of the Seven Sages motif appears different than typical examples from late Ming to early Qing pieces in both style of decoration and the way the figures were painted. Earlier examples from the late Ming to early Qing period depict the Seven Sages with more details, limiting emptiness in the background. The emphasis lies in both the scenery with the natural surroundings as well as the actions of the figures. One example of this comes from a late Ming (ca.

---

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Bjaaland Welch, *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery* (North Clarendon, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2008), 175.

<sup>18</sup> “Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove: Who Were the Seven Sages?” Asia Society, 2009. [http://sites.asiasociety.org/yangfudong/seven-sages?\\_ga=2.159994173.1611472155.1695184190-711981964.1695184190](http://sites.asiasociety.org/yangfudong/seven-sages?_ga=2.159994173.1611472155.1695184190-711981964.1695184190)

1640) Covered box decorated with the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (Figure 4) from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where an ample amount of cobalt blue decorations fills the box, including natural foliage, mountainsides, figures, and objects.<sup>19</sup> Another example from Lyon & Turnbull shows a seventeenth century Transitional Period *Blue and White* ‘Seven Sages’ Brush Pot (Figure 5) displaying similar features to early Qing portrayals of the Seven Sages—an elaborate cobalt blue-decorated background with little empty spaces.<sup>20</sup> The brush-holder (Figure 1), in contrast, has many blank spaces throughout the scene, with lack of natural surroundings and details filling up the emptiness. Furthermore, the sages in the museum and auction pieces are also painted in a manner differing from the brush-holder, showing clearly defined faces with minimal facial features and emotional expressions. The Seven Sages on the brush-holder (Figure 1) shows a variance in facial features, with more emotional expressions and facial details unseen in Kangxi pieces, suggesting its origin to be late Qing. While the Seven Sages motif is relevant to the Ming-Qing transitional period, its representation on the late Qing brush-holder does not coincide with depictions from the Kangxi era.



**Figure 4**  
Covered Box Decorated with the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove. Ming dynasty (1368–1644), ca. 1640. Porcelain painted in underglaze cobalt blue (Jingdezhen ware). Box and cover: H. 4 ¾ in. (12.1 cm); D: 8 3/8 in. (21.3 cm). Gift of Julia and John Curtis, in celebration of the Museum’s 150th anniversary, 2019. 2019.446.1a, b

<sup>19</sup> “Covered Box Decorated with the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove: China: Ming Dynasty (1368-1644),” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accessed October 1, 2023.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/712495>

<sup>20</sup> “Blue and White ‘Seven Sages’ Brush Pot Transitional Period, 17<sup>th</sup> Century,” Lyon & Turnbull, May 13, 2022. <https://www.lyonandturnbull.com/auction/lot/177-blue-and-white-seven-sages-brush-pot/?lot=256756&sd=1>.





**Figure 5**

Blue and White 'Seven Sages' Brush Pot. Transitional Period, 17<sup>th</sup> Century. H: unknown. D: 19 cm (7 ½ in.). Lyon & Turnbull. Lot 177.

Lastly, the brush-holder's unusual size also proves that it's not authentic to Kangxi's time. The brush-holder (Figure 1) stands at 6¼ in (15.8 cm) in height with 4¾ in (12 cm) in diameter. Compared to standard brush-holders from Kangxi's time, this brush-holder stands taller with a substantially slimmer diameter. The Asian Art Museum's *Brush holder* from the Kangxi period (Figure 3), for instance, stands about 5.8 inches tall (14.9 cm) with a diameter of 7.25 inches (18.4 cm), showing that it is both shorter and wider. Similarly, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Transitional Period *Blue and White 'Seven Sages' Brush Pot* (Figure 5) from Lyon & Turnbull shows a diameter measurement of about 7.5 inches (19 cm), a drastic difference from the 4¾ in (12 cm) diameter of the brush-holder. On that account, the brush-holder containing Kangxi reign marks is arguably most likely from later Qing due to its incompatible dimensions to typical early Qing pieces.

The preceding evidence proves that blue and white brush-holder (Figure 1) is an attempt at imitating *qinghua* official ware from Kangxi's reign, though its features suggest late-Qing production. Using reign marks and common decorative motifs from the late Ming to early Qing period strategically establishes an impression of Kangxi. Still, the level of execution as well as other indications, like the vessel's dimensions, decoration, quality of clay, and cobalt pigmentation, prove

otherwise. Though the brush-holder may not be authentic, it nevertheless demonstrates the act of imitations that have been going on for hundreds of years. According to Christie's, artisans may not have created imitations with the intention of fooling people but rather out of respect and reverence for the early periods.<sup>21</sup> It would make sense understanding that Emperor Kangxi, one of the Qing's longest lasting rulers, devoted his energies to restoring China's cultural glory. To do this, Kangxi reopened the Jingdezhen kilns, which created beautiful monochrome glazes, *qinghua* porcelains, and enameled wares that sparked interest and demand locally and abroad. While this brush-holder may lack the genuineness of Kangxi's time, it is still a beautiful attempt to exhibit the Qing's glorified past.

---

<sup>21</sup> "A guide to demystifying reign marks on Chinese ceramics."

### Works Cited

- “A guide to demystifying reign marks on Chinese ceramics.” Christie’s. April 17, 2023, <https://www.christies.com/features/Reign-marks-on-Chinese-ceramics-An-expert-guide-8248-1.aspx>
- Blue and White ‘Seven Sages’ Brush Pot Transitional Period, 17<sup>th</sup> Century* [photograph]. Lyon & Turnbull. May 13, 2022. <https://www.lyonandturnbull.com/auction/lot/177-blue-and-white-seven-sages-brush-pot/?lot=256756&sd=1>.
- Bjaaland Welch, Patricia. *Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery*. North Clarendon, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2008.
- Brush Washer, China: Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), Kangxi Mark and Period (1662–1722)* [photograph]. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accessed October 1, 2023. [www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/42230](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/42230). Accessed 27 Sept. 2023.
- Covered Box Decorated with the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, China: Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)* [photograph]. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accessed October 1, 2023. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/712495>
- Clunas, Craig. *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China*. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004.
- Gerritsen, Anne. *The City of Blue and White: Chinese Porcelain and the Early Modern World*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Li, He. *Chinese Ceramics: A New Comprehensive Survey*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1996.
- Li, He. (1996) *Brush Holder* [photograph]. Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, California.
- “Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove: Who Were the Seven Sages?” Asia Society, 2009. [http://sites.asiasociety.org/yangfudong/seven-sages?\\_ga=2.159994173.1611472155.1695184190-711981964.1695184190](http://sites.asiasociety.org/yangfudong/seven-sages?_ga=2.159994173.1611472155.1695184190-711981964.1695184190)
- Sullivan, Michael. *The Arts of China, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Revised and Expanded*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2008.
- Xu, Jay and He Li. *Emperor’s Treasures: Chinese Art from the National Palace Museum, Taipei*. San Francisco, California: Asian Art Museum, 2016.