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Extraordinary rediscovery: Lost treasure of Imperial China found in an Attic in France

Exceptionally rare 18th century Imperial 'Yangcai' *Famille-Rose*
porcelain vase – a unique piece brought into Sotheby's in a shoebox –
to be offered at Sotheby's Paris in June



Henry Howard-Sneyd, Sotheby's Chairman of Asian Art, Europe and Americas, said:
"Chinese art has been admired and collected across Europe for centuries, but the importance of certain pieces is occasionally lost over time. Given the huge appetite for Chinese art among today's collectors, now is the moment to scour your homes and attics, and to come to us with anything you might find!"

PARIS, 22 MAY 2018 – Today in Paris, Sotheby’s unveils an extraordinary recently-discovered treasure of Imperial China: a unique Imperial 18th century ‘Yangcai’ *Famille-Rose* porcelain vase, bearing a mark from the reign of the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736-1795). Discovered by chance in the attic of French family home, this magnificent vase was brought into Sotheby’s Paris by its unsuspecting owners in a shoe box. When Sotheby’s specialist Olivier Valmier, opened the box to examine the vase, he was immediately struck by its quality. Further research revealed the vase to be a unique example produced by the finest craftsmen of the time for the Qianlong Emperor. Of extraordinary importance and rarity, the vase will now be offered for sale at Sotheby’s in Paris on 12 June, with an estimate of £430,000 – 610,000 (€500,000 – 700,000 / US\$ 600,000 – 850,000 / HK\$4.8-6.7 million).

Left to the grandparents of the present owners by an uncle, the vase is listed among the contents of the latter’s Paris apartment after his death in 1947. It is recorded alongside several other Chinese and Japanese objects including other Chinese porcelains, two dragon robes, a yellow silk textile, and an unusual bronze mirror contained in a carved lacquer box. This mirror will be offered in the Sotheby’s sale of Asian Art in Paris immediately after the sale of the vase.

While the exact provenance of the vase and the other Chinese and Japanese pieces before 1947 cannot be traced, the receipt of a Satsuma censer acquired as a wedding gift in the 1867 Universal Exhibition in Paris by an ancestor of the family suggests an active interest in Asian art at a very early date. Similarly, this vase – may well have been acquired in Paris in the late 19th century when the arrival of Asian works of art initiated a fashion for Japanese and Chinese art. Interestingly, the only other vase of this shape and similar design, now in the collection of the Musée Guimet, Paris, was acquired by Ernest Grandidier (1833-1912) about the same time, around 1890 from Philippe Sichel, an Asian art dealer in Paris active in the late 19th century, and an early advocate of Japanese art in France.

The vase is of exceptional rarity: the only known example of its kind, it was produced by the Jingdezhen workshops for the magnificent courts of the Qianlong Emperor (1735-1796). *Famille Rose* porcelains of the period (or ‘*yangcai*’ porcelains, as they are known) are extremely rare on the market, with most examples currently housed in the National Palace Museum in Taipei and other museums around the world. On the rare occasions when pieces of this kind do come to auction they are the subject of fierce competition: earlier this year in Hong Kong a [Famille-Rose porcelain](#) bowl sold at Sotheby’s Hong Kong for HK\$239 million (£21.7 million; US\$30.4 million) in April this year.



These so-called *yangcai* porcelain commissions were the very epitome of the ware produced by the Jingdezhen imperial kilns. They were made as one-of-a-kind items, sometimes in pairs, but never in large quantities. This technique combined a new colour palette with Western-style compositions.

Beyond their superior quality, *yangcai* enamels were intended to create the most opulent and luxurious effect possible.

The vase, to be sold at Sotheby's in Paris, has a body encircled by a magnificent landscape with deer, cranes and pine trees, all auspicious symbols of health and longevity: a genuine painting on porcelain showing nine fallow deer and five cranes in a rocky landscape with a tumbling waterfall, surrounded by gnarled pines and mist-covered peaks expressing all the artist's dazzling talent. Only one other similar vase, although with slightly different subject matter and decorative borders, now in the Guimet museum in Paris, is known. This naturalistic garden most probably illustrates one of the Imperial parks designed for the Emperor's delight. The scene may seem ordinary, but is in fact highly symbolic. The fallow deer, synonymous with happiness and prosperity, is often shown as the mount of the god of longevity. Cranes, personifying old age, also carried immortals through the air. Lastly, immortality is represented by *lingzhi*, mushrooms growing on the islands where the gods dwelt.

The Imperial inventories drawn up in the 18th century mention pairs of vases with this design twice: one pair commissioned in 1765; the other ordered as a birthday gift in 1769.

If you would like advice on any Asian artefacts you might have in your home, do contact one of our specialists:

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