



Straits Chinese Solid Silver Wine Ewer, 19th century
£2,400.00

Straits Chinese Solid Silver Wine Ewer, 19th century

Decorated with elaborate and fantastical imagery, this remarkable solid silver wine ewer is an excellent example of a type of object which were rarely encountered outside of the homes of wealthy Straits born Chinese families.¹ The Straits Settlements were British colonial territories of settlements around British Malaya.²

'Straits Chinese' were Chinese born migrants based in

Southeast Asia, maintaining unique cultures which distinguished them from the indigenous population. These communities settled in Singapore, Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, establishing themselves in these lands predominantly in the 19th century.

³

Numerous figures, trees, temples, naga, a lion, branches, trees and blossoms decorate this intricate work in silver.

Atop the lid of the ewer is a lion finial. Notable examples of Straits Chinese wine ewers have lion finials on the top of their lids.⁴ Lions are important symbols within Buddhism, with the lion established in early Buddhism as a symbol of Shakyamuni Buddha.

⁵ ⁶ As a symbol of his

sovereignty, the Buddha's throne is supported by eight lions. The lion on the lid of this ewer has a circular shape under its front paw. A Chinese legend recounts that lionesses lactate through their paws and that by passing hollow balls for their young to play with, the cubs could extract milk.⁷

Around the wine ewer various figures are portrayed. Two figures wearing traditional clothing, perhaps intended to be monks, are positioned in a temple setting. One sits in an entranceway of the temple below the roof while the other is positioned beside the building beneath a blossom tree. A votary, with a bowed head and standing on steps, faces the sheltered monk and holds an object in both hands. Next to the figure standing beside the temple is another figure holding a fan and standing below a tree. On the base of the ewer another man stands between a palm tree close to a building and a tree with large blossoms. The emphasis of landscapes and figural scenes

⁷ Beer, pp. 63-64.

⁶ Paul K. Nietupski, *Infinite Splendor, Infinite Light, The Bruce Walker '53 Collection of Tibetan Religious Art*, (Greencastle, Indiana: DePauw University, 2018), p. 57.

⁵ Robert Beer, *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*, (Chicago, Illinois: Serindia Publications, Inc, 2003), p. 63.

⁴ Meng, p. 157-159.

³ Mark Ravinder Frost, 'Transactional Diaspora: The Straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819-1918', *Asia Research Institute, ARI Working Paper*, No. 10 (2003) 1-44 (pp. 1-2).

² David Newman, 'British Colonial Censorship Regimes: Hong Kong, Straits Settlements, and Shanghai International Settlement 1916-1941', *Silencing Cinema: Film Censorship Around the World*, ed. by Daniel Biltereyst & Roel Vande Winkel (2013) 167-191 (p. 168).

¹ HoWing Meng, *Straits Chinese Silver, A Collector's Guide*, (Singapore: Times Book International, 1984) p. 156.

indicate that this ewer was produced by master artisans in Southern China and sent to the Straits for export.⁸

However, the most impressive element of the ewer is the handle. The entire handle is the body of a naga. Naga in Sanskrit and Pali means snake and in China they are represented as dragons. A naga inhabits underwater kingdoms and the roots of monumental trees, often with the intention to protect treasure. These creatures are said to be under the command of Virupaksa, the god of the west and they guard the Traystrimsa Heaven. There are times when they appear in the audience of the Buddha, as detailed in the famous Lotus Sutra. Naga may be benevolent or malevolent and there were instances where they served to protect or shelter the Buddha.⁹

The entire length of the ewer's handle represents a naga. The remarkable texture of the naga's scales is finely delicate, while the swirling whiskers and mane twist and blow wildly around its face as if caught in a great storm. A Tibetan ewer inspired by Chinese design in the Victoria and Albert Museum also has a handle which resembles a naga, however that handle is not as whimsical or as refined as this example.¹⁰ A similar creature's head is at the base of the ewer's spout which protrudes from this monster's open mouth. This is a common motif in Straits Chinese wine ewers.¹¹

This intricately detailed ewer, with its floral imagery, figures and representation of architecture, lion finial and naga handle and spout, is an excellent example of 19th century Straits Chinese silver. With comparable examples in private collections published in academic literature,¹² this

ewer would be a magnificent artefact for admirers, scholars and collectors of Straits Chinese artefacts.