

Changsha Bowl

BATEA 1635

This ceramic bowl may look quite humble with its muted colours and simple decorations, but it is quite an innovation for its time. It was crafted in the 9th century during the Tang Dynasty when its rulers brought a long period of stability and prosperity to the region, transforming the capital of Chang'An into the largest and most cosmopolitan city in the world at that time. Foreigners included entertainers, monks, diplomatic envoys and merchants flooded the city from as far away as Persia and Syria. China was the Eastern end point in the vast trade network known as the Maritime Silk Road and like many products made in China today, this humble bowl was made for the export market and archaeological finds could be found throughout the trade network and as far away as East Africa and the Middle East. A shipwreck off the island of Belitung in Indonesia found some 55,000 of these bowls on its way to customers most likely in the Middle East. How were they able to produce so many bowls in China in the 800s?

This Changsha bowl, named after the city where it was made would have been formed in a production line, where one person would shape the bowl and then pass it onto the next person who would do the painting and glazing, then to a specialist who would do the firing of the bowl in the kiln. Finally, there would be a specialist packer who would pack it to send it on its way to its overseas customers. How else could the Changsha potters produce 55,000 of these tea bowls for shipping?

This was also the first time potters in China painted designs underneath the glaze using free-flowing brush strokes. Before this innovation, they would dip the bowls in a glaze or pigment of only one colour. The design we see in this bowl is a cloud-like shape with curlicues and wispy tails formed from separate brush strokes; this vapour or cloud scroll form was one of the most common designs; other common designs included birds, flowers, landscapes, fish, even sea monsters and figures of curly haired men with big noses; what foreigners looked like to Chinese potters at the time. These potters would have had to paint their designs quite speedily to produce so many bowls, but they painted it with such skill, personality and spontaneity.

From this one bowl, what does it show us? Ninth century China was part of a well-established globalised trading network where mass production of ceramic goods which the Chinese would tailor specifically for foreign markets through different popular designs.

That tradition continues to this day. Think of this the next time you come across a tag that says 'made in China'!