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Ewer Made for the Indian Market

Guangzhou, China, 18th century

Copper enamel

35 cm high, 28 cm wide

Provenance: UK private collection since the 1970s

Stock no.: A5159

The elegant ewer is pear-shaped with a long slender spout, arching handle and lid with knob. Its form is derived from the metalwork of Mughal India, for whom this vessel was made.

The surface of the ewer is painted with a wide variety of coloured enamels. The technique of painting with enamels on a metal base first developed in northern Europe during the Renaissance. European missionaries, foremost among them the Jesuits, started to bring European enamelled metal objects to China as official gifts in the late seventeenth century. These included items that were unknown to the Chinese, such as watches, clocks and religious scenes. Both the technique and the artefacts were seen as rare and precious, and several enamelled watches and clocks are still preserved in the collections of the imperial family in the Forbidden City in Beijing.¹ An imperial workshop to replicate such treasures was set up.² Chinese craftsmen had already attained a high level of skill in enamelling porcelain, so adoption of this new technique on copper was rapid. However, the imperial workshop could only manufacture a limited number of pieces, and as the taste for painted enamels on a metal base spread, larger premises appeared in the southern port city of Guangzhou (Canton). The city catered to Chinese clients but also to a wide variety of contacts abroad, whose ships arrived daily from Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

Tear-shaped repoussé panels on each side contain delicately painted peonies, peaches, chrysanthemums and day lilies. These plants convey wishes for wealth, nobility, long life and maternal devotion. Round the neck and foot are further floral bands, while the body is decorated as if draped with swathes of precious textiles that are looped and tied. This manner of non-figural decoration would have been suitable for Muslim clients, and would have been attractive to them, even if the Chinese symbolic meanings of the designs were not apparent.

The decoration of enamelled copper vessels followed much the same process as porcelain. After the initial firing, designs would be laid down in dark outline and the piece would be passed through the hands of several artisans, each specialised in the drawing of different designs. The outlines were then filled with different enamels, each based on a different powdered metal oxide mixed with water or oil.³

Footnotes:

¹ Wan-go Weng. 1982. *The Palace Museum: Peking, Treasures of the Forbidden City*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

² Hugh Moss. 1976. *By Imperial Command: An Introduction to Ch'ing Imperial Enamels*. Hong Kong: Hibiya.

³ Jorge Welsh (ed.). 2015. *China of All Colours. Painted Enamels on Copper*. London and Lisbon: Jorge Welsh Research and Publishing. pp.26-28.