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Six-Sided Kangxi Silver Ewer or 'Chocolatière'

China, Kangxi Reign (1661-1722)

Silver with mercury gilding

19.2cm high, 18cm wide (including spout and handle), 8.2cm diameter

Stock no.: A5396

This silver ewer or *hu* (a closed tea or wine vessel) has a lobed six-sided body. Its form appears to derive from Chinese tea caddies. Indeed, a ewer in the Victoria & Albert Museum of the same form (accession no. [M.69:1.2-1955](#)) was initially catalogued as a tea caddy with later spouts and handles. However, the silver was tested of the body, handle, and spout were tested and revealed to be the same grade.¹

Each of the six sides of the ewer is decorated with a panel depicting pastoral scenes in relief against a matte background. Figures are situated amongst the natural landscape and buildings. Flowery trees are home to monkeys, whilst phoenixes fly in the Reishi mushroom clouds above. Whilst relief ornamentation in Tang dynasty silver ware was created by repoussé, or hammering from behind to create a raised surface, the relief in these ewers is created by applying cast silver elements.² This appliqué technique adds more silver to the object, increasing its value.³ The negative space is matte, an effect known in the Ming period as *shadi* 沙地 or 'sand ground', created by hammering punch marks into the silver.⁴ The contrast between the cast relief and hammered ground creates multiple planes of texture.

Two of the panels depict recurring motifs of the Ming and Qing periods. One shows a scholar on his way home from a party, a scene also depicted on a scroll by Dai Jin in 1455, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (accession no. [1992.132](#)). The next panel depicts the Tang poet Meng

Haoran (189-740CE) riding a donkey and searching for plum blossoms in the snow, the first sign of spring. This scene is frequently depicted on blue and white porcelain, such as c. 1644 plate in the Princessehof Museum, Leeuwarden (accession no. [1984-062](#)).⁵ On both this plate and the present ewer, Meng Haoran is accompanied by his servant.

A similar six-sided ewer now in the Château de Versailles (accession no. [V2018.8](#)), was given to Louis XIV by Phra Narai of Ayutthaya, Siam (now Thailand) in 1686.⁶ It is described in an inventory of 1697 as a Japanese chocolate pot, or 'une chocolatiere d'argent, fleurs d'or, d'un ouvrage fort revelé, du Japon'.⁷ Another ewer, of coffeepot form but ornamented with the same techniques, also entered the British Royal Collections between 1691 and 1723. The gift to Lady Elizabeth Stanhope is now kept in Buckingham Palace (accession no. RCIN 104100a-b).⁸ This has led to the belief that Kangxi silver ewers were primarily made for the European export market, where they were given as diplomatic gifts. However, they were also valued in China, and many with Chinese inventory marks have to come to light in recent years.⁹

A similar ewer in the Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg (accession no. [JC-87](#)) measures 20cm high, and is dated to 1670 to 1680. The technique of appliqué combined with *shadi* matte ground is also exhibited on a teapot dated to the late 17th to early 18th century (accession no. [JC-83](#)), and several wine cups dated to 1670 to 1680 (accession nos [JC-161](#) and [JC-162](#)). A teapot of more traditional form made in southern China and dated to c. 1680 is held in the Peabody Essex Museum (accession no. [E82766.AB](#)).

n.b. accession nos are clickable links

[1] See Jackson, Anna and Jaffer, Amin (eds) *Encounters: the meeting of Asia and Europe 1500-1800*. London: V&A, 2004, p.6.

[2] Eberhard, Susan. 'Metamorphic Medium: Materializing Silver in Modern China, 1682-1839.' (Doctoral thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2023), p. 95.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 88.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Ströber, Eva. 'Literati and Literary Themes on Porcelain from the collection Keramiekmuseum Princessehof Leeuwarden', *Aziatische Kunst* 41.2 (2011), p. 17.

[6] Eberhard, Susan. 'The Asian Silver Chocolatière: The Transpacific World in a Diplomatic Gift'. *Journal 18*, Issue 14 Silver (2022), retrieved online via <https://www.journal18.org/6528> on 21/01/2025.

[7] 'A chocolate pot made of silver, golden flowers, high-relief workmanship, made in Japan'. De Chaumont, Alexandre. *Relation de l'ambassade de Mr. le Chevalier de Chaumont à la Cour du Roy de Siam, avec ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable durant son voyage*. The Hague: Isaac Beauregard, 1733, p. 161 in Eberhard (2023), *op. cit.*, p. 129.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 109, fig. 3.9.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 130-131.

