



**Andrew Parker**  
Senior Valuer



## The History of Collecting Oriental Works of Art

In Europe the collecting of Oriental works of art goes back to the end of the 15th Century when Portuguese traders began to import Chinese porcelain and this fashion for exotic items from the Far East soon swept the whole of Europe with many countries vying to control the market.

Such was the popularity and value of Chinese porcelain that in 1717 Augustus the Strong of Saxony swapped 151 pieces of Chinese porcelain for 600 of the King of Prussia's finest soldiers.

Other materials were also highly sought after by the Europeans including silk, lacquer and Jade.

In the middle of the 17th century the civil war in China led to a shortage of Chinese goods and so the Western traders approached the Japanese to produce similar items, whilst back in Europe many people were trying to produce wares in the style of the Chinese.

Until fairly recently the market in the West has been dominated by Europeans and North Americans, though the Japanese, who had also collected Chinese porcelain for over 1,000 years, were also buyers.

### Recent Trends

In the 21st century the increasing wealth of a great many Chinese nationals has led them to try and buy back their heritage.

The best prices are paid for items made for the domestic market, particularly those made for the Imperial Court, whilst pieces made for export to the West are largely looked down upon as being inferior.

Imperial porcelain from the 18th century is especially sought after for its high quality, which was often dismissed by Western collectors as lacking the soul and character of Ming and earlier wares.

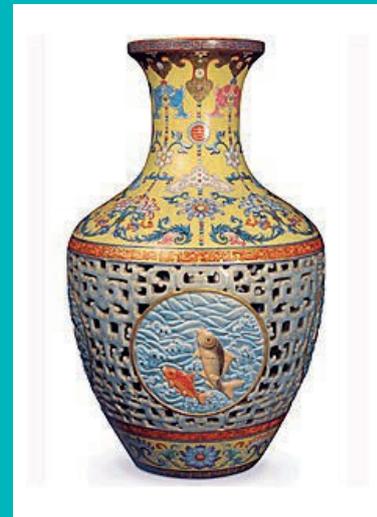
The finest of these 18th century pieces make many millions of pounds, most famously the vase, made during the reign of the Emperor Qianlong, who ruled China from 1736 to 1795, which sold at a small auction in the Home Counties for £53.1 million.

In recent years the Chinese market has become much more selective as knowledge has increased amongst the dealers and collectors in mainland China, where a few years ago Chinese pieces were bought in an almost indiscriminate manner there is now a greater appreciation of the range of Chinese artefacts and their relative quality.

The high prices and subsequent publicity achieved by Chinese piece brought a considerable number of items onto the market and so the prices for more common pieces fell.

Another result of the high prices being paid for Chinese pieces has been that extremely good copies are now being made which has undermined certain sections of the market and means that provenance has now become of even greater importance than previously, with collectors looking for evidence that a piece has a confirmed history.

Because of strict limitations on the export of cultural items from China, once a piece has been bought and taken to China it can no longer leave the country creating a



Vase, made during the reign of the Emperor Qianlong. £53.1 million

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diminishing supply of good quality pieces in the West, one effect of this has been to broaden the range of pieces collected, pushing up the prices for Ming and earlier pieces, the increase in knowledge of Chinese collectors has also enabled this to happen.

Recently a porcelain brush washer from the Imperial Ru kiln, made around 1100 AD, 13cm diameter with a pale blue/green glaze and typical finely controlled cracking to the glaze, sold in Hong Kong for 294,287,500 HKD, around £30 million.

The entry of the Chinese collectors into the market has pushed many of the finest pieces out of the reach of Western Collectors, though there are still areas that are affordable and have not yet been greatly affected by recent events, Chinese export porcelain from the 18th century is still remarkably inexpensive with many attractive piece passing through UK auctions and fairs on a daily basis.

Values for attractive pieces often being measured in the tens and hundreds of pounds rather than the many thousands and even millions, it is possible to buy individual plates from the 18th century in good condition for less than £50, fine export examples with the most attractive and rarest decoration rarely cost more than a couple of thousand leaving a broad and interesting collecting area that is still surprisingly affordable.



1100 AD porcelain brush washer. £30 million



Chinese porcelain plate, Qianlong period (1736-1795) £40



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