FALLING FOR ANCIENT JADE

Jade has been prized for thousands of years in China. Ancient specimens of the precious stone, which embody history and craftsmanship, are highly sought after by collectors. But for those thinking of venturing into this field, making sure you have the genuine article is both crucial and challenging.

STORY CHRISTY CHOI

Terracotta warriors, Buddha sculptures, Chinese zitan furniture. Hollywood Road has long been the place to go in Hong Kong for hunters of antique items such as these.

On this winding hillside road in Sheung Wan, collectors have also come here to find jade from long-time dealers. Mei Ling Chiang is the director of Oi Ling Antiques, a family-run business specialising in antique furniture. While she has a few pieces of archaic jade for sale, she insists she is no jade expert, but can relate what she has observed over the past two decades as a trader on the street.

During this time, she has occasionally helped collector friends acquire pieces and put together exhibitions. These days she only sees a good piece “once every few months” she says, as she pulls up images of pieces sent to her by friends and clients on her smartphone. Collecting archaic or ancient jade is a high-stakes game, and fakes have become all the more common as demand has risen over the years.

Even a dealer that has real things might sell you a fake. They will save the good stuff for long-term clients,” says Renee Chiang, a decade-long collector of archaic jade, and editor and co-owner at New Century Press.

“You need to be willing to make your mistakes,” she adds. Chiang and her husband, New Century publisher Bao Pu, have collected some 100 pieces – including more fakes than she’d care to admit – drawn by the allure of the cool translucent stone.

Jade, unlike diamonds or other gemstones, is not a single type of rock, but has long been a catchall phrase used to describe tough stones favoured by the Chinese for their hardness and translucent beauty. They’re usually one of two types of crystalline rock found most commonly in shades of green or white called nephrite and jadeite. Jadeite is rarer, and can be found in a broader range of colours, including blue, pink, mauve, emerald green and lavender.

Because of the hardness of jade, it took ancient craftsmen an enormous amount of time, effort and patience to work with the stone. A piece could take months or years to create – not so much carved as eroded down – using either bamboo, other harder stones or a slurry of sand.

“You can feel how it’s worn down,” says Chiang, as she hands over a small inch and a half diameter bi, a flat sphere with a hole through the centre. The bi is one of the most common shapes found in the graves of ancient nobles. It was likely used in rituals, although no surviving texts from the time describe what they were used for.

The pattern continues to be used in modern day jade carvings and ornaments. Jade is still worn by some as talismans intended to ward off evil spirits. It’s believed that when a piece of jade jewellery breaks, it has protected its wearer from harm.

ABOVE Openwork ornament in the shape of a dragon on cloud scrolls. Dated from the Tang or Liao dynasty, 9th to 10th century, this ancient jade is part of the Cissy and Robert Tang Collection currently being exhibited at the Art Museum of The Chinese University of Hong Kong.
The peak

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It’s little details like this that help Chiang decide whether or not an item is genuine. In more than 10 years of collecting, Chiang and her husband have amassed an arsenal of knowledge. What helped led to this expertise was the unintentional purchase of a fake. One day, 11 years ago, in a doctor’s office, Chiang came across several pieces of jade laid across a table. One shaped like a turtle shell caught her eye. Spellbound, she convinced the doctor to introduce her to a Kowloon-based dealer. “I always liked sculpture,” says Chiang, adding that her family have been involved in the museum business.

Soon she and her husband were the proud owners of several pieces of what they thought was Neolithic Hongshan archaic jade aged between about 5,000 to 6,000 years. Hongshan sites have been found across an area stretching from Liaoning to Inner Mongolia and the culture, thought to be one of the oldest to feature carved jade, is said to have influenced that of early China and Korea. But after months of studying, poring over books and catalogues alike, the couple felt something was wrong. “We felt like such stupid dupes,” says Chiang. The price they paid, Chiang says, should have tipped them off. The paid just a few thousand for the pieces, which would normally have much more. Despite being stung, they did not want to be beaten and caught the collector’s bug. They spent a lot of time learning about ancient jade; reading books and catalogues, visiting museums, talking to curators, dealers, academics, auction houses and more. “You cannot trust your instincts, you really need to study,” says Chiang. And that’s a point that dealers, collectors and auction house experts all agree on: Study, study, study.

Collect with care

“Archaic jade is a minefield at the moment,” says Tsang Chi-fan, a specialist in Chinese ceramics and works of art at Christie’s. Unlike paintings, mummies and pottery, whose age can be gauged using radiocarbon dating, ancient jade is notoriously difficult to date. That’s because carbon dating reveals the age of the rock itself, not when it was carved.

As a result, curators and collectors must closely examine the items themselves, with reference to the observations of archaeologists who have carefully catalogued items and put together guidelines based on such pointers as carving patterns, forms, tool marks and techniques to differentiate whether a piece is from the Song Dynasty, Neolithic or other time period. For example, if tiny particles of metal from modern grinders are embedded in the jade, it’s unlikely the piece is ancient. And even if a piece satisfies certain guidelines, there’s no guarantee they are of a certain era. Much as art students in the present day might imitate van Goghs and da Vincis, craftsmen of later eras reproduced ancient styles; not necessarily as fakes, but as a tribute to early craftsmanship. Two renowned experts can disagree about the age of a piece. Even if they agree on a time period, that period could span several hundred years and Chinese dynasties. Tsang advises anyone who wants to take up collecting jade to get a real hands-on feel for the ancient stones. The British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum will arrange jade handling sessions for those who make appointments ahead of time, she says. But with the threat of the destruction of cultural heritage by grave robbers, the sale of such items, which can include early jades, bronzes and pottery, are classified as special Chinese cultural relics.

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“YOU CANNOT TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS; YOU REALLY NEED TO STUDY” — Renee Chiang
“You’re not allowed to sell archaic jade in China,” says Tsang. “You’ll get in big trouble with the authorities in 2000, says Tsang. “When considering a piece of ancient jade, consider the following:

1. Are the designs from the right period?
2. What’s the provenance?
3. Is there documentation or study of the piece?
4. Is there evidence of modern tool work?
5. Is there documentation from dig to sale?
6. What do the experts say?
7. What is the dealer’s reputation?
8. Age doesn’t necessarily equal value.

A CONSUMING PASSION

“I find I can only buy things these days when there’s some kind of catastrophe,” said Robert Tang, a permanent judge on Hong Kong’s Court of Final Appeal and long-time archaic jade collector. While speaking at a guided tour of an exhibition of his and his wife Cindy Tang’s jade collection at the Art Museum of The Chinese University of Hong Kong in December, the exhibition, which features more than 100 pieces of archaic jade spanning Neolithic times to the late Qing period, is being held until February 28. Tang said his last purchase at auction was in New York after the Lehman Brothers went bankrupt in 2008.

“Chinese Jades From the Cissy and Robert Tang Collection, a large coffee table-sized book which showcases the couple’s special collection, was published late last year. At a book launch event hosted by Christie’s in September, Tang shared anecdotes about how he built up his collection in discussion with Jenny So, Adjunct Professor at the Department of Fine Arts at Chinese University and a former senior curator of Chinese art at The Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. Tang’s passion as a collector is clear. “I tend to be an impulsive buyer. If I see something that I like, I make up my mind immediately,” he said. “If I take longer, it’s because I’m thinking how on earth am I going to pay for it.”

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