JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER 3rd (JDR 3rd) inherited a love of Chinese ceramics from his father, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who famously delighted in his collection of Kangxi period (1662–1722) enameled porcelains and Ming dynasty (1368–1644) jahua wares. JDR 3rd grew up in homes where these ceramics, long and widely favoured by European collectors, were displayed prominently as decorative items. Today, many porcelains from the collection of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. can be found in public and private collections, including those of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Rhode Island School of Design and Kykuit, the Rockefeller Estate in Pocantico Hills, New York.

JDR 3rd’s upbringing gave him a familiarity with Chinese porcelain, but his travels to Asia, beginning with a world tour upon his completion of college, provided him with a broader exposure as well as an Asian context for them. When he began to build his own collection of Asian art, the core of which now forms the Mr and Mrs John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection at Asia Society, New York, JDR 3rd and his wife, Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller, selected exquisite examples with the assistance of Sherman E. Lee, the renowned Asian art specialist. With Blanchette and Lee at his side, JDR 3rd cast his net wider than his father, as he searched for porcelain and other high-fired ceramics.
that had historically appealed to Chinese and Japanese collectors. These were ceramics that Lee had the great fortune to have studied closely during his experience as a museum curator in the United States and, even more notably, while working for the Arts and Monuments Division of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers in Japan from 1946 to 1948.

Under Lee’s tutelage, the collection of JDR 3rd grew to include the most refined Chinese imperial porcelains, as well as pristine, quality examples of wares traditionally manufactured for a broader domestic market and Asian export. Among the Chinese ceramics they selected together—that later became part of the Asia Society’s Mr and Mrs John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection—are sixty that date between the Song (960–1279) and Qing (1644–1911) periods. The majority of these are truly stellar examples acquired by the Rockefellers from dealers and collectors in North America and Europe between 1960 and 1977.

Two Northern Song period (960–1127) Ding wares, a dish with moulded decoration of a dragon in clouds and a bowl with incised design, form part of the group of Song to Qing period ceramics at Asia Society Museum (1). The conically-shaped bowl is an exquisite example of Ding ware with incised decoration. As is customary, the sides of the bowl have been left undecorated. The inside of the bowl, however, is whimsically decorated with an incised design of lotus flowers and leaves composed of fluent arching lines and arabesques. The lotus, of course, is a flower long associated with Buddhism because it emerges pure after growing out of muddy waters. The elegant incised motif and simplicity of the colour seem to highlight this otherworldly ideal. The bowl was dipped in a glaze that fired a creamy white on the buff-coloured body. When held, the thinness of the potting becomes immediately apparent. Although the diameter of the bowl is nearly 22.5 cm, it is astoundingly light in weight. Many high quality Ding wares, among the best used at the Northern Song court, have a metal-bound rim. This means of covering the unglazed lip was a practical solution in preventing a rough lip (of a ware that was fired upside down) from warping while being more appealing to the eye and to the touch. In the case of this bowl the metal band around the lip is copper, which is a warm brown that beautifully complements the colour of the glaze. Also characteristic of Ding wares are the “tear drops” (known as mang in Chinese) that are the result of dipping the wares in glaze. Both the Song court and collectors have traditionally seen these as flaws. This bowl is notable for the even application of the glaze over the majority of the interior and exterior of its body. The only exception is an approximately 8 cm area where five slightly raised “tear drops” streak downwards from the lip to the foot on the exterior.

Another Northern Song work in the collection, from Shaanxi province, which is adjacent to Hebei province where the Ding kilns were located, is a green-glazed dish with carved and combed designs (2). This is an especially fine product of the Yaozhou kilns. This particular example, like the Ding bowl, has floral and vegetal motifs decorating its interior—in this case a peony design. This design of the flower associated with wealth and rank in China was also added before the piece was glazed. Although the technique, ware and flower depicted are completely different, both designs exploit C-shaped and S-shaped curves to create a

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Field of flowers and foliage. It is the crispness and fluency of this craftsmanship that is a hallmark of the best Northern Song ceramic decoration. The deep carving and comb marks of the Yaozhou dish design creates recessed areas where the olive green of the iron-oxide infused glaze pools over the grey-coloured clay body, forming darker areas that help to define the sensuous pattern. The glaze is at its thinnest, and lightest in colour, at the top of the convex rim of the dish.

A peony takes the central place on the design of an outstanding broad-shouldered Cizhou bottle in the JDR 3rd Collection (3). Cizhou wares are known for their bold, graphic, slip painted and carved black and white designs. When these wares, also made in Northern Chinese kilns, have carved designs, they can appear somewhat crude in terms of their decoration. This bottle is extraordinary because the pattern is both beautifully finished and balanced across the vessel. Petals, leaves and curving patterns, at the collar and above the foot of the bottle, are clearly defined by the white areas that have been carved away.

Kilns that produced Cizhou wares also created black wares admired for their warm, dark colour from iron in the glaze. A stellar example is a large brush washer, with silvery spots densely speckling the black glaze covering the sides and interior of the bowl (4). This “oil spot” effect, the result of excess iron rising to the surface of the glaze during the firing process, was deliberate. Only on the rim of the brush washer, where the glaze is very thin, appears a warm slightly reddish-brown colour. The low sides and wide mouth of the bowl would provide easy access for a painter or calligrapher wanting to rinse out brushes or lean and soak them in water, but the profile is also pleasingly squat and curved at the sides.
The JDR 3rd Collection also includes a number of very special porcelains from the renowned kilns at Jingdezhen in Jiangxi province. The earliest example in the collection is a mid-14th century underglaze cobalt blue platter, decorated with delightful lively brushwork (5). The shape and scale of the platter suggest that it would have been produced for export to Iran (Persia), Turkey or India where this hard, white ware with blue decoration was highly desirable. An inscription in Farsi, inscribed on the outside of the platter’s foot ring, shows that this was most likely the case (6). It is impossible to determine where precisely the platter was originally shipped. However, the inscription has the name of Shah Jahan, the mid-17th century Mughal emperor, and has a date corresponding to 1652/1653, so it certainly had reached India by that time. One can absolutely see why Shah Jahan would have been charmed by the fabulous galloping qilin at the centre of the platter and the fluid vegetal and landscape elements around it. The cobalt ore, rich in iron oxide, used to create this decoration was imported from Iran. This diffused into the thick clear glaze, creating the darker blue “heaped and piled” areas found throughout the design.
When Jingdezhen potters crafted an impressive blue and white flask, decorated front and back with a magnificent three-clawed dragon, in the early 15th century, they were still using cobalt imported from Iran (7). This is evident from the “heaped and piled” darkened areas on the dragons as well as on the lotus scrolls that cover the surface of the vessel. On the flask there is a change from the kind of segmented decorative pattern seen on the earlier Yuan period (1271–1368) porcelains, like the platter (5). Now, the fabulous creature and floral scrolls have broken free of the constraints of decorative bands that are characteristic of the designs of the prior century. The large scale of the flask and the presence of the dragon suggest that it was created as a court gift from the emperor. As similar flasks are now in important collections in Tehran and Istanbul, it is quite possible that it was intended as an imperial gift to a foreign ruler or dignitary.

International exchange, of course, went in both directions. The shape of another flask in the collection (8) harkens to metalwork forms that emerged from the Middle East and surely appeared exotic to the Chinese. This all-
white porcelain flask, also from the early 15th century Ming era, exhibits hallmarks of Yongle (1403–1424) imperial taste. At first glance, the object appears undecorated. The faintly blue “sweet white” (tianbai) glaze evenly covers the body of the vessel, but, in fact, a ceramic artist deliberately incised the still somewhat malleable vessel before the application of the glaze. An open lotus image is dominant on this flask’s so-called hidden decoration (anhu). Smaller lotuses peck out from between the lappet-shaped petals of this large lotus. A small lotus has also been incised into each of the nüji-shaped handle ends that rest on the shoulders of the flask.

By the time of the creation of a petite Chenghua (1465–1487) wine cup (9), the Ming potters at Jingdezhen were using domestically sourced manganese cobalt to produce blue decoration under clear glaze. As seen on this cup, the blue was less saturated than that created with cobalt imported from Iran. Nevertheless, porcelain wares of the Chenghua era have been held in the highest regard in China since their creation. This cup is decorated with the “joined colours” (doucai) technique that combines underglaze blue with overglaze enamel. Prior to being filled in with enamel colours and then fired again at a lower temperature, the entire pattern on the ceramic had been carefully delineated with cobalt blue. A cheerful play of flowers, foliage and dragon medallions of blue, yellow, green and red stand out against the lovely white tone of the glaze that covers the elegantly thin walls of the cup. The underside of the cup’s low foot is marked with an underglaze blue six-character Chenghua period mark.

A mid to late 15th century stem cup in the collection also combines underglaze blue with overglaze enamel (10). The boldly coloured ritual cup is decorated with flying creatures, rendered in underglaze blue over the waves of a red sea with white foam. A writhing winged dragon is painted at the bottom of the interior of the cup. Just below the lip, which elegantly curves outward, the exterior is decorated with a band of the archaic “thunder pattern” (leizhen) found on Shang dynasty ritual vessels. Below this is another winged dragon, a winged deer, a winged elephant, a qilin-like creature with a wild mane, and near the bottom of the vessel, a winged horse and deer and two flying fish. This imagery of auspicious hybrid creatures over the sea may be indicative of China’s 15th century maritime ambitions and prowess. The red sea, defined by lines and curling foam of clear glazed, but otherwise undecorated, white porcelain, continues onto the stem of the cup.

Although on a much smaller scale than blue and white wares, the Jingdezhen kilns were also producing copper-red monochromes as early as the Yuan dynasty. During the Xuande reign (1426–1435) of the Ming period, the Jingdezhen potters were able to improve copper-red wares so they did not run, but still, only limited numbers were successfully produced. A mid to late 15th century dish in the
Wine cup. Ming dynasty, Chenghua period (1465–1487), China, Jiangxi province. Porcelain painted with underglaze cobalt blue and overglaze enamels (Jingdezhen ware). Height 4.8 cm, diameter 7.3 cm. Asia Society, New York: Mr and Mrs John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection, 1979.175

Dish. Ming dynasty, mid to late 15th century (probably Chenghua period, 1465–1487), China, Jiangxi province. Porcelain with copper-red glaze (Jingdezhen ware). Height 3.5 cm, diameter 16.5 cm. Asia Society, New York: Mr and Mrs John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection, 1979.177

JDR 3rd Collection is coated with a glaze not as strong in colour as the Xuande examples (11). A red vessel of this shape was most likely created for use in imperial ritual and ceremony. Unlike those of the earlier Xuande period, some small black veins are present within the red glaze. The presence of tiny bubbles, that were trapped in the glaze during firing, is revealed by the "orange-peel" surface of the glaze, a quality also found in Xuande era copper reds.

After a hiatus resulting from unstable leadership and resulting destruction, the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen were rebuilt, and resumed production in 1683. The extraordinary technological developments that then took place in enamel glazing on porcelain during the Qing dynasty are beautifully illustrated on two Yongzheng era (1723–1735) works in the JDR 3rd Collection. One is a grand wide-shouldered bottle embellished with auspicious fruit, including peaches, pomegranates and loquats, and camellia flowers (12). These motifs can be found on many Qing dynasty and later porcelains, but a careful look at the quality of the colouration of the fruit, flowers and leaves reveals the mastery of Yongzheng era enamel application. The opaque overglaze enamels appear in a subtle range of tones so that, for example, the colour of a peach gently moves from deep pink to a lighter pink that then gently blends with a light to an ever so slightly darker green. The second is a lovely overglaze enamel palette, used on the exterior of a small bowl that is decorated with a popular bird and flower motif (13). Two quail, with carefully articulated plumage, walk among nandina, narcissus, nymp-shape fungus and garden rocks. This bowl, which bears a Yongzheng reign mark like the above example, features a combination of auspicious elements that frequently appear as New Year or birthday wishes. Also like the bottle, the composition of the painting is carefully balanced to form a play of positive and negative space as one’s eye moves around the vessel. Each turn allows for a novel and aesthetically pleasing view. The interior of the bowl has been left plain.

On promising the collection of Asian art to Asia Society, JDR 3rd expressed his intentions in an interview with The Washington Post on February 8th, 1974: “Art has tremendous appeal and I would hope that with greater emphasis on the art factor in the total cultural picture, it would give the cultural prominence that I feel is important if we’re going to develop a really basic appreciation and respect and
understanding between ourselves and any other country”. It was an appreciation for China’s long history of cultural achievements that motivated JDR 3rd and Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller to collect those artworks that this article has touched on—some of the finest ceramics the world has ever produced. Thanks to its mission and goals, Asia Society continues to share these breathtaking achievements with scholars, students, collectors and other visitors from America and beyond.

Bibliography
