

The Yuan Lacuna: The ‘David’ vases and UK collectors of early Chinese blue-and-white porcelain in the early 20th century

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ABSTRACT

In 1929, R. L. Hobson (1872–1941), Keeper of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum, was the first to publish and formally acknowledge the significance of the pair of Yuan blue-and-white temple vases, now known as the David vases. It was the first time in the United Kingdom that this type of blue-and-white porcelain was firmly established as being made in the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). Before this, most Yuan blue-and-white porcelain in UK collections was ascribed to either the Song (960–1279) or the Ming (1368–1644) dynasties. Given the dated inscriptions and physical evidence of the David vases, the article considers how and why it took another half a century in the West for a dating framework for Yuan porcelain to be finally established. The article examines the early twentieth-century history of the David vases, before they came into the possession of Sir Percival David (1892–1964) and considers examples of Yuan blue-and-white belonging to early collectors including George Eumorfopoulos (1863–1939) and Charles E. Russell (1866–1960) and how the objects were dated, catalogued and exhibited. With little access to Chinese archaeological research, these early UK collectors and curators depended on philological and documentary evidence to frame the physical evidence they encountered. The article considers the material available to them and the pre-conceived notions and contexts in the UK up to the middle of the twentieth century that allowed the David vases to exist in a virtual vacuum. This paper charts the gradual and piecemeal emergence of scholarship and dating on Yuan blue-and-white porcelain in the UK, the collections and collectors that contributed to the study and the factors that underpinned its evolution.

This article considers the early 20th century pre-Percival David history of the David vases in the United Kingdom (hereafter UK) - when they were first published and how their significance was gradually recognised. The paper will look at the dating of other Yuan (1271–1368) blue-and-white porcelains in key UK collections to see if this changed after the David vases were published. It will also examine what other scholarly material was available to early academics and collectors in the West. The aim is to see what parameters were used in the creation of a dating framework for Yuan blue-and-white porcelain in the UK at this time and how that shifted over fifty years.

20th century ‘Pre-David’ history of the David vases

The David vases are likely to have been imported to the UK in the early 20th century. It has been suggested by Lee and Ho that at least one

had belonged to Wu Lai-hsi (circa 1881–1951) [1], the famous collector-dealer of imperial ceramics (Fig. 1). Wu was a Straits Chinese who attended Cambridge as a Queen’s Scholar. He subsequently worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Peking.¹ Whether or not Wu actually owned one or both of the vases is unsubstantiated, but one of them was acquired by Charles Ernest Russell (1866–1960), certainly before 1929. Russell was on the Council of the Oriental Ceramic Society (hereafter OCS) - a small, key group of collectors and curators in the UK who collected and published on Chinese ceramics.²

In 1935, Sotheby’s auctioned part of Russell’s collection, including his altar vase, its significance highlighted by a double page entry, including a translation of the dated inscription (Fig. 2) [2]. John Sparks Limited bought the vase for Sir Percival David (1892–1964) for £360. Later in 1935, David lent it to the *International Exhibition of Chinese Art* held in London, at the Royal Academy of Art (hereafter RA). David was

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¹ Wu Lai-hsi’s Straits Chinese name was Goh Lai Hee. For local press cuttings on his career, see <https://tombs.bukitbrown.org/2021/04/goh-lai-hee.html>, accessed 22 May 2025.

² For a short history of the Oriental Ceramic Society, see Frances Wood, “To widen appreciation and to acquire knowledge”: The Oriental Ceramic Society, in: Sarah Wong and Stacey Pierson (Eds.), *Collectors, Curators, Connoisseurs: A Century of the Oriental Ceramic Society 1921–2021*, Oriental Ceramic Society, London, 2021, pp. 12–19.

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Fig. 1. Wu Lai-hsi (Wu Laixi, circa 1881–1951 吳賡熙).



Fig. 3. The *International Exhibition of Chinese Art*, Royal Academy of Art, London, 1935–36. Tang Xifen (Tang Hsi Fen 唐惜芬), Exhibition Secretary and Sir Percival David, Exhibition Committee Director, examining bronzes in preparation for the exhibition. ©Royal Academy of Arts.

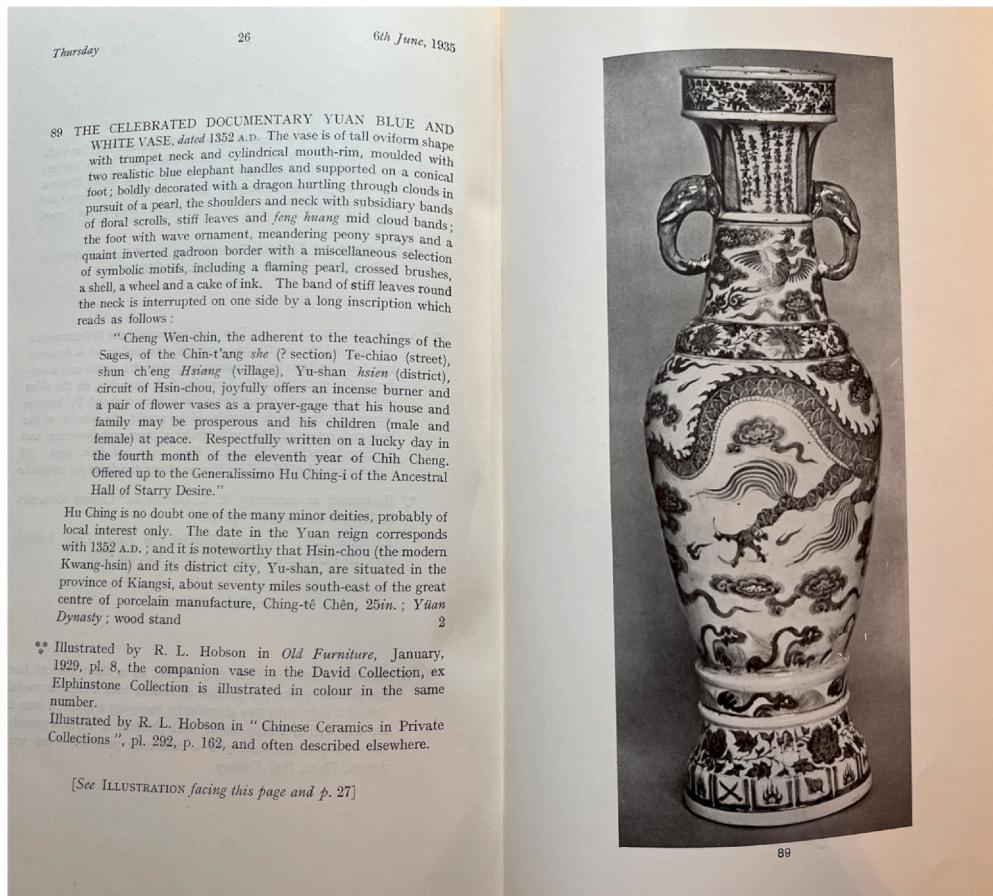
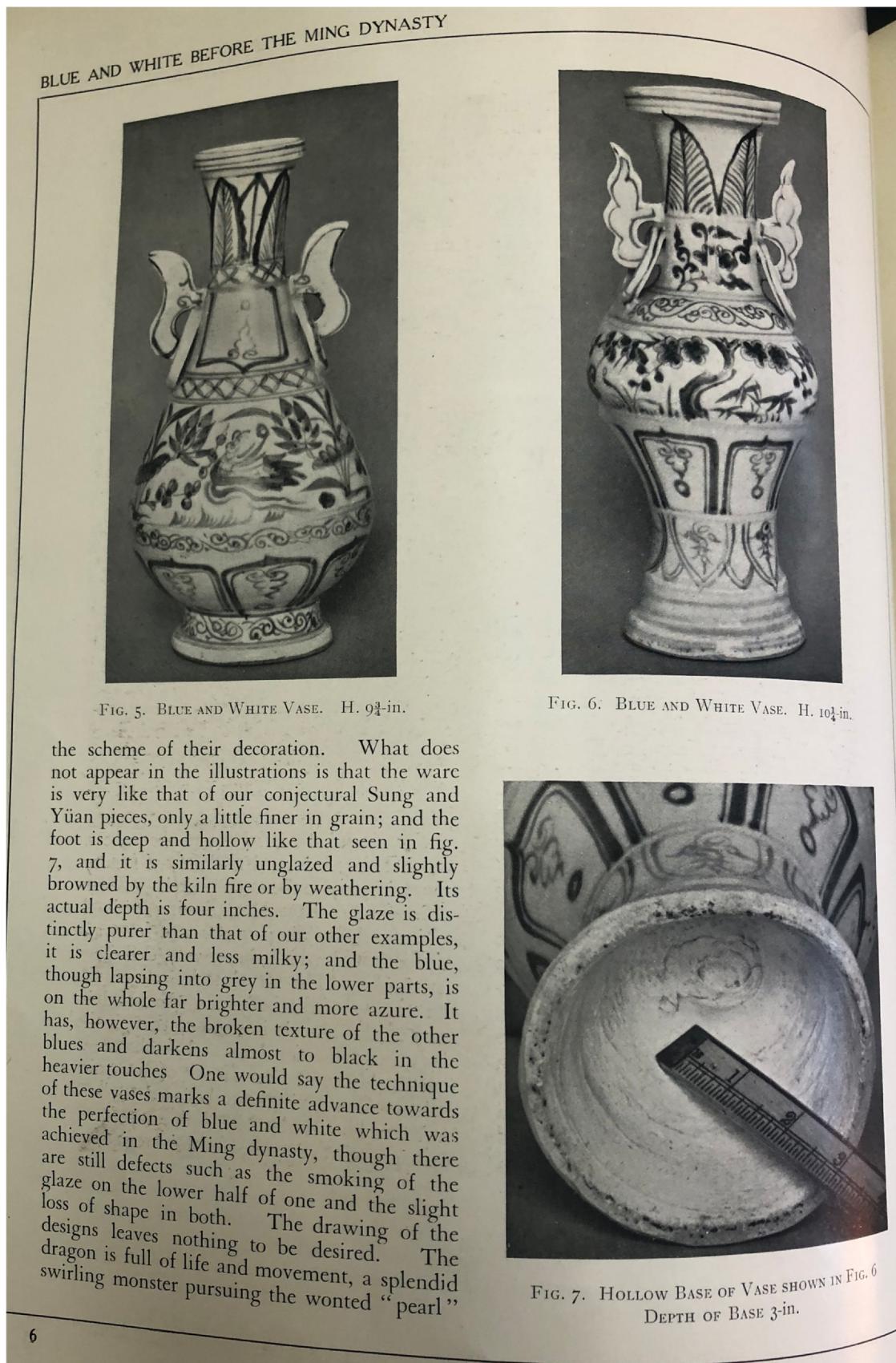


Fig. 2. Catalogue entry for one of the pair of altar vases of 1351 that was offered at Sotheby's, 1935, as part of Charles E. Russell's collection, and purchased by Sir Percival David. After Sotheby's, London, 6th June 1935, number 89.

FIG. 5. BLUE AND WHITE VASE. H. 9 $\frac{1}{4}$ -in.FIG. 6. BLUE AND WHITE VASE. H. 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ -in.

the scheme of their decoration. What does not appear in the illustrations is that the ware is very like that of our conjectural Sung and Yüan pieces, only a little finer in grain; and the foot is deep and hollow like that seen in fig. 7, and it is similarly unglazed and slightly browned by the kiln fire or by weathering. Its actual depth is four inches. The glaze is distinctly purer than that of our other examples, it is clearer and less milky; and the blue, though lapsing into grey in the lower parts, is on the whole far brighter and more azure. It has, however, the broken texture of the other blues and darkens almost to black in the heavier touches. One would say the technique of these vases marks a definite advance towards the perfection of blue and white which was achieved in the Ming dynasty, though there are still defects such as the smoking of the glaze on the lower half of one and the slight loss of shape in both. The drawing of the designs leaves nothing to be desired. The dragon is full of life and movement, a splendid swirling monster pursuing the wonted "pearl"

FIG. 7. HOLLOW BASE OF VASE SHOWN IN FIG. 6
DEPTH OF BASE 3-in.

Fig. 4. Comparison of the dated Yuan altar vases of 1351 in Fig. 2 with smaller vessels from the Russell collection, which Hobson believed to be Song (960–1279). After R. L. Hobson, Blue and white before the Ming dynasty: a pair of dated Yuan vases, *Old Furniture: A Magazine of Domestic Ornament*, Jan-April 1929.



Fig. 5. Underglaze blue porcelain *guan* jar, Yuan dynasty, height: 39.4 cm (PDF.620). ©The Trustees of the British Museum.

an instigator of this landmark exhibition and its Exhibition Committee Director (Fig. 3), lending over 300 objects including his newly acquired Yuan altar vase [3].

The other vase was perhaps split from its pair when it arrived and bought by Mountstuart W. Elphinstone (1871–1957), a collector and OCS Honorary Secretary. David later acquired this vase directly from his fellow collector. According to Lady David: ‘Sir Percival then persuaded Elphinstone to exchange some things for his (vase), and as Elphinstone felt that the vases should be a pair, he let my husband have it’ [4].

While still in separate collections, the vases were first published together in 1929 by R. L. Hobson (1872–1941), Keeper of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum and an OCS founder member. He was close to many of the OCS collectors and familiar with their collections, many of which were later published by him. His article proclaims the importance of the vases and discusses their dating:

‘At last a real document has arrived, a pair of dated blue-and-white porcelain vases: not indeed Sung, but at any rate, pre-Ming’ [5].

Hobson compares the altar vases with several smaller vessels from the Russell collection (Fig. 4). However, he believes that a ‘considerable period of evolution separates the two groups’ and that the small examples may be Song (960–1279). Though Hobson had the evidence of the David vases, like other UK scholars, he still believed that blue-and-white porcelain probably began in the Song. Hobson also translates the inscriptions on the vases, though the 11th year of the Zhizheng reign (1333–1370) is transcribed as 1352, not 1351.³ Nevertheless, this landmark article is the first to highlight the importance of the vases and publish them as a pair in the West.

Yuan blue-and-white in some early UK collections

During this early 20th century re-discovery, publication and re-uniting of the pair of vases, what Yuan blue-and-white porcelains were

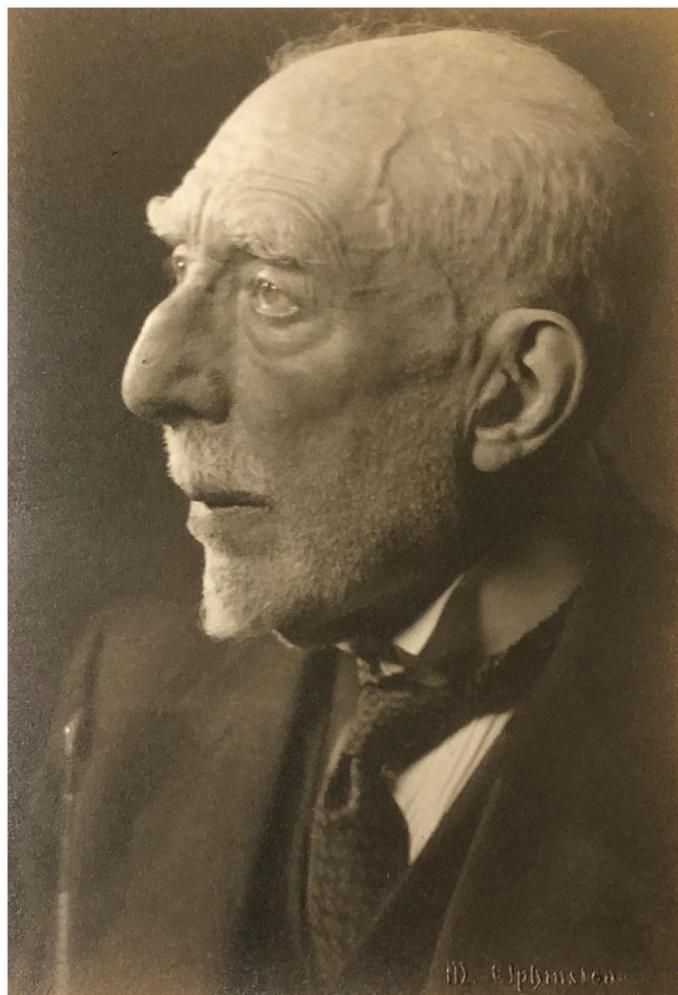


Fig. 6. Photograph of George Eumorfopoulos (1863–1939), first President of the Oriental Ceramic Society, taken by Mountstuart W. Elphinstone (1871–1957).

in other UK collections? How did the vases change the perception and dating of other Yuan ceramics?

Hobson published the Percival David collection catalogue in 1934, a year before David acquired the altar vase at auction. Hobson’s introduction transitions from Song to Ming (1368–1644) ceramics, ignoring the Yuan dynasty completely [6]. However, according to Lady David, for David, ‘the Yuan dynasty was another favourite period. He didn’t get any Yuan blue-and-white in China because there wasn’t any in the Imperial collections’ [4].

The David catalogue includes two Yuan dynasty jars, both of which were assigned to the 15th century, according to the standard dating of the period. One is a *guan* jar (Fig. 5) which Hobson compares to the example in the Topkapi Saray [6].⁴ The other David *guan* jar, with openwork ogival panels, decorated in underglaze blue with copper red highlights, had belonged to fellow collector, Stephen D. Winkworth (d. 1938) [6].⁵

⁴ Hobson remarks that the *guan* jar was ‘found in Constantinople’ and mentions ‘a similar jar in the Old Seraglio Collection’, see Hobson 1934, p. 120.

⁵ In addition to the underglaze blue and copper red jar in the Sir Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art Trust, now in the British Museum, there appear to be only four others of this type known. Two were excavated in Baoding, Hebei province in 1964, now respectively in the Palace Museum, Beijing and in Hebei Province Museum, Shijiazhuang. Two others are in private collections. Refer to Sarah Wong, Yuan porcelain innovation and adaptation: an underglaze blue- and red-decorated *guan* jar, in: Eskenazi Limited, *Blue and white Porcelain from the Yuan and Early Ming Dynasties*, London, 2024, pp. 10–21.

³ The 1352 date given by Hobson is only finally corrected to 1351 by John Pope in 1952.



Fig. 7. The Yuan dynasty underglaze blue porcelain flask (under the sideboard) in George Eumorfopoulos' dining room in his home at 7 Chelsea Embankment, London.

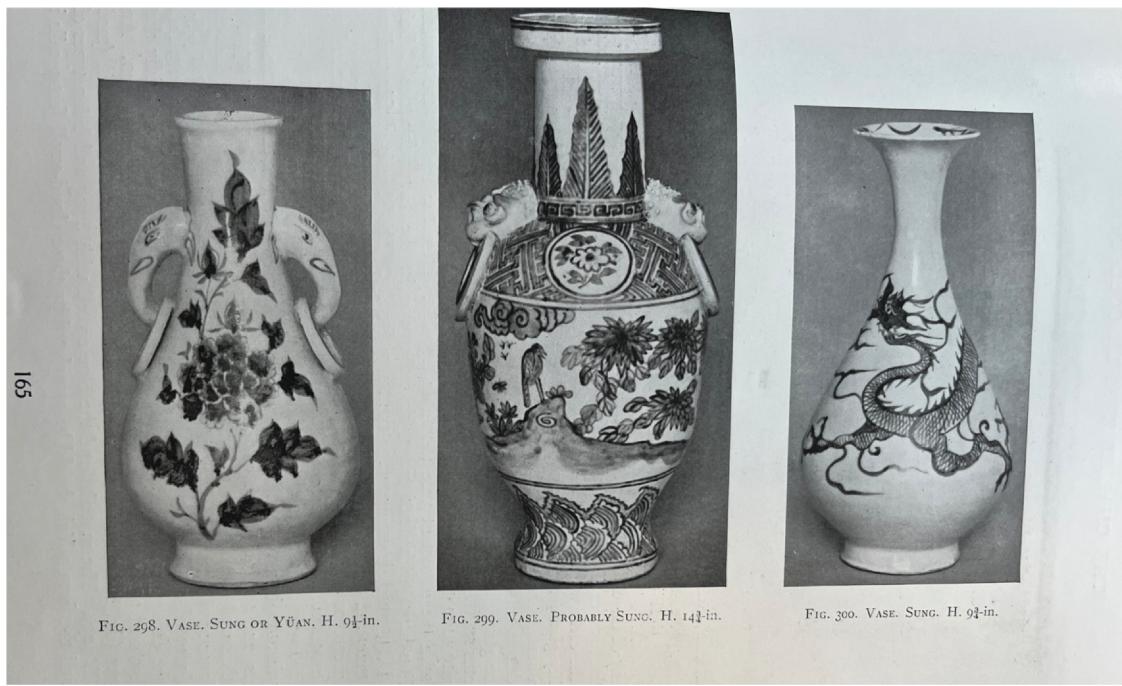


Fig. 8. Dating of a Yuan vase with a single dragon to the Song dynasty by Hobson. After Hobson, Rackham and King, *Chinese Ceramics in Private Collections*, Halton & Truscott Smith, London, 1931.

George Eumorfopoulos (1863–1939) was a fellow collector, first president and OCS founder member (Fig. 6) whose extraordinary collection was displayed in his Chelsea home. By the mid 1930s, it had to

be sold and was acquired by the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum (hereafter V&A). Despite its scope, there were very few Yuan blue-and-white porcelains, the most notable being a flattened,

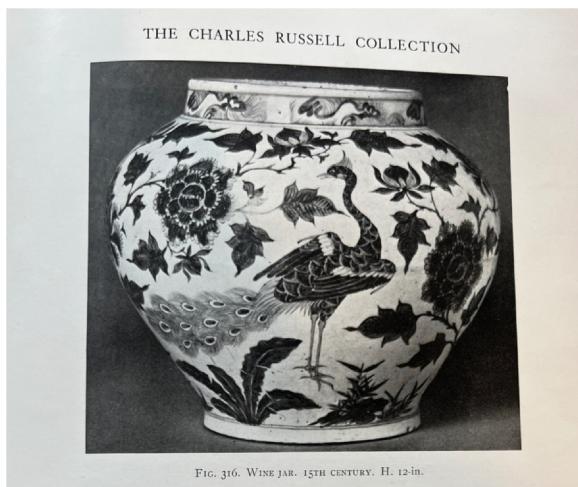


Fig. 9. Dating of a Yuan jar with a peacock to the 15th century by Hobson. After Hobson, Rackham and King, Chinese Ceramics in Private Collections, Halton & Truscott Smith, London, 1931.



Fig. 11. Underglaze blue porcelain *guan* jar, Yuan dynasty, height: 30.5 cm (OC.93-1946). ©Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Hobson's original article on the altar vases was re-published in 1931, illustrating only the Russell altar vase with some additional objects from that collection. Hobson explains that for pre-Ming blue-and-white:

'free use was made of Mr. Charles Russell's collection Mr. Russell was one of the first to explore the subject in a practical manner by getting together a good series of relevant specimens' [8].

Hobson now dated some smaller vessels in Russell's collection to the Yuan dynasty, citing their relationship to the altar vases. This included two vases, both with flanged handles, decorated in registers and with deep stepped bases, like the altar vases. However, another Yuan vase painted with a single dragon is dated to the Song dynasty, while a *guan* jar painted with a peacock is dated to the 15th century (Figs. 8 and 9) [8].

Oscar Raphael (1874–1941) was another founder member and president of the OCS (Fig. 10). His collection from China and other cultures totalled about 1200 objects at his death. It was published by Hobson et al. with no Yuan blue-and-white [8] but a few years later, Raphael lent his blue-and-white Yuan *guan* jar painted with ducks to the 1935–36 RA exhibition, where it was dated 15th century (Fig. 11) [3].

Henry Oppenheim (1895?–1946) was yet another OCS member with an important collection which was published by Hobson. His underglaze red peach-shaped wine cup was dated Song or Yuan period: 'it is safe to say that pre-Ming underglaze red will soon be accepted as a matter of course' [8]. A few years later, the cup was lent to the 1935–36 RA exhibition as 'perhaps Yuan'. Thus, at this time, underglaze red porcelain was gradually accepted as Yuan but the picture for underglaze blue was a little different. The early blue-and-white in this collection includes a vase with flanged handles, similar to the Russell one, dated 'Sung or Yuan'. Other blue-and-white porcelains, including a stem cup and a box painted with an immortal, are simply dated 14th century, in effect allowing the option of an early Ming date [8].

Thus, there were few Yuan blue-and-white porcelains in early UK collections and apart from the David vases, their dating remained vague, despite the recognition of the date of the David vases. The smaller shapes with simpler decoration were labelled 'Yuan' or just '14th century'. Blue-and-white porcelain was thought to be in its developmental stage in the Yuan, represented by these smaller vessels. The larger blue-and-white porcelains with complex designs for the Middle Eastern market were perhaps thought too 'evolved' and were dated to after the mid 14th century and even to the 15th century. The two 'types' were thought to be consecutive, separated by the David vases, rather than concurrent.

Two OCS exhibitions

This section looks at some Yuan porcelains exhibited in London in the 1940s and 1950s and the change in dating over the course of two

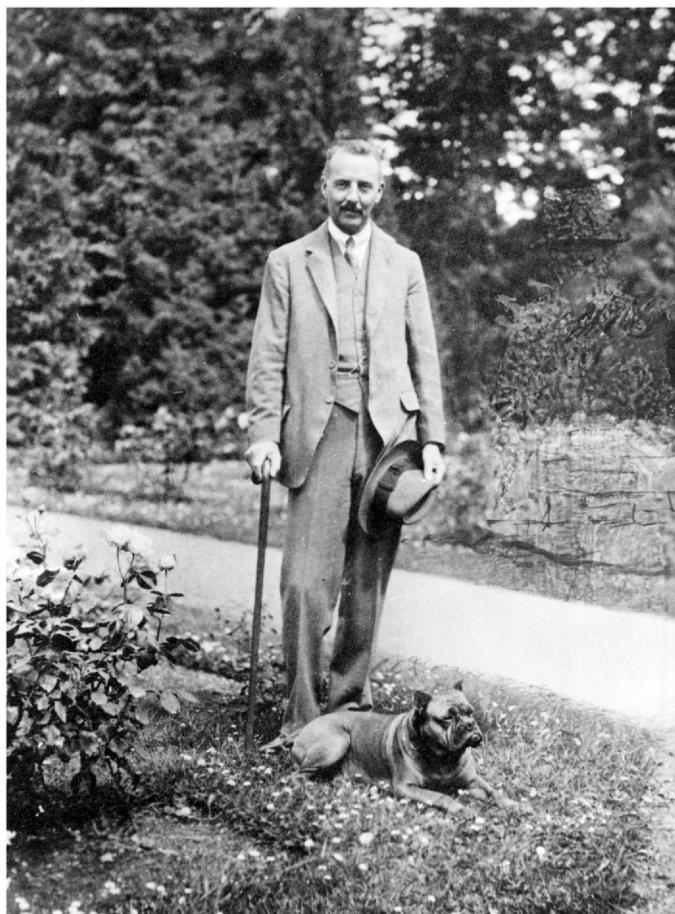


Fig. 10. Oscar Raphael (1874–1941). ©Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

rectangular flask (Fig. 7, under the sideboard).⁶ When the Eumorfopoulos collection was published, this flask was dated to the late Ming [7]. It was acquired by the V&A and lent to the 1935–36 RA exhibition, still dated to the 15th century [3].

⁶ Photographs of George Eumorfopoulos's home at 7 Chelsea Embankment in London were taken in the autumn/winter of 1934 with most of his collection *in situ*.



Fig. 12. Display cabinet, Oriental Ceramic Society exhibition, *Chinese Blue and White Porcelain*, at The Arts Council, St James's Square, London, 1953. ©Dominic Jellinek.



Fig. 13. Display cabinet for larger objects, which were no longer dated 15th century but assigned to the 'second half of the 14th century', Oriental Ceramic Society exhibition, *Chinese Blue and White Porcelain*, at The Arts Council, St James's Square, London, 1953. ©Dominic Jellinek.

exhibitions. The 1935–36 RA exhibition was followed by several small OCS exhibitions focusing on blue-and-white porcelain. The first, *Ming Blue-and-White Porcelain*, was held at Bluett's, 48 Davies Street, London, in 1946. The focus was on the re-dating of Ming blue-and-white in the West since the turn of the century, but it included one vase painted with a dragon, lent by Mr and Mrs Alfred Clark, which, though unillustrated, was dated to the Yuan [9].

The 1953 OCS exhibition, *Chinese Blue and White Porcelain: 14th to 19th Centuries*, organized with the Arts Council, was the Society's first

large-scale, public exhibition.⁷ The installation photographs show the quality and range of blue-and-white porcelains lent by members (Fig. 12). The introduction by Harry Garner explains that since 1946, 'our knowledge has been greatly extended, especially of 14th century wares' due to 'recent studies of those collections' - that is, the studies

⁷ See Sarah Wong, The exhibition legacy of the Oriental Ceramic Society, in: Wong and Pierson (Eds.), 2021, pp. 47–49.



Fig. 14. John Alexander Pope (1906–1982).

by John Pope (1906–1982) of the Ardebil and Topkapi collections [10].

Innovatively, this OCS catalogue includes sixteen porcelains all dated specifically to the Yuan, first half of the 14th century - one of the first times such a large number (including the Clark vase again) are recognised and correctly dated. The larger wares are no longer dated 15th century but assigned to the 'second half of the 14th century' (Fig. 13). The dating has shifted but still straddles both Yuan and early Ming. While scholars understood that the David vases of 1351 were, stylistically, the culmination of a tradition, this knowledge was not always applied in practice and the large-scale porcelains were still assigned to after the David vases.

Some early publications

Apart from the David vases and some Yuan porcelains in these early collections, what other material was available to these early scholars in the UK? Access to archaeological reports from China was limited. Collections such as in the new Palace Museum were known to some but there were few Yuan blue-and-white porcelains.

UK scholars drew on some translated traditional Chinese texts, such as the publication by Stephen Bushell (1844–1908), based on his translation of *Tao shuo* (Zhu Yan, 1774) and on Chinese-style connoisseurship. The chapter on Yuan focusses on *shufu* wares and acknowledges that there are 'few authenticated pieces of the Yuan dynasty in modern collections' [11]. Bushell's assumption was that much of Yuan porcelain was white-glazed porcelain.

The many contributors to the early study and dating of Yuan blue-and-white cannot be acknowledged here. However, a short article by John Ayers (1922–2021) marks a turning point. He examines four large

Yuan blue-and-white porcelains in the Ashmolean Museum, concluding: '... seems likely to represent a significant early phase in the evolution of the new style ... one which may not have continued long after the mid-century date indicated by the 1352 vases' [12]. Significantly, he recognises that the large-scale porcelains that we now know to be Yuan, were indeed made before or around the time of the David vases and not afterwards.

John Alexander Pope (1952, 1956) of the Freer Gallery, and his first-hand, comprehensive studies on the Middle Eastern collections, opened the doors to a conclusive dating of Yuan for the larger exported objects (Fig. 14) [13,14]. He used the David vases as a keystone, successfully linking them to the Middle East group. He was also the first in the West to amend the date of the David vases to 1351.

The publication of the David vases by Hobson in 1929 provided crucial early evidence for the dating of Yuan blue-and-white. Despite that, many Yuan pieces remained unrecognised and were often dated to the 15th century. In a number of early collectors' catalogues, important Yuan porcelains were classified as Ming. Gradually, some of the simpler, smaller Yuan porcelains started to be dated as early fourteenth century. Meanwhile, the larger objects for Middle East consumption were first dated Ming, then re-dated to the late 14th century. Stylistically, the David vases were recognised as the culmination of a tradition, but this understanding was not widely applied. It was thought that the large-scale porcelains were made in the later 14th century, after the David vases. There was a reluctance to place them fully in the Yuan, either due to historic prejudice or lack of available evidence. The 1950s saw increased access to the collections in the Middle East. The work on those by scholars such as John Pope finally paved the way for an orderly chronology for Yuan blue-and-white, and for its innovative significance to be fully realised.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Sarah Wong: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares the following personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Sarah Wong 王嘉惠 is a Director of Eskenazi Limited, and the President of the Oriental Ceramic Society (OCS), London.

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