

Palace's Chinese vases valued at €28m

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Qin Dashu inspecting one of the Chinese porcelain vases at the President's Palace in Valletta.

Photos: Matthew Mirabelli

Tucked away in a corner at the President's Palace, in Valletta two rare Chinese porcelain vases tell the story of a poor man who fell in love with a woman above his class.

Until last week, very little was known about the vases, not even their value. Nobody knows exactly how they found their way to the palace or how long they have been there but now, at least, the large, hand-painted vases have been dated back to the 17th century and have been estimated to be potentially worth over €28 million. They depict scenes from the Chinese legendary Romance of the Western Chamber.

Similar rare artefacts as the two vases, that form a set, are known to have been sold for about €14 million a vase in auction, Chinese porcelain expert Qin Dashu said.

After inspecting the artefacts, Prof. Qin shed light on the origin and age of the vases that have been at the palace for decades.

Prof. Qin, from the School of Archaeology and Museology at the Beijing University, visited the palace in Valletta where he was shown six vases, two of which are roughly a metre high.

The large vases and a set of smaller ones, he said, dated back to the 17th century while the other two were mid-18th century.

All vases were hand painted in blue paint over a white background mainly because the colour combination was popular at the time and because cobalt blue paint resulted in a crisp design when the porcelain was fired.

"There are many of these types of vases in Europe. However, it is very rare to see the large ones," Prof. Qin said.

The vases were recently conserved by Heritage Malta and are all in a good state apart from one of the smaller 18th century ones that might have been damaged during WWII, Heritage Malta conservator James Licari said.

Although Heritage Malta did not know exactly when the vases reached Malta, they suspect they may have been a gift to a grandmaster during the times of the knights or brought by the British to embellish the palace, he said.

After inspecting the vases, Prof. Qin called at to the Bighi restoration centre to see their lids.

There it was established that their dog-shaped knobs had been replaced. The head of the original foo dog, a traditional Chinese guard dog, had been replaced during the time of the British with the head of a European-looking dog.

Curator Bernadine Scicluna added that, until Prof. Qin's valuation, there was little information about the vases and their lids.

Once they heard that Prof. Qin would be coming to Malta to give a lecture, they seized the opportunity and asked him to inspect the four vases at the palace.

Last Friday, Prof. Qin gave a talk at the National Museum of Archaeology in Republic Street, Valletta on the exquisite beauty and provenance of Chinese porcelain.

Comments

gaffarena joseph (2 days, 22 hours ago)

Better if the authorities will find a safe place for them, because if not, they will be gone in 60 seconds, like other impeccable treasure that gone missing that gone missing from,museums,and never have been found.

Roderick Cutajar (4 days, 18 hours ago)

I would never agree that Malta's other problems should be fixed at the expense of heritage. I'm sure there are ways and means to address other problems.

J.Bonnici (4 days, 18 hours ago)

A ridiculous price for 2 vases. Sell them. That's enough money to cover the theatre, furnish our depleted libraries with proper library stock and repair fort St Angelo.

Steve M. Engerer (4 days, 18 hours ago)

Once that their true value is now known, they should be properly secured & not let to stand alone waiting for an 'in/accident' to happen.

They should also be well protected against theft. We all know how easy it was for the 'Moon Rock' to be stolen from the Natural History Museum - Mdina.

Museums & Palaces are an easy target for theives world wide - let alone Malta.

With regards to selling them for a better cause I do not agree.

Joe Azzopardi (4 days, 18 hours ago)

These vases belong to the collectivity and form part of our heritage. Suggesting their sale is simply stupid!! We would get much more for the Caravaggion and Matia Preti paintings at St John's. Should we sell these? Like all our heritage these vases need only be protected and exhibited.

Muscat D (4 days, 19 hours ago)

Will they now go the way of the moon rock? Better secure them properly and install some alams and CCTV.

Galea. L (4 days, 19 hours ago)

Please, please please stop making suggestions.

Gonzi might try to sell them to make good for a small bit of the budget deficit.

Joseph Calleja (4 days, 19 hours ago)

€28million can fix a lot of roads? Can feed a lot of hungry people. Can pay for one of the AFM boats. This could be extra money, that if used wisely can do a lot of good. 2 vases sitting at the presidents palace does not feed any hungry people.

joe portelli (4 days, 22 hours ago)

They could sell them and buy some medicine. It seems like even an old chinese Vase can make more money for Malta than all other foreign students !!!!!!!

Franco Farrugia (4 days, 22 hours ago)

I think they should be sold and the money that is received goes towards some urgent expenses that need to be done in our country! Better than let them wait there to be broken, ... or lost!

Joseph Schembri (5 days ago)

OMG - they should be secured in some physical way! I have seen them many times and in my ignorance I often wondered whether they were just some cheap imitation costing a few Yen!