



Pair of Leopards

Kangxi, c. 1720
Length 39 inches (99 cm)

A large pair of animal figures well modelled in the form of crouching leopards, enamelled in yellow and black over biscuit porcelain, the mouth with iron red and the eyes with pale green, the tails detachable.

These appear to be unique, though they compare closely with three recorded models of standing tigers that have similar enamels and detachable tails and are the same size. They would have presented considerable technical difficulties in the firing, and the surface of these leopards has circular marks where clay stilts were attached to them to stabilise them in the kilns. A smaller tiger that appeared at auction in Paris in 2006 may be a sample prototype made for approval.

The two most likely species being depicted here are the Manchurian or Amur Leopard (*Panthera pardus orientalis*) and the Chinese Leopard (*Panthera pardus japonensis*), both found in the Manchu homeland in what is now northeast China. They have become rare because of significant habitat loss: the Chinese leopard population is now around 2,500 and that of the Manchurian Leopard is less than fifty, mostly remaining in the Amur Valley in Russia.

Until recently it has been accepted that the group of big cats, comprising this pair of leopards plus a pair of tigers (now in a private collection) and a single tiger, were made for export, but an analysis of the subject matter and their period of manufacture suggests that this is not the case.

Although leopards and tigers have no particular cultural relevance to Europe, where the lion has always been the main source of fascination, both leopards and tigers are important in Chinese mythology and both were native to China.

The philosopher Liezi of the Warring States period (206 BC-25 AD) postulated that the leopard was the ancestor of the horse, which in turn was the ancestor of man. The tiger is often represented in Chinese mythology and literature as symbolizing yin and the west, paired with the dragon symbolising yang and the east. Leopards are emblematic of bravery and often appear associated with tigers. In the Ming dynasty, a leopard was embroidered on the robes of military officials of the third grade. In the famous Chinese novel, *The Water Margin*, the hero Wusong uses his bare fists to slay a tiger that has been terrorising a village, a scene often represented on Chinese porcelain. In the Kangxi period, it was believed that if a man was killed by a tiger his soul would become its slave, unable to return to earth until a substitute could be found.

Leopards are rare in Chinese art, first known in the Han dynasty (206BC - 220AD) and appearing occasionally on later

bronze and enamelled metalwares. Sometimes their image is associated with a man, and the connection between man and leopard seems to be significant in early Chinese mythology. Leopards, being smaller than tigers, have to rely on cunning and courage in equal measure, and this sets an example for man.

Although most animal representations in Chinese porcelain, especially at this period, only approximate their subjects, this group of big cats is very accurate in its detail and was almost certainly modelled from life, perhaps from animals in captivity. The leopards are alert and nervous, poised to spring or to retreat, their demeanour similar to that of leopards in the wild; the tigers, however, are striding, bored but confident, in the stiff legged and unnatural manner of caged tigers, quite unlike their fluid and stealthy motion in the wild. It is likely that the only location where such close observation could be made was in the animal park of the Kangxi emperor. This being the case, the only possible destination for the completed model would be the emperor himself. The menagerie was in the Sanbeizi (Third Prince) Gardens in Beijing, named after the Kangxi emperor's third son, Prince Cheng, Yinzhi (it was Kangxi's fourth son, Yinzhen, who succeeded him as the Yongzheng emperor and for whom the Yuanmingyuan was built). Certainly no potter producing a model for export would have been granted access to the Emperor's property.

Early in his reign (1662-1722), the Kangxi emperor reconstructed the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen that had been destroyed during the Qing conquest; he revived the tradition of imperial patronage of the kilns and appointed the secretary of the Imperial Works Department, Cang Yingxuan, as director of the imperial kilns. Cang was an accomplished potter, and his appointment marked a departure from practice under the Ming emperors, whose directors had been civil servants.

The new director would have had to employ the best artisans from those commercial kilns that had survived the war between the Ming and Qing and were making porcelain for export to the West. At this time, many large dishes and vases in the famille verte palette and similar to those made for export, except in their scale, were made for the newly built Summer Palace, the Yuanmingyuan. It seems likely that the massive models of the big cats were contemporary to these pieces and were also destined for the Yuanmingyuan.

The Yuanmingyuan was sacked and looted by the French and English, led by Lord Elgin, in October 1860, and much of this porcelain found its way back to these countries after the withdrawal of the European forces from China. As the known recent history of the big cats entails France, it lends credence to the supposition that their original home was the Yuanmingyuan.

Provenance: with Cohen & Cohen, London; Christie's London, July 2005; the Champalimaud Collection, Portugal; with Partridge Fine Arts, London, 1986; with Aveline, Paris; Sothby's Monaco, 27 June 1984, lot 1310; The Florence J. Gould Collection, El Patio, Cannes; Galérie Charpentier, at Hôtel Drouot Paris, 8/9 June 1959, lot 124, this pair (lot 123 was the single tiger).

Related Examples: The single tiger was sold at Sotheby's London, 12 Nov 1996, lot 92; Howard 1997, p134, Cat 70, the single tiger; Christie's Paris, 14 June 2006, lot 269, a small tiger in the same pose, date and style as these leopards, 10 inches long; Christie's Hong Kong, 1 Nov 2004, lot 871, a painting (1737) by Zou Yigui (1688-1772) of the animal symbols of official rank, including a pair of leopards.

**Sold for £2,460,000 to a private US collector,
World Record Price**

