

SUNKEN TREASURE FROM THE 'HOI AN HOARD' GOES UP FOR BID AT TURNER AUCTIONS + APPRAISALS ON FEBRUARY 12

Over 160 Lots of Renowned Vietnamese Ceramics from Centuries-Old Shipwreck Surface for Online Sale

SOUTH SAN FRANCISCO, CA, JANUARY 18, 2017 – Turner Auctions + Appraisals is excited to present an online sale on February 12 from the renowned “Hoi An Hoard” – historic treasures of 15th- and 16th-century Vietnamese ceramics that were recovered from a trading ship that sank over 500 years ago in a typhoon in the Dragon Sea. Excavated from the deep with extreme difficulty under death-defying conditions in the late 1990s, the shipwreck’s collection of porcelain artifacts is considered by many experts to be the most significant find in Vietnamese art.

The auction features over 160 lots, almost all with multiple items. Among the offerings are vases large and small, boxes, wine flasks, bowls, tea and wine cups, serving plates, platters and more. Some items are decorated with blue and white designs, enamel or white glaze; some are undecorated; and some include marine encrustations from over five centuries buried at sea. An auction highlight is a small, one-of-a-kind box in the form of a crab, decorated with green enamel that has degraded over the years due to underwater exposure at the bottom of the sea.



The works for sale from the Hoi An Hoard are sure to tempt today's treasure hunters. These 500-year-old ceramics – probably created in the mid-1400s, before Johannes Gutenberg printed his first bible and Leonardo da Vinci was born – infrequently come up for auction. Focused on individual buyers, this auction presents a rare opportunity to obtain art objects with a unique historical, cultural and archaeological provenance – and at prices that enable most people to participate.

Turner Auctions + Appraisals begins its online sale Sunday, February 12 at 11:30 am PDT; sale items can be previewed online until the sale starts. The online auction is featured live on Invaluable and LiveAuctioneers. In addition, Turner Auctions + Appraisals has just launched its own mobile site for viewing and bidding. Bidders can download the app from the App Store or Google Apps ("Turner Auctions"), or see the site at visit <https://auctions.turnerauctionsonline.com/>. All bidding platforms are easily accessed through ‘Upcoming Auctions’ at the company’s website: www.turnerauctionsonline.com/upcomingauctions/.

Sunken Treasure: The Amazing Story of the Hoi An Hoard

The story of the Hoi An Hoard – from the collection itself, which is the only known cache of Vietnamese ceramics, to the extraordinary underwater archaeological excavation, which involved smuggling, typhoons and hazardous diving operations – is an amazing tale.

(Page 2) Although a number of items from the Hoi An Hoard have been acquired by museums – including San Francisco's Asian Art Museum and London's British Museum – Vietnamese ceramics are relatively unknown except to a small group of collectors. The items from the Hoi An Hoard come from the village of Chu Dau, the oldest pottery center in Vietnam and renowned for its high quality export ceramics. Although Vietnam became independent from China in 936 A.D., Chinese migrants continued to venture south, influencing the local craftsmen with Chinese styles and production processes. When the Chinese Ming government, torn by wars and internal strife, curtailed all foreign relations, Chu Dau producers became the leading suppliers of trade pottery to overseas markets.



It's no surprise that the Vietnamese artisans put their own stylistic stamp on their wares of blue-and-white and polychrome ceramics. It is these wares, retrieved from their watery grave, that comprise the Hoi An Hoard.

Indeed, the tale of the Hoi An Hoard is one of mystery, danger and intrigue. Perhaps the modern story begins the 1980s when a Japanese diplomat in Vietnam made the fortuitous comparison that pottery shards from the Red River Delta were similar to those of the famous Chu Dau vase exhibited in Istanbul's Topkapi Saray Museum, a piece signed by its creator in 1450. Then, in the early 1990s, Vietnamese fisherman increasingly began to find shards of porcelain in their nets near Cu Lao Cham Island. Quickly and quietly, these pieces began to show up in the nearby town of Hoi An, an ancient trading center no longer bustling except with occasional tourists. As recognition of the artifacts' provenance spread among visitors, the secret leaked out.

Soon adventurers, opportunists and antique dealers were in hot pursuit of these ancient wares – all encouraging fishermen to abandon their trade and drag the sea floor with nets and steel rakes for loose pieces. As greed overcame good sense, scant regard was given either to the potential damage to the wreck and its cargo, or to Vietnam's laws that prohibit the export of national artifacts. The scandal was uncovered when two Japanese art dealers were stopped at Da Nang Airport with valises filled with contraband. The authorities traced the smuggled goods back to the region of Cu Lao Cham Island in the Dragon Sea, an area of the South China Sea named for its typhoons' unpredictable ferocity, and placed a ban on the illegal activities.

Subsequently, it became clear that salvage of a deepwater wreck was beyond local capabilities. To locate the wreck and excavate it, an Asian salvage company and the Vietnamese Government formed a joint venture to bring the needed technology, management and financial resources. The project was placed under the stewardship of Vietnam History Museum. Then Oxford University Maritime Archaeological Research Unit (MARE) was engaged to provide the scholarly and scientific expertise for this complex endeavor.

Exploration began in mid-1997 after the sidescan unit bouncing sonar off a large anomaly on the ocean floor portended a wreck. But the extreme depths thwarted efforts to confirm it until the operation's eleventh hour, when with all alternatives exhausted, a remote-operated vehicle was finally jerry-rigged into working. Its camera recorded the entire wreck and much of its cargo, which despite numerous plunderers, appeared virtually intact. That was the good news.



(Page 3) The bad news was that the depth of the shipwreck required extraordinary means of retrieval. Usual scuba diving techniques allow divers to go to about 110 feet. This wreck however was located 230 feet (70 meters) below the surface, so scuba would not work. In spring 1998, various recovery options were considered, tried and discarded. Then, when an out-of-season typhoon wiped out the initial operation and allocated funding was exhausted, the project was nearly abandoned altogether.



But the team regrouped in 1999 with a new and controversial strategy – to use a complex, hazardous technique called "mixed gas saturation diving." This procedure is used in oilfield and deepwater recovery operations. (A well-documented example was the retrieval in 2000 of the ill-fated Russian nuclear-powered submarine *Kursk* at 350 feet deep.) However, this technique had never before been applied in an archaeological excavation, and the MARE experts were skeptical that the procedure's high cost would compromise the time and care such a historic operation required. But if successful, the groundbreaking endeavor would be the world's deepest, full-scale archaeological excavation.

Moreover, even for *terra firma* residents who love the water, saturation diving is filled with requirements that engender extreme unease. First, the technique required that divers be kept in a confined pressurized chamber. Second, they had to live for the duration of the project – about two-and-a-half months! – in the sealed, claustrophobic saturation chamber (in essence, a tube six feet in diameter and 12 feet long) or the diving bell, which was smaller still. Third, the divers would not undergo decompression until the end of the operation, when three full days would be necessary to re-acclimate their bodies' systems. Fourth, although the saturation chamber sat atop a barge and not under water, the sealed and pressurized container meant that, if anything happened to its handlers or the barge itself, the divers would be doomed to certain death. (Such a tragedy befell another saturation salvage operation near Hong Kong in 1996 during a typhoon.)

This was risky business indeed. But six divers from Australia, New Zealand and Ireland accepted the challenge – and two three-man teams worked round-the-clock in 12-hour shifts on the sea floor for 69 days!

The six divers, however, were just one part of the vast excavation operation. Topside on board the 230-foot barge *Tropical 388*, there were 19 life-support technicians and 12 supervisors who continuously fed the divers, maintained their lifeline and monitored all their functions within the pressurized capsule. During their 12-hour work shifts, the divers were transported in the diving bell to the black, underwater wreck site where, under control of the Diving Superintendent, they carried out the excavation monitored by topside



archaeologists. Items from the shipwreck were brought to the surface by a huge crane and transferred to two other barges. There items were cleaned and kept in a water bath for desalination to prevent their drying out and cracking.

Along the way, each was tagged and catalogued. Unique and selected examples were photographed and drawn in detail. In all, this complex operation required 120 people – and that excludes Vietnamese Navy personnel, whose gunboats were on hand to provide armed security against pirates and looters.

In total, 244,000 items were recovered. Amazingly, after tops and bottoms were re-mated, the final tally yielded over 180,000 intact ceramics. The cache was extremely diverse, ranging from special occasion items for the wealthy to more mundane items for everyday use. The sunken ship's name and origin remain a mystery, although the vessel's wood and a crewmember's skull suggest it was from Thailand. It is known the

(Page 4) trading ship was destined for Southeast Asia and the Middle East before its voyage was cut short by an unknown disaster, perhaps a typhoon or pirates. Current thinking suggests the overloaded, top-heavy ship capsized in a powerful Dragon Sea tempest, but it's likely the truth was buried with the treasure.

On the other hand, the precious cargo from the Red River Delta has *finally* – circuitously, over the span of centuries, and using resources never before available in history – reached the export trade market. It is the good fortune of today's collectors that some wares have surfaced, albeit 500 years later than expected.

Highlights from the sale include (please see catalog for lot details):

LOT 24: A Group of Twelve 15th/16th Century Asian Blue and White Ceramics, Vietnam. Estimate: \$300-500. (Photo, right)



LOT 121: Two 15th/16th Century Asian Blue and White Serving Dishes, Vietnam. Estimate: \$200-400. (Photo, left)

LOT 74: A 15th/16th Century Cobalt Glazed Ceramics Asian Crab Form Box, Vietnam. Estimate: \$200-400. (Photo, page 1)

LOT 49: A Large 15th/16th Century Asian Blue and White Covered Box, Vietnam. Estimate: \$300-500. (Photo, page 2, top left)

LOT 11: A Group of Twelve 15th/16th Century Asian Blue and White Ceramics, Vietnam. Estimate: \$300-500. (Photo, page 2, bottom right)

LOT 33: A Group of Eighteen 15th/16th Century Asian Blue and White Ceramics, Vietnam. Estimate: \$400-600. (Photo, page 3, top right)

LOT 143: A Group of Ten 15th/16th Century Asian Blue and White Ceramics, Vietnam. Estimate: \$200-400. (Photo, page 3, bottom left)

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ABOUT TURNER AUCTIONS + APPRAISALS

Based in South San Francisco, Turner Auctions + Appraisals was founded by Stephen Turner to complement and expand the capabilities of Stephen G. Turner Associates, an auction and appraisal consulting firm founded in 2004. Turner Auctions + Appraisals presents online auctions in diverse categories of personal property (www.turnerauctionsonline.com). Among them are Fine Arts, Decorative Arts, Asian Arts, Toys, Jewelry, Militaria, Ethnic Arts and others. The company offers a range of auction and appraisal services for buyers, sellers and collectors. Online auctions are held several times a month. Working with leading live and online auction houses on the West Coast since 1991, Turner is a professional appraiser of personal property and seasoned auctioneer. His areas of expertise include fine art, decorative arts, antiques & residential contents. The company welcomes consignments and appraisals.

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(Story sources include: Three articles on the Hoi An Hoard by Kim Fay at www.thingsasian.com, and "Treasures from the Hoi An Hoard" auction catalog, Butterfields, 2000.)