

Antiques as Investment

Terminology used here:

'Fakes' mean items made mostly in the 20th century or later, after about 1930.

Until then the old style painting can still be found on Chinese porcelain.

'New' could be brand new, or any time in the past decades. Calling items 'new' is common practice among collectors.

Not knowing if a piece of Chinese is authentic is a problem for you, me, and everyone else wanting to buy an antique.

If you buy a wrong one (fake or new) you will lose all the invested money the very moment you close the purchase. Copies only have antique value if they were made in imperial times; the earlier the better. That means usually in the early 20th century or earlier.

An 'antique' ceramic item has zero (0) value if it is fake, or if it is antique but from a much later period, it may have a much lower value.

Fake antiques have NO value. Genuine antiques that have been modified or repainted or over-painted at a later time (e.g. 20th century) also have little to no value. An antique collector does not want these.

There is really only one reason that antiques are higher priced than equivalent contemporary items: a collector wants to own it and is ready to pay more for it than he would for a comparable modern item.

The more collectors want an item, the higher its value gets. On the other hand, if the extant number of a specific antique item is high, but the number of people wanting to buy or collect it is low, then its value, both for collecting or investing, is low.

Don't buy antiques as an investment unless you either understand their value, or have a knowledgeable friend or other party that knows it, and whom you can consult beforehand. But again, authenticity is the precondition for collecting value of any antiques. Something new can simply not have antique value. The antique dealers from whom you purchase do often not know much about Chinese items, or whether they are authentic.

However ...old does not always mean an item is valuable either.

To give an example, some late Ming dynasty (17th century) items may have less value than some early 20th century items, despite being more than 200 years older. They are too common, too crude or too ugly, often the the quality of the more recent item is much better. Many rare items from the Han dynasty (BCE206~220), or even earlier, may be suitable for a museum, but not necessarily for a private collection. And items made by the more famous kilns in the Song dynasty may have a higher value than comparable items made by less important kilns during the same period.

An item that looks unappealing is also not desirable for many collectors, thus it should not be used for investment either.

When investing in antiques you best either only invest in those you know by heart, or do your homework before you buy specific items. This should be including consultations with others, etc. Doing your own research may include paid appraisals or valuations. Yes, there are free valuations and appraisals, but if you need to get a reliable idea on whether an item is worth a a major investment, this is not the time to save. Get two or more appraisals or valuations, and be prepared to pay for them.

Opinions about authenticity are just that, a view regarding an item's authenticity, no more. Even if you pick someone experienced, he or she may not always be informed about a specific type of item's potential value. But even if he/she is, value is different from region to region, and depends much on sales venue.

If your main purpose is not the investment part of a purchase, but rather the collecting experience, one of the most required preconditions is basic experience and theoretical knowledge.

These can be obtained from places like this website (www.chinese-antique-porcelain.com), or books, etc. Note should be taken that reliance on Internet information only is a dangerous thing. There are just too many websites out there providing incorrect information or showing images of fakes. You could be learning from the wrong source. Resources that really get you into identification, authentication, and recognition of fakes are fewer than few. Most people probably just start by buying items, books, and pay tuition in the form of the cost of fakes.

The recommended way is to get some genuine antiques as standard items or examples, early on, so that you can compare with the multitude of fakes out there. Nothing surpasses the opportunity of seeing or inspecting the real thing.

Unfortunately, many novice collectors of Chinese porcelain just give up after some time, because they cannot get real antiques. Often this is due to their own mindset. They want to avoid spending money on costly antiques, so they try to find low cost items in places where most items either are not antique or simply fakes. Thrift stores and flea markets are not the places to find real Chinese antiques, and if there are any, they mostly have little collecting or investment value.

It would be better to spend a few hundred upfront for confirmed, real ones, and then start looking by yourself for more, using these items as reference for comparing the look of those and comparing with others. With Chinese porcelain the difficult part is really knowing how authentic old porcelain of different eras and qualities really looks. This is a precondition to differentiate old porcelain in good condition from new or fake porcelain, which often are artificially made to look old.

Using the above method, you will get more selective and realistic as to fakes much sooner, than if you try again and again to get the real thing from the wrong places and fail.

All the best

Peter Pfister