

VANDERVEN ORIENTAL ART



Bitong

Porcelain

China, Kangxi period (1662-1722)

Height: 14 cm | Diameter: 11.7 cm

Provenance:

- With Salomon Stodel, Amsterdam 1990 (label PCV46)

- Private Collection, Belgium 2025

A sturdily potted cylindrical brushpot (*bitong* 笔筒), decorated with a continuous scene of large flowering peonies and chrysanthemums issuing from craggy rocks. Above the flowers are fluttering insects such as a butterfly, dragonfly and other tiny insects. A large black beetle with white spots, sits on a bending reed plume. The scene is painted in bright overglaze famille verte enamels, including a strong transparent blue with black outlines underneath. The other colours used are three shades of green, yellow, red, aubergine and a touch of gilding. The base of the pot is partially covered in a thin transparent glaze, leaving a ring around the centre unglazed. A circular recess in the middle is unglazed and unmarked. A large round label from the Stodel Collection (Amsterdam), has a stock number written in pen.

The symbolic combination of peonies (*mudan*) and chrysanthemums (*juhua*) can be read as: “may you enjoy long life,

wealth and honour". In China all blooming flowers are considered auspicious, because they represent prosperity. When depicted in combination with butterflies (*hudie*) - symbols of joy, longevity and blessings - it also forms a motif for joy, love and good fortune. On the other side of the pot, a large green flowering plantago (*Cheqiancao* 车前草) is depicted sprouting from the ground. This common plant, used in traditional Chinese medicine, also had symbolic meaning; its resilience and ability to grow in common places, reflected the humble yet strong spirit of the ideal Chinese scholar.

All these emblematic references, would have appealed greatly to the Chinese scholar gentlemen (*wenren*), for whom such brush holders were intended. As their brushes were a crucial item for the important activity of calligraphy and painting, containers to hold them were a constant feature on every scholar's desk. They were not only functional but also essential objects for every literati. A suitable brushpot would no doubt be selected with great care, reflecting the owner's status, intellectual refinement, and appreciation for the arts. Used to store a variety of brushes, the *bitong* comes in many different sizes, shapes and materials. Apart from brushes, they might also be used to hold other useful implements such as tools for incense burning or decorative items such as peacock feathers or a *ruyi* sceptre.

A slightly wider pot with a similar floral scene with insects is in the Grandidier Collection in Musée Guimet, Paris (acc.nr. G4633).