



Very Fine Set of Eight Chinese  
Watercolors of the Production of  
Silk, Mid 19th Century

**Inventory Number :**180-104

**Price :**\$18,000

**Size:** 4 ins high and 6 1/2 ins wide (image) 9 1/8 ins  
high and 11 1/2 ins wide (frame)

Process of silk making (sericulture) depicted in the paintings:

1. Gathering of silkworm eggs
2. Laying silkworms with mulberry leaves on trays
3. Moving silkworms to frame for spinning cocoons
4. Sorting cocoons
5. Boiling cocoons
6. Reeling silk threads
7. Weaving fabric with silk threads
8. Selling silk fabric

Watercolors depicting Chinese characters and everyday life were extremely popular subjects for export to the European markets in the 19th century, and many albums were produced in Canton by the pre-eminent artist studios of the day including Tingqua, Sungqua and Youqua.

Watercolors were collected by the European travelers and merchants of the day in much the same way that postcards were collected in the era of photography. Those fortunate enough to travel to the Far East would collect these images to educate and amaze friends and relatives about the mysteries of the Orient, and as with all ephemera the variations in quality are extreme.

The set of eight watercolors (gouache) that we present here depict the process of the “production of silk” and relate directly to similar sets in the Peabody Museum, the Mystic Seaport Museum and are of the highest quality. It is evident that the very best of three watercolor series depict a very limited number of subjects; the cultivation of rice, the production of porcelain, the production of silk, and the cultivation of tea, and all appear to have

original from the same studio. Each individual painting is fully realized and finished to a very high artistic quality.

Interestingly, these works are painted on what is known as pith paper (sometimes erroneously referred to a rice paper). Pith paper is not actually paper at all but a cellular tissue skillfully cut from the stem of a small tree

*Tetrapanax Papyrifera*

, native to south west China. The pith paper support for these watercolors is extremely thin producing a translucent quality and artist has painted the sky and landscape features on the reverse of the paper with the figures, building structures and detail painted on the face of the painting resulting in a wonderful depth to each scene.

Given the fragility of the thin support and the fugitive nature of the watercolor, series of painting such as these were laid down on Chinese paper and bound into albums to protect them from damage and light. These pieces have now been framed with acid free materials and protected with non-reflective UV-filtering glass.

Canton, China. Mid 19th Century

Provenance:

By repute, the Mottahedeh Collection

With Martyn Gregory, London, 1980's

Private Collection, New York by 1985

**For more information please contact us**

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