Vitrine de Curiosidades

Sycee Silver Ingot
Saici
Silver (cast)
China, Qing Dynasty, 1644–1912
H. 22 mm × L. 54 mm × W. 44 mm / Wt. 288 g
MAH.R.2023.2072

Sycee Silver Ingot
Saici
Silver (cast)
China, from the Daoguang period (1821–1851)
to the Guangxu period (1875–1909), Qing Dynasty
H. 16 mm × L. 31 mm × W. 18 mm / Wt. 45.31 g
MAH.R.2023.2074

This month's Cabinet of Curiosities highlights two silver ingots, known as sycees, from the coin collection donated to the Museum by Luís Filipe Thomaz and now held in the Numismatics and Notaphily Collection.

A sycee was a gold or silver ingot used in China as a means of payment for high-value commercial transactions. For centuries, copper coins dominated the Chinese economy, relegating precious metals to a secondary role in everyday exchange. Although this monetary system proved effective for small-scale transactions, it was ill-suited to large-scale commerce, leading to the adoption of the sycee as a silver ingot serving as a monetary unit. While its precise chronological origin remains uncertain, several sources associate the widespread use of the sycee with the Mongol period—a time marked by a significant increase in transactions involving silver ingots and paper money—although its origins are believed to predate this period by a considerable margin.

Both examples on display were cast during the Qing Dynasty, the last imperial dynasty of China. The term *sycee* is a Western designation derived from the Chinese expressions *hsi-szu* ("fine silk") or *hsi yin* ("fine silver"), referring to the delicate lines visible on the surface of the metal after the casting and finishing processes. These ingots were produced in authorised private foundries, known as *lu fang*. Molten metal was poured into specially prepared moulds and, while still in a semi-liquid state, the inscriptions were impressed using engraved punches or dies. This manufacturing technique produced the characteristic shape in which the sides of the ingot rise above its central section. Sycees generally bear the name of the maker or issuing authority—sometimes a government institution—together with their weight, the inspector's mark and the location of the foundry, while the date of manufacture was less commonly recorded. Following casting, each ingot was examined by the *kung ku* (public assayer), who officially certified its value and purity by applying an additional mark.

Sycees were produced in a remarkable variety of forms, the most common being the shoe- or boat-shaped type known as *yuanbao*, as well as drum- and loaf-shaped examples. Other documented forms include double-bladed axe-shaped ingots—considered the earliest known type—flat rectangular examples, and figurative forms modelled as fish, butterflies or leaves.