

# The Reception of Chinese and Japanese Porcelain in Europe

*Rose Kerr*

## Introduction

In the last twenty years, a great deal of new work has been done on the trade in porcelain between China, Japan and Europe. The extent of research activity is revealed by the impressive six-page, double column, and bibliography in the catalogue which accompanied an exhibition at the British Museum in London from July to November, 1990.<sup>1</sup> This exhibition, entitled "Porcelain for Palaces", looked at one aspect of the trade, namely the fashion for Japan in Europe in the period 1650-1750. It was only one of many recent projects undertaken in Europe, America and Japan to consider the East-West trade in ceramics during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Indeed, the only country to show scant interest has been China herself.<sup>2</sup> Most useful study has been carried out in the West and in Japan, through archaeological and archival work: exploratory trips to the Chinese mainland have revealed little of interest.<sup>3</sup>

This paper will attempt to sketch a few new details upon this expansive background. Its first subject will be a very brief overview of European trade in the East during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the second part will deal with bulk exports or tableware; while the third will examine the types of Chinese and Japanese porcelain used for luxury display in European palaces and great houses.

## European Trade in the East in the seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Export porcelains make an attractive item for study because they are beautiful, and because they survive complete or as sherds. It should not be forgotten, however, that the magnet which originally drew European traders into Indian and Pacific waters was the search for other, perishable luxuries such as drugs, spices, tea and fine textiles. Of these, tea was by far the most important commodity in terms of both quantity and value. Raw silk came next, and porcelain a poor third.<sup>4</sup> The power to attain these desired goods came when western seamen gained the secrets of sailing east round the Cape of Good Hope and north with the monsoon winds across the Indian Ocean. Attempts to sail against the monsoon, if they did not result in loss of ships, led to financial disaster, as we shall see with reference to one Swedish East Indiaman, the "Gotheborgs".

The first Europeans to reach China were the Portuguese, in 1514; they went on to set foot on Japanese soil in 1542. Among their many achievements, two were crucial to success.

---

<sup>1</sup> Porcelain for Palaces – The Fashion for Japan in Europe 1650-1750, John Ayers, Oliver Impey, J. V. G. Mallet (Oriental Ceramic Society, London, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> There are some notable exceptions, for example the journal *Haiwai Jiaotongshi Yanjiu* (Research on the History of Overseas Communications published in Quanzhou, Fujian province, which includes a varied menu of articles by scholars in local museums and universities).

<sup>3</sup> Berit Wastfelt undertook such a journey in the course of research on the Swedish East India company trade, and described his meagre findings to the Oriental Ceramic Society in London on 13 November, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> *Chinese Export Art and Design*, edited by Craig Clunas (Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1987), p. 16.

The first was the adoption for their merchant fleets of the largest ships then known to the world, a type called in Arabic qaraqir (merchant vessel), in Italian *caracca* and in English *carrack*. The second was the establishment of trade routes so successful that they were followed by all later European traders, with the exception of Spain who traded via the Philippines. The Portuguese obtained silk and porcelain from China, some of which they shipped once a year to Japan. The Japanese paid for these luxuries in silver and Portuguese ships returned to Macao where the bullion was used to buy more silk and porcelain from Chinese merchants. This circular transaction realized a profit of four to ten times. The second load of silk was destined for Indian, Middle Eastern & European markets, while the ceramics were sought all along the Portuguese trade Chain links to Europe. Voyages wares were used as barter items in Champa, Siam, Borneo and Indonesia. More refined porcelains were sold to India; Persia, and east Africa, finest wares reached Europe.<sup>5</sup>

Spain gained ascendancy of this hard-won trade through political might; in 1580 Philip II of Spain was crowned Philip I of Portugal, combining the two nations and, ultimately, their enterprises, as one. The Spanish developed a unique pattern of trade in East Asia, for the wealth they derived from silver mines in South America obviated the need for a complex bartering system via Japan.

The Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie or Dutch East India Company was founded in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. In 1595 Dutch sailors found the route round the Cape of Good Hope to the Moluccas and by 1602 were at open war with the Portuguese. In 1619 Batavia became capital of the Dutch commercial empire in the Indies, and by 1625-50 the Portuguese had been eclipsed. The latter had suffered a terrible blow in 1639, namely expulsion from Japan. In 1641 the Dutch became the only nation to trade with Japan, via a post on the small off-shore island of Deshima, at Nagasaki. Accurate VOC records still exist in the National Archives in The Hague, research into which tells us that the Dutch followed the same trade pattern as the Portuguese, but treated porcelain as a more important item. Netherlands' traders satisfied a large part of the European demand for porcelain, in addition to that of Holland, importing several hundreds of thousands of pieces per year.<sup>6</sup> Even in the nineteenth century, many ceramics sought by collectors were bought in by English dealers from Holland.

English trade was dominated by the Honourable East India Company, a joint stock company established under royal charter granting it a monopoly on trade with India and East Asia. The company limited its trade, in the main, to tea, silk and porcelain, of which tea was the most important. During the second half of the seventeenth century trade centred mainly on India rather than China, and it was not until 1715 that a 'factory' was opened by the Company at Canton. This belated start was improved upon later in the eighteenth century, for after 1757 when Canton became the only port open to trade; the volume of English trade exceeded that

---

<sup>5</sup> Maura Rinaldi, *Kraak Porcelain. A Moment in the History of Trade* (Bamboo Publishing Ltd, London, 1989), pp. 32, 34-35.

<sup>6</sup> The most extensive research has been undertaken by T. Volker *Porcelain and the Dutch East India Company. As Recorded in the Dagh-Registers of Batavia Castle, those of Hirado and Deshima and other Contemporary Papers 1602-168Z* (E.J. Briil, Leiden, 1954, 1971).

of all the western nations together.<sup>7</sup> Crew members from the captain downwards were allowed to bring back agreed numbers of items for personal trade and it may well be that certain of the luxury display pieces discussed below reached England in this manner.

The Swedish East India trade was carried out in a similar way with a large percentage of goods being consigned onwards from Sweden to customers in other European countries. Britain provided a huge market for tea, much of which was smuggled into the country illegally. So important was this market that a number of Continental East India Companies were in reality little more than fronts for British merchants operating in covert competition to the official English Company. Thus the British financier Colin Campbell was behind both the Ostend and Swedish Companies, whose ships were packed with tea and tea-drinking wares.<sup>8</sup> A certain number of porcelains, particularly export blue-and-white, remained in Swedish homes, however, while the Swedish Royal Family appreciated luxury Asian crafts.<sup>9</sup>

### Bulk Trading in Porcelain

We shall now move on to consider the sort of porcelain exported in bulk to be used as tea ware and tableware in Europe. Material from shipwrecked cargoes and excavations will be used to illustrate this theme. Much additional unprovenanced export material exists in museums and private collections; an outstanding example is the collection of nearly 1500 pieces of top-grade porcelain bequeathed to the Victoria and Albert Museum by George Salting in 1910.<sup>10</sup> Most of these pieces are export porcelain, their styles totally divergent from Qing dynasty porcelains surviving in China.

More complete information has been provided by a series of ship excavations in recent years, in which entire or part cargoes of porcelain have been preserved. We shall concentrate on three such finds by way of example, one of mid-seventeenth century date and two others from the middle of the eighteenth century. The two eighteenth century cargoes will be compared with chance finds uncovered during excavations in the London Docks.

The recovery of two wrecked ships in the South China Sea by Captain Michael Hatcher in the early 1980s added greatly to our knowledge of export cargoes.<sup>11</sup> The earlier vessel was a Chinese junk, from which 23,000 pieces of porcelain were removed. Among them were two jar covers bearing cyclical dates equivalent to 1643, and it is judged that the ship sank within-three years of this date. The ceramics from this wreck were tremendously varied in terms of their shapes and designs. They included pieces for the Chinese domestic market (censers, bulb bowls, brush pots, bird feeder, cricket cages, and garden seats) as well as wares for the European market (large dishes, jars, vases in rolwagen form, teapots). Greatly surprising were the pieces decorated in Kraak style, for this type of decoration on porcelain

---

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Jourdain and R. Soame Jenyns, *Chinese Export Art in the Eighteenth Century* (Spring Books, Middlesex, 1967), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Colin Sheaf and Richard, *The Hatcher Porcelain Cargoes, The Complete Record* (Phaidon. Christie's, Oxford, 1988), pp. 89-90.

<sup>9</sup> Ake Setterwall, Stig Fogelmarck, Bo Gyllensvard, *The Chinese Pavilion at Drottningholm* (Malmo, 1972).

<sup>10</sup> Rose Kerr, *Chinese Ceramics – Porcelain of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911)* (Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1986), p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> Both ships and their cargoes are described by Sheaf and Kilburn, *op. cit.*

was previously believed to have died out earlier in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. There were also 845 items of Dehua porcelain, a statistic of relevance to the conclusions of this paper.

The second 'Hatcher' cargo belonged to the Dutch East Indianan Geldermalsen, and yielded a staggering 140,000 items of porcelain. The Geldermalsen sank in January 1752 and when excavated revealed large sets of tea and table ware (e.g. over 10,000 dinner plates), the greater part in blue-and-white with a small number of overpainted wares and a very small number of ceramics from Yixing and from Dehua.

The history of the Swedish East India ship "Gotheborgs" reveals how hazardous the East India trade could be, both in terms of lives and of profits. The ship left the port of Goteborg on the 14 March 1743, reaching Cadiz on the 7 April, and sailing directly on round the Cape of Good Hope in an attempt to reach Canton that season. She was turned back by unfavorable trade winds in the South China Sea in September, however, and after severe hardship landed in Batavia in December 1743. She was forced to remain there until May 1744, and may have taken on some cargo of porcelain there. Batavia was an important centre in the inter-Asian junk trade, which shipped ceramics for non-European client as well. The individual nature of the Gotheborgs' cargo suggests that such pieces may have been picked up in Batavia, as a hedge against failure to pick up a full cargo from the Chinese mainland. Other item surviving from the cargo are more standard European-taste ware, including two fragments with 'Chinoiserie' designs after those design by Cornelis Pronk for the Dutch East India Company in the 1730s, and a very few monogrammed and armorial sherds. The total cargo is difficult to reconstruct, as the continuing history of the Gotheborgs' last voyage shows. After her stay in Batavia, the ship finally sailed in May 1744, reached Canton in June, and left the following January 1745, picking up favorable trade winds for the return journey. At the very end of her voyage, just outside the Harbour of the port of Goteborg, she went aground on 12 September 1745. The ship has lain in shallow, silty, tidal waters for more than 250 years, so her cargo has been greatly disturbed, and many pieces have been retrieved by individuals in earlier years.<sup>12</sup> A reconstruction of her cargo reveals a great quantity of blue-and-white, a little Imari, but almost no over glaze-decorated ware save armorials.

A group of material in sherd form was discovered during excavations by the Department of Greater London Archaeology based at the Museum of London, in the spring and summer of 1990.<sup>13</sup> The archaeologists made the important discovery of the site of the Lime house kiln, one of the earliest English kilns to manufacture wares in competition with those being imported from the Far East. The Lime house factory was only in operation from 1744-1748. In a drainage ditch about 80 metres downstream from the site of the kiln, and adjacent to a dock where Fast Indiamen (ships) were overhauled, archaeologists unearthed a series of blue-and-white plate sherds, and a fragment of an over glaze decorated plate with an armorial device. None of the sherds showed any signs of wear, so it seems probable that they had been swept into the ditch from the scuppers of a ship, after being damaged during the voyage from the Far East to Britain. The armorial sherd bore the arms of Marten impaling

---

<sup>12</sup> Ostindiefararen Gotheborgs porslinslast, Berit Wastfelt, Bo Gyllensvard, Jorgen Weibull (Wiken, Denmark, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Wendy Evans at the Museum of London for bringing this material to my attention.

Bidwell, and must have been part of a private consignment. The Marten family hailed from Oxford shire, and in 1750 George Marten (sic) married Deborah Bidwell whose rather was a senior merchant in the East India company. Armorial dishes from the set of which the excavated sherd was part have therefore been dated to about 1750,<sup>14</sup> though the order for the wedding service was presumably placed a year or two before the marriage, in the late 1740s. The blue-and-white porcelain can be dated stylistically to around 1750, by comparison with the shipwrecked finds discovered above. Detailed analysis of the English ceramic finds from the Lime house kiln itself are still proceeding, but it seems likely that many of its products were copied from Chinese porcelain just like that unearthed nearby.

### Porcelain as a Luxury Item

The third part of the paper will examine the sort of Chinese and Japanese porcelain which was used for luxury display in European palaces and great houses in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Particular mention will be made of old English collections, as a device to explain this topic.

The earliest Asian ceramics to be collected in Europe were single items selected for the cabinets of curiosities' formed by members of the aristocracy and burgher patrons. These *Kunstkammern* combined specimens in natural and man-made materials, and had as their aim scientific rather than artistic purposes. They contained precious items such as shells, hardstones and porcelains mounted in precious metals; an example of the latter is the 'Von Manderscheidt cup' in the Victoria and Albert Museum, a piece of Jiajing porcelain decorated in *kinrande* style with a German metal mount. The inscription on a companion piece records that it was brought from Turkey by count Eberhart Von Mandorscheidt in 1583 and mounted in memory of his brother.<sup>15</sup>

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the great majority of East Asian porcelain was imported in bulk and used as tableware, as the items cited above illustrate. Certain examples were perceived as precious and rare, and these were singled out. Other pieces again were specially commissioned as display pieces. The extreme limits of this fashion were seen in the late seventeenth to early eighteenth century 'Porcelain Rooms', whose walls were dressed in massed ranks of Chinese and Japanese porcelain.

The exhibition at the British Museum on 'Porcelain for Palaces'<sup>16</sup> showed that it was colored over glaze-decorated wares that were first commissioned especially for display, and that initially porcelains from Japan such as Imari and Kakiemon were preferred. The catalogue listed the prestigious sites where such displays can still be seen as follows:

- 1) The only extant mid-17<sup>th</sup> century display, a pyramidal ceiling clad in late Ming blue and white plates in the Santos Palace in Lisbon

---

<sup>14</sup> David Sanctuary Howard, *Chinese Armorial Porcelain* (London, 1974), p. 319.

<sup>15</sup> Inventory number M. 16-1970.

<sup>16</sup> See note 1.

- 2) Dehua figures and Japanese blue and white porcelain in Rosenberg Castle, outside Copenhagen, founded by King Frederik II: around 1650.<sup>17</sup>
- 3) Queen Mary's china closet designed by Daniel Marot in Holland in 1684, and her subsequent collection at Kensington Palace in London, some of which still survives at Hampton court and Windsor castle. The Hampton court collection is characterized by fine examples of over glaze decorated Japanese porcelain there are eleven extant pieces of Dehua ware.
- 4) Burghley House in England, which belonged to the Right Honourable John, Earl of Exeter and Ann, Countess of Exeter, and whose collection was inventoried on 21 August, 1688. The major part of this collection is of fine Japanese over glaze-decorated ware.
- 5) The largest of all such collections in Dresden, assembled by Augustus the Strong, King of Poland and Elector of Saxony. Augustus started collecting in 1715, and all his pieces were inventoried between 1721 and his death in 1733. The Porzellansammlung contains both Chinese and Japanese porcelain, but only the Japanese collection has been published in recent years.<sup>18</sup>
- 6) The Oranienburg Palace near Berlin, whose Porcelain Room was designed for the King of Prussia in 1733.

Another interesting collection that I have been working on recently is that at Boughton House in Northampton shire in England, home of the Dukes of Buccleuch and Queensbury.<sup>19</sup> There are fifty-four pieces of white Chinese porcelain at Boughton House, and fifty-two of them are Dehua ware. Dehua porcelain was manufactured in a variety of shapes, including figurines, and it has been suggested that the early production was stimulated by foreign trade.<sup>20</sup> Ivory was carved at the nearby city of Zhangzhou, the raw ivory having been shipped in by the Spanish via their trade base in the Philippines. Carvings of the period 1580-1640 were often re-exported to Europe, among them figurine of a young woman with a baby and a rosary. The catholic Spaniards saw this as the Virgin Mary, while the Chinese were working from a prototype of their own, the Bodhisattva Guanyin. At all events, many figurines of the Virgin Mary/Bodhisattva, made in both ivory and porcelain, made their way to Europe. The Boughton House collection contains no fewer than eleven such examples, including the typical image of song zi Guanyin 'Guanyin as a provider of male children' which can be traced back as far as the 1620s.<sup>21</sup> Family tradition holds that the Chinese porcelain at Boughton House was left to John, 2nd Duke of Montagu (died 1749) by his illustrious

---

<sup>17</sup> Etnografiske genstande i Det kongelige danske Kunstkammer 1650-1800, edited by Bente Dam-Mikkelsen and Torben Lundbaek (Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Reichel, *Altjapanisches Porzellan aus der Dresdener Porzellansammlung* (Leipzig, 1980)

<sup>19</sup> The catalogue of porcelain there will form part of a book on Boughton House to be published in 1992 by Faber and Faber Limited.

<sup>20</sup> Derek Gillman, 'Ming and Qing ivories: figure carving' in *Chinese Ivories from the Shang to the Qing* edited by William Watson (Oriental Ceramic Society, London, 1984), p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> There is an image of the 'songzi Guanyin' in the City Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong, with an inscription dated to the second year of the Chogzhen period, 1629, see: Sheila Riddell, *Dated Chinese Antiquities 600 1650* (London, 1979), p.B3. Other figures were found in the finds from the Chinese junk which sank in 1643-6, see Sheaf and Kilburn op. cit. note a.

mother-in-law Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough (1660-1744). It would be helpful to the history and dating of Dehua ware to be able to state that the pieces did actually belong to Sarah, who married into riches in 1678-9 and who could have started acquiring household ornaments after that date. Unfortunately, however no mention of white porcelains has yet been discovered in the family papers. There is some evidence that the Dehua porcelain was not regarded as being as valuable as the fine French ceramic wares at Boughton.

The taste for and major consumption of fine Asian ceramics ceased after about 1775, when emerging European factories took over the market. One curious footnote can be recorded here, that of the collection formed by the wife of Sir Joseph Banks (the distinguished scientist and natural historian, 1743-1820). Lady Banks displayed her collection in the dairy of their property at Spring Grove, Isleworth, Middlesex. The choice of dairy as display space stems from the fact that it was the special preserve of women, who were the chief collectors of porcelain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>22</sup> Sir Joseph carefully catalogued his wife's collection in 1807 as a gift, and his illustrated catalogue reveals that Lady Banks's collection contained several Dehua figurines of Guanyin and the Buddha.<sup>23</sup>

### Conclusions

Limits of time and space preclude a comprehensive discussion of the enormous topic of exports of Chinese and Japanese porcelain to Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Nevertheless, even the limited thesis set out here suggests some general points. We can estimate that the larger part of the export trade in ceramics was of bulk-reduced tea and table wares. The great majority of these were blue-and-white, some with a brown exterior. Only a tiny fraction comprised the more expensive over glaze painted wares. In contrast to these bulk exports were the luxury items selected for European *kunstkammern* and for room display. These comprised a majority of two categories that seem to have been especially treasured were Japanese porcelains, particularly Imari and Kakiemon styles, and porcelain figurines.<sup>24</sup> The highest-quality porcelain figurines were those produced at Dehua, and they have been preserved in many European collections.

Rose Kerr is Curator of the Far Eastern Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

---

<sup>22</sup> Anna Somers Cocks, 'The decorative use of ceramics in the English country-house during the eighteenth century', *Papers of the Treasure Houses of Britain Symposium* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> Rose Kerr, 'The Chinese Porcelain at Spring Grove Dairy. Sir Joseph Banks's Manuscript', *Apollo*, January 1989, pp.30-34.

<sup>24</sup> This supposition is strengthened by the items in another recent exhibition, cataloguing the *Staatliche Kunstsammlungen in Kassel*, 'Porzellan aus China und Japan. Die Porzellangalerie der Landgrafen von Hessen-Kassel' (Berlin, 1990).