

Ornamentation and Orientalization: Social and Racial Implications of the Consumption of

Chinese Porcelain

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Porcelain trade between England and China peaked around 1750, though it started significantly earlier. Chinese goods first appeared in Europe in the 1500s though it was only in 1600 that the East India Company was established to further Britain's trade with China.¹ Because of the massive distance between England and China, acquiring porcelain was a hobby left to the affluent. One such "passionate china collector" was Mary of Orange, who was credited by Daniel Defoe as "furnishing [her] house with chinaware, which increased to a strange degree afterwards."² These pieces of art would have stood out from the rest of a collection, as Chinese artists did not rely on the use of a single vanishing point and depicted imagery not found in Europe, such as exotic flora and animals. By the 1750s the Rococo style was in vogue, which was much more akin to Chinese aesthetics, and consumers of porcelain, primarily women, bought heaps of Chinese paraphernalia; because women were associated with the consumption of Chinaware, social commentary often exploited porcelain as a symbol of feminine values. Porcelain, since it was associated with femininity and China, became a synecdoche for all of China—if Chinese art was feminine, then the country, too must be effeminate. Throughout the eighteenth-century tensions rose between China and England which resulted in the Opium War and a shift of power in favor of the British. This shift in political power, combined with the rise of neo-Classicism and German kilns that could produce passable imitations of porcelain, led to Chinese-made porcelain falling out of favor in England. While ostensibly the fashionability of porcelain was based on aesthetics, it is also a commentary on class, femininity, and race.

Rococo art and the scenes depicted on Chinese goods have many aesthetic similarities, so porcelain was embraced and lavishly adorned British homes. The Rococo period was popular in

¹ Joseph Downs, "The China Trade and its Influences," *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* Volume XXXVI, No. 4 (1941): 84.

² Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (London: G. Strahan, 1724-26), 175.

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which was concurrent with the import of Chinese porcelains.³ The aesthetics of rococo are based in soft, fluid lines, as well as nebulous colors and a lack of symmetry.⁴ Popular themes depicted in rococo art are nature and love, both of which can be found in mediums ranging from painting to architecture to interior design.



Pair of Stands (Jingdezhen [Jiangxi Province, China]: reign of Kangxi, c 1700)

One example of Chinese porcelain from this period is a pair of stands from the Jiangxi Province that were created circa 1700.⁵ These stands are painted in soft, pastel colors, with fluid vines encasing the sides, and only natural subjects are depicted: flowers, leaves, and vines. While painted in China, these pieces fit precisely within the description of the rococo aesthetic. And it

³ Downs, “China Trade,” 85.

⁴Ibid.

⁵ I would like to point out that in the Royal Collection, Japanese and Chinese pieces are lumped together, so that a search for “Chinese porcelain” garners significantly different Japanese art, as well. The grouping of these two similar aesthetic is a continuation of orientalization, since these two cultures had distinct artistic practices developed by the 1700s.

was not solely goods from China that were imported either. The East India Company brought art back from Japan, India, and other “exotic” locales, as well, and there was a high demand in England for such pieces. One Englishwoman describes her dressing room in the following manner, “The very curtains are Chinese pictures painted on gauze, and the chairs the Indian fan sticks with cushions of Japan satin painted.”⁶ For those who could afford them, Eastern artworks were abundant in British life, particularly during the rococo period.

By the mid eighteenth century, neoclassicism and the Grand Tour were rose to prominence, and the oriental style began to decline in popularity. Wealthy young men often traveled to Rome to gain experience, and they also brought Roman artifacts back to England.⁷ The manner of collection of Roman antiques in and of itself differs from Chinese art. The East India Company, not aristocratic individuals, brought back masses of Chinese goods to British shores. In contrast, the British who ventured to Rome often funded excavations of old monuments themselves and were intricately involved with the purchase of remnants from the Romans. Some of this art was categorized as “grotesque,” which etymologically means “grotto art,” or artifacts that were found underground.⁸ Grotesque Roman art became increasingly popularized and collected, and the same term began to be applied to the scenes on Chinese porcelain, though with a significantly more negative connotation. Joseph Warton argued, “Happy should I think myself to be able to convince the fair connoisseurs... that no genuine beauty is to be found in whimsical and grotesque figures, the monstrous offspring of wild imagination,

⁶ Elizabeth Montagu, Letter to her Sister (1750) quoted in Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins, *A Taste for China: English Subjectivity and the Prehistory of Orientalism* (Oxford Scholarship Online: 2013) doi: 0.1093/acprof:oso/9780199950980.001.0001

⁷ Frank Salmon, “Art and Architectural Influence of the Grand Tour” (lecture, The Davidson Summer Program in Cambridge 2018, July 30, 2018).

⁸ Salmon, “Grand Tour”

undirected by nature and truth.”⁹ This is fairly damning of the worth of Chinese aesthetics—figures are “unnatural” and “monstrous” and require no talent to create. Warton believes that the British should halt the collection of Chinese arts, and the implication is that the opposite aesthetics listed in this quote, that is to say natural and realistic figures, are capable of possessing “genuine beauty.” This can be interpreted as a reference to Roman statuary, which was amazingly realistic even after thousands of years had passed. Aside from aesthetics, Warton’s critique has a more sinister implication, as porcelain was often a symbol for women and feminine values; his quote can be read not only as a critique of non-European art’s lack of quality, but of the British women who coveted Asiatic paraphernalia.

Porcelain was primarily collected by women and the association between collector and object led porcelain to become a symbol for femininity in popular writings. The very nature of porcelain is delicate, and it was often crafted into objects that are equally if not more decorative than utilitarian, such as teacups and jars. In Britain around the 1750s Chinese goods were still a rare commodity and having a large collection of porcelain was a sign of wealth and influence. A reporter from a London newspaper describes one woman’s china room as, “piles of plates and dishes, and pyramids of cups and saucers, reaching from the floor to the ceiling”.¹⁰ Women collected masses of porcelain purely for its exotic nature, and disregarded its utilitarian function; even though fragile, teacups and vases still have a function other than ornamental. When the fragile porcelain is stacked in “pyramids,” they cannot be plucked for use without the utmost care, especially when the entire china room is filled with such delicate goods. Later in the same article, the narrator’s eye is “completely lost in a chaos of pagodas, wagging-headed mandareens

⁹ John Warton, *The World*, No 26 (28 June 1753) quoted in Vanessa Alayrac-Fielding, “‘Frailty, thy name is China’: Women, Chinoiserie and the threat of low culture in eighteenth-century England” *Women’s History Review* 18, no. 4 (2009): 664, doi: 10.1080/09612020903112398.

¹⁰ Henry Mackenzie, *The Lounger*, no. 79, (London: A. Strahan, 5 August 1786): 98.

and bonzes, red lions, golden dogs, and fiery dragons.”¹¹ This female collector is selecting “ornamental porcelaine” that is nowhere near the European tradition. The ornaments that she, and other women, chose to adorn themselves with are prized distinctly because it is from mythicized China, and cost lots of money to obtain; this shows interest in the mythical and exotic. The obsessive collection of expensive porcelain was construed into vanity; if a woman had too much of the Chinaware, she was wasting her husband’s money.¹² Virtue was another characteristic that porcelain came to represent. A cracked teacup, for example, was used to symbolize a woman who had lost a pristine reputation, through one scandal or another.¹³ Women were connected to the material goods that they owned, and if they could not maintain the correct up-keep of their possessions, it reflected poorly on their character. As Alayrac-Fielding, one of the leading authors about Chinese porcelain’s relationship with femininity, argues, equating a piece of porcelain that a woman owns with her character makes her an “object of consumption like the china [she] consumed”.¹⁴ The purer a bride-to-be, if her china was not cracked, the more likely she could arrange for a higher, more prosperous marriage. Women’s association with porcelain was objectifying, and the comparison was used to show her market value.

Richard Steele in *The Spectator* makes multiple references to the British Empire’s collection of Chinaware, and porcelain’s correlation to femininity.¹⁵ He writes in a section about requirements for women to obtain beauty it must be, “By [Embellishing the whole Person by the proper Ornaments of virtuous and commendable Qualities] it is that those who are... the

¹¹ Mackenzie, *The Lounger*, 98.

¹² Alayrac-Fielding, “Frailty, thy name is China,” 662.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 661.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Richard Steele, along with Joseph Addison, authored the newspaper *The Spectator*, which was targeted towards a middle-class audience, and more specifically towards middle-class women. It had a large readership so this quote would have been read widely by the very audience it is describing.

Porcelain Clay of human Kind, become animated, and are in a Capacity of exerting their Charms.”¹⁶ In Steele’s article, for a woman to be beautiful she must have the “proper Ornaments” of “virtuous” behavior, which, in tandem to the later reference to porcelain, conjures an image of a whole, uncracked porcelain teacup. By writing that it is women shaped from “the Porcelain Clay of human kind,” Steele references the fragility that a woman must possess—the only objects porcelain clay can create are delicate. The subtext of the quotation, then, is that it is only women who are ornamented and fragile that can be considered eligible for beauty. The fact that *The Spectator* was a nominally satirical paper introduces some question as to authorial intent in choosing to use a traditionally Chinese medium to present female caution and virtue. It is a very strong statement to write that *only* Porcelain clay can produce proper ladies, and this surety in a satirical paper introduces speculation about the intent of this phrase. The reverence of oriental aesthetics could be a false praise, and questions whether it is solely Asiatic, porcelain clay that can create beautiful, European women.

The feminization of porcelain by British authors is not just a reflection on European women, but also serves as a feminization of China’s world power. The main products that were exported by China at this time were to Western eyes considered feminine: lacquerware, porcelain, silks, and tea. When researching this paper, texts about porcelain from the eighteenth century focus on the equation between Chinese goods and femininity, and modern scholarship examines how this objectified British women. While this is an incredibly important topic, what is missing from scholarship about porcelain is how the relationship between Chinese goods and femininity in turn feminizes Chinese people. The Chinese who produced the porcelain that the British women consumed were Chinese *men*. This is an important facet of porcelain’s

¹⁶ Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, vol 1, no. 33 (1711). The reason this quotation appears to be so edited is that in the original there is an unnecessary reference and an unfortunate use of “this”.

consumption because most British people at this time had never seen a Chinese man in person so the only association they had with the country or its people were the goods that had been imported, such as porcelain.¹⁷ On some wares exported from China there were images of Chinese fashions and peoples which was the only exposure of Chinese bodies to the English. To an Englishperson, the way Chinese clothing fit over the body and the aesthetics of the garments themselves were much more gender-ambiguous than European-style paintings.¹⁸ In England, Chinese masculinity and the pieces of art that Chinese men produced were no longer masculine and actively feminized. By judging Chinese culture and applying Western norms of gender roles and expression, the Chinese people were seen to be more effeminate than the British

This essay has examined how the British used their perception of China and Chinese exports to create commentary about their own culture; this is problematic because then the only value to Chinese culture is to help define what it means to be British. Edward Said defined orientalism in his seminal work, *Orientalism*, that Europeans established the concept of “the East,” which lumps together a multitude of cultures, and use it to establish a binary between the lesser-east and the greater-west.¹⁹ British men and women in the eighteenth century who were buying goods from China displayed a distinct lack of focus on anything about China other than its exports. The British who collected porcelain teacups, such as Mackenzie’s character in *The Lounger*, did not care where their goods came from, so long as it was from the East and was decorated with a foreign design. There is also the issue that European art critics and collectors used “the other” to define their own, higher valued aesthetic.²⁰ East Asian art was considered to have low aesthetic value since elements of perspective and symmetry that developed from the

¹⁷ Alayrac-Fielding, “Fraility, thy name is China,” 665.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (NY: Vintage Books, 1978): 1-2.

²⁰ Alayrac-Fielding, “Fraility, thy name is China,” 665.

Renaissance were absent. This is a Eurocentric perspective—Chinese aesthetics were used as collectible kitsch to increase the standard of European art.²¹ Yet this fact escapes British social commentators who focus on porcelain as a sight for the projection and interpretation of British social concerns. Contemporary social and art critics do not use porcelain to address concerns about growing British imperialism, or any social problems that extend out of the British Isles, instead choosing to focus their commentary inward on British values.

To write a paper about discrimination and orientalization against China without considering a Chinese perspective on the issue would only contribute to the problem of marginalization because it continues to place all the emphasis on the British. In fact, the Chinese were well aware of British consumers' fetishization of Eastern aesthetics and catered to this interest to gain economic profit. The porcelain shipped to England was created for the sole purpose of exportation; porcelain that was displayed in English china rooms was never created for a Chinese audience.²² The Chinese knew that their "othered" work was coveted by Europeans, so they created a distinct aesthetic for European consumption, known as chinoiserie.²³ Chinoiserie highlights fetishized elements, such as mystical creatures and lack of narrative to the foreground of their art because the Chinese knew that that would be more attractive to their foreign audience. Chinoiserie, therefore, was not as authentic as other Chinese potteries because the intention was that it would never be used by Chinese people. There was also an aesthetic difference between Chinese goods for consumption China and Chinese goods destined for England. Catering to European tastes, chinoiserie included many fantastical elements, which might not have compositionally been attractive or normal in a Chinese setting.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 660.

²³ Ibid., 661.

In addition to aesthetic manipulation to sell more of their art, the Chinese also had large control over how and where the British and other Europeans traded with them by only selling their goods in certain ports. China was not nearly the weak, feminized peoples the British ascribed to them, and gained significant advantage from recognizing the market that their goods occupied.

One method of controlling trade that the Chinese Emperors utilized was to restrict foreign merchants to the southern region of China known as Canton. Emperor Kangxi restricted foreign trade to one single port in 1757 in attempt to avoid European imperialism. Not even fifty years later, in 1792 the East India Company, dissatisfied with trade conditions, petitioned King George III to write a letter to Emperor Qianlong asking him to open more Chinese ports for trade. The letter reached Qianlong, and he sent a response to George III, which is piercing in his disdain for European consumption and political expansionism yet praises Chinese aesthetics and power. He states, “tea, silk and porcelain which the Celestial Empire produces, are absolute necessities to European nations and to yourselves,” which immediately sets the tone for the rest of the letter.²⁴ Qianlong is aware of the importance Chinese exports has to British fashion and culture and the power that he holds in the balance of trade. This puts him in a position of power when writing this letter and means he does not have to placate to the British in order to maintain the commoditization of Chinese goods. The address continues, “I do not forget the lonely remoteness of your island, cut off from the world... nor do I overlook your excusable ignorance of the usages of our Celestial Empire.”²⁵ There is distinct contempt with the way the Emperor views the British, and he acknowledges the distance, both physical and cultural, that exists between the British and the Chinese, though seems as unwilling to learn the customs of the other,

²⁴ Qianlong, Letter to George III (1792).

<http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/2c/texts/1792QianlongLetterGeorgeIII.htm>

²⁵ Qianlong, Letter to George III.

just as the British behave. Qianlong ends the letter with a threat, “Should your vessels touch the shore, your merchants will assuredly never be permitted to land or to reside there, but will be subject to instant expulsion.”²⁶ Qianlong is explicit to King George III that if British ships are to set sail and land anywhere other than the designated areas the Chinese have assigned, there will be severe repercussions. The Chinese were clearly in control of their land throughout the eighteenth century and took advantage of British expectations to earn more profit.

Trade did not always stay in favor of the Chinese, nor did porcelain remain solely a Chinese craft. British merchants had increasing restrictions and taxes imposed upon them by the Chinese, and lobbied their King to declare war, which he did in 1839.²⁷ The British won, and the result was that China had to open more ports and allow year-round residence in said ports.²⁸ The Opium War clearly delineated the contrast between east-west that had already been established between Chinese porcelain and European works of art. The popularity of Chinese porcelain decreased during the war not only because of difficulty attaining it, but because of other material and aesthetic shifts. Europeans had been attempting to produce porcelain for centuries, and by the 1850s the Germans had managed to produce and market it, meaning that the ornamental value of Chinese porcelain was decreased since there was much cheaper porcelain to be bought by the British that did not have to be imported from as far.²⁹ This also meant that porcelain was removed from the labor of Chinese people, since the same style could be bought from Europeans. Aesthetically, the neoclassical style was in full-swing as a counter to Rococo’s lack of moral character, and classical aesthetics were viewed as the heritage of modern European

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ South China Morning Post

²⁸ South China Morning Post.

²⁹ Downs, “The China Trade and its Influences,” 89-90.

culture.³⁰ Neoclassicism and a return to Greco-Roman aesthetics not only replaced Rococo, but also exotic, Oriental aesthetics, and is another reason why porcelain trade between China and England decreased. Tracking the history and popularity of porcelain in Britain allows for the severing of Chinese goods from Chinese aesthetics, as well as the fetishization of the East emerged as a collectible fad. Art and aesthetics, such as concerns porcelain, can provide an important vehicle for historians to study how cultures interacted, and the relationship between trade and cultural exchange.

³⁰ This, in and of itself is problematic and shows a domestication of Greek culture. The Ancient Greeks were as removed from 1800s Europe as nineteenth century China was, yet one was accepted as a moral standard and was subsumed into European culture, whereas the other was juxtaposed with the “goodness” in Europe.

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