ORIENTAL PORCELAIN

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Anyone who is seriously interested in the study of antiques should have some knowledge of the culture of the Orient and its profound effect on many facets of Western art. One has only to pick up a current magazine on antiques and read the advertisements, or to go to a furnished room at a musuem to see that fine Oriental rugs, porcelain and paintings are highly regarded. At one time wealthy British families would have one member who made a career of shopping in the Orient for the entire clan. Oriental objects of art look equally at home in the most contemporary setting as well as in traditional decor.

When the first European traders came to China to establish trade they were not welcomed. The Chinese had a civilization that went back for centuries, whereas the Europeans had only recently been free of the raids of barbarians. Marco Polo was one of the pioneers in establishing contact withfar-off Cathay, as it was then called. He spent sixteen years with Kublai Khan, returning to Italy in 1245. It was he who told of the wonders of the Orient, and the beautiful ceramics that looked like the shell, porcella. No one believed the stories Marco Polo told, and after his death, it was learned, that he had been telling the truth.

The Portugese arrived in the Orient in 1514, followed by the Spanish and Dutch. The English did not arrive until 1599. The Renaissance in Europe had awakened the people to new ideas, little wonder then that the introduction of the beautiful, highly sophisticated silks and ceramics from the East created such a stir! The desire to acquire these goods was so frantic, that writers of the time coined the word, Chinamania, to describe the malady.

In 1720 the Emperorkhang Hsi gave the Cantonese merchants a license to trade with the "foreign devils." They were confined to a compound near the factory. Laws were passed to prevent the integration of the whites into Oriental society. If a Chinese were caught teaching a European the Chinese language, the penalty was torture or death. To make matters even worse, the Europeans had little to trade that the Chinese wanted, consequently the English introduced opium, which nearly ruined this old civilization.

The secrets of the potters were highly guarded and although the traders had heard of the beautiful old treasures of this land, they were not allowed to see them. The Jesuit missionaries finally gained the confidence of their hosts, and this facilitated communication. For man years the Chinese were never free of foreign invaders. The trade between the Cantonese merchants and the East India Company continued until the early 1800's when the company went out of business. (The Americans had joined the stream of traders in the 1780's with their famous Clipper ships.)

Although there was an uprising in the early 1800's when many of the Canton factories were destroyed, it was 1850 when the first great revolt began. The Chinese were tired of having foreigners own land and run their cities. Although this revolution was not successful, it lead the way for other revolutions. After World War I, some of the Europeans gave up their cities. The date, 1850, is an important one for collectors to remember. Things made in China as well as in Europe are not as desirable after this--it was the end of the hand-made era and the start of the machine age.

During revolutions the arts always suffer. The mood of the people

is not conducive to creative thinking along luxury lines. Fine porcelains were always a symbol of the aristocracy, and so when the people rebelled they destroyed many fine old collections, as well as the factories where these things were made. (Chiang Kai-Shek was able to smuggle enough of these historic pieces to Taiwan to set up a fine museum.)

In spite of all the troubles in China, a steady flow, more or less, of goods kept coming to the West until the Communists took over the mainland in 1949. Because labor was cheaper in the East than in the West, the Oriental goods always undersold their European and American counterparts. However, when our trade was stopped abruptly with Red China, "Chinamania" broke out again. Collectors, realizing that the Chinese items that were here were irreplaceable, started a frenzied hoarding of the existing supply. Since the quality had gradually deteriorated over the years, the demand for the really old pieces exceeded the supply. Consequently, the prices on the popular wares, Lowestoft, Canton and Rose Medallion, have gone so high they are out of reach to the average collector.

One can hardly tell the story of porcelain without mentioning the simultaneous introduction of tea. Drinking water had to be boiled in England, and because it was so untasty, beer was served to adults as well as to children. The tea drinking ritual was a welcome change, and the custom spread like wildfire. In 1664, thirty-four ounces were purchased as a gift for Charles II, by 1772, ten million pounds were being shipped annually from Canton to England. The tea was so very expensive at first, that the original tea pots were very small.

STONEWARE

The introduction of porcelain into Europe created not only the mania to acquire these fine articles, but also stimulated the artisans' desire to produce the equivalent. The race to obtain the formula became an international obsession. The research became so costly, that the rulers of Europe had to sponsor it. The Medici family of Florence, LouisXIV, Madame de Pompadour, Louis XVIII and Marie Antoinette were all contributors to the effort. Augustus the Strong of Saxony was responsible, in part, for the final success. He was an avid collector, going bankrupt to support his hobby. He heard of a young alchemist, Bottger, who was believed to be on the verge of discovering a formula for making gold. Augustus kidnapped him and set him to work in a laboratory--where after many failures, came upon the formula for making porcelain. In 1710, the same year, the Meissen factory was authorized.

The Chinese had closely guarded their secrets for making porcelain. They used kaolin and petunse as basic ingredients. They are the same stone in different stages of decay. (Incidentally, the worlds's supply of kaolin is nearly depleted, the best deposits are in the United States.) The Chinese didn't tell Europeans they sometimes baked their pottery for as long as nineteen days. The use of straw and wood fires to keep the temperature justright, was an art that couldn't be learned quickly. It was passed from father to son through first-hand experience. The oven-tender was the highest paid of all workers. He had no thermometers, the color of the flame was his only guide. He could completely change a color by over-or under-baking it. Unfortunately as the old craftsmen began to die, their sons lost interest in learning about forms and color. The revolutions would temporarily halt production, and when it resumed, many skills were lost, consequently, quality suffered.

The Orientals try to convey a message through their works of art. The artist considers himself to be an instrument of God and prays for divine guidance before he starts to work. Their folk-lore abounds in fables and symbols are used extensively to represent the fables. The phoenix, the monkey and the peach, the dragon and the pearl, the five bats, etc., are all symbolic of legends. The merchants who came to trade did not appreciate this and suggested meaningless motifs made up of unrelated bits and pieces. Imagine how you would feel to see Humpty Dumpty jumping over the moon, or Red Riding Hood appearing at the home of the Three Bears. Little wonder then that the Chinese were careful to never have in their own homes things that were made for the traders.

Little by little, color and form from the West seeped into Chinese goods. They were entranced by the beautiful pink of Dresden, and they used it in abundance.

British historians had a good time recording the humorous sidelights to the craze that had swept over the countryside. They poked fun at the lack of perspective, the hideous dragons, and the speckled glazes that were found on the new imports. They were not the only ones having fun. Themoney-hungry Canton merchants were laughing just as hard--because they were loading the boats with all the inferior merchandise they could find. The rejects that were not good enough for home consumption, were greedily gobbled up by the "hairy nosed foreigners."

Nearly every country in Europe tried its hand in making porcelain. A lot of dishonest practices arose as spies would try to steal the secrets of a competitor. (This went on on the Continent, not England.) Each country's distinct personality seemed to emerge through its new art. The Italian

artists seemed to be the most sensitive to the Oriental's delicacy. The romantic nature of the French was apparent in its soft, flowing lins, and subtle colors. The stolid character of the Dutch could be felt in viewing its Delftware. The Swedes admired the simplicity of the Japanese designs, and their interpretations of this art were so well received in Japan, that they started copying their own copiers!

The Impressionistic artists Degas, Whistler, Manet and others were influenced by Oriental woodcuts. These first Japanese woodcuts came to Paris wrapped around china. The simple lines and use of flat areas of color inspired these artists to refine and simplify their own works.

Coffee and chocolate were introduced as beveragesabout the same time as tea, and so the demand for dishes in which to serve these beverages added an urgency and stimulus for production. Also milady had to have an open cupboard in which to display her new acquitions, and this led to a revolution in the furniture business. The impact of the Orient was as tremendous in furniture as it was in pottery. (The French word Chinoiserie was used for European goods with an Oriental look.)

There were many interesting by-products of this period. Milk glass, bone china, and ironstone were all discovered in England in her attempt to make a satisfactory porcelain. The Willow pattern (which is not an Oriental theme) was adapted from old Canton, even the Meissen onion started out to be a Chinese pomegranate. Flow Blue was inspired by Chinese blue and white.

When Napoleon came into power in the nineteenth century, he had a bad effect on the development of the arts. He was insecure, pompous, unartistic, and practical. Mechanization and mass production took the place of fine handwork. Handicraft methods were counterfeited, and materials imitated--the guild system was destroyed. Mementos of the porcelain age are avidly hunted by collectors, and figurines command an extremely high price.

ORIENTAL PORCELAIN
(Japanese)

In general, Japanese porcelain is not as desirable as that which comes from China. It usually commands a lower price. Much of Japanese art was inspired by the Chinese. The Japanese have been noted for copying things they admire. An abundance of cheap merchandise flooded our stores in the early 1900's--and the label--"made in Japan"was on most of it. Even souvenirs which were once made by American Indians started wearing the Japanese mark. Labor before World War II was very cheap there. When the Japanese artist made a copy of someone else's work, he would change some insignificant detail that only he could know of. As far as he was concerned he had improved the original, and thereby excaped any guilt that comes from plagarism.

The Japanese were more successful in driving out the foreign invaders who came to trade in the 17th century than were the Chinese. They were disgusted with the manners of those barbarians, and resented very much the missionary work of the Christians. The punishment was so severe for anyone who dealt with the Europeans (with the exception of the Dutch) that trade was almost reduced to a trickle. Japan retained this isolated position until 1854 when Admiral Perry was sent to persuade the Japanese to resume trade.

When we recall that the Japanese were hunting with bows and arrows at this time, and less than one hundred years later (Pearl Harbor) were a full-fledged world power--it is no wonder that Admiral Perry's mission is likened to the opening of Pandora's box.

Although some handcrafts are still being pursued in Japan, this now highly industrialized nation has learned that it is more profitable to make transistor radios, cameras, and automobiles than to paint chins. Many collectors are now looking a second time at the dainty, little scenes

that were so lightly regarded when they were sold at the "five and ten."

Kakiemon, which is sparsely decorated, and Imari, which is highly decorated, are two of the best-known quality porcelains made in Japan. Both of these were made at the port city of Arita. Kutani, a pottery with a rougher glaze, is a third very fine type of ware. Of these three, Imari, with its colorful dark blues and iron reds is the best known and most available. Dutch potters who went to England copied the Imari and developed the famous gaudy Dutch. When buying Imari, beware of large areas of iron-red carelessly put on over the glaze. This is characteristic of later wares where there is not as much attention to detail.

Even thoroughly experienced collectors have difficulty in telling Chinese pieces from Japanese. For example, both countries have made the rice pattern--the Japanese copied from the Chinese--even the artists signatures and dates. The Japanese wares were then sent to China for the tourist trade where the prices were better than at home. Incidentally, a kernel of rice is not used in making these dishes. A little hole is cut in the clay and the glaze runs down to form the window-like aperture.

The Chinese put their glazes on by hand, so the underside of the rims are never glazed. The Japanese are more apt to dip their pieces, and often stilt-marks can be found. The Chinese tapered the edges of their plates, and beveled the foot-rims where the glaze ran down and formed drips. If you find a blue line running completelyaround the inside of the foot-rim, the item is apt to be Japanese. Experts who know Oriental symbolism can be helped in identifying the pieces by recognizing whose symbols appear. For example, the two countries use different symbols to represent the four seasons. The Chinese use people, animals and birds frequently, whereas the Japanese like rocks,

flowers and trees.When the Japanese do use people they are apt to be more glum, thinner, and have fewer details in their faces than Chinese people. The Japanese never made vases in pairs, while the Chinese always did. Both countries consider resonancy to be more important than translucency. Since the Chinese were exporting vast quantities when marks were not required, an unmarked piece is more apt to be Chinese. Fluting seems to be more characteristic of Japanese. Chinese dragons are supposed to have five claws, the Japanese, but three. Here again, one should stay away from making too many positive statements. The way to learn is through experience and study. It is possible to have museum curators help in making identification if you are in doubt.

ORIENTAL PORCELAIN
ON BECOMING A COLLECTOR

Experience is the best teacher--can be readily applied to the study of porcelain. The term "orange peel" is often used to describe the surface of pieces made during the latter part of the 18th century. You have to see a piece with this characteristic, and then you will always recognize it. There is a certain unevenness of surface in other pieces that can be discerned when the article is held obliquely to the light. Burst bubbles, soot marks, and imperfections in the glaze are all important to the collector. A knowledge of the development of different colors will help pinpoint age, also differences in shapes and designs are noted. For example, during the Ming Dynasty, yellow was reserved for the Emperor.

Very old Canton was decorated in a rich deep cobalt blue--some writers believe this color was originally bought from the Persians. When the Chinese learned to make it themselves, it was never as dark. The background color of Canton is an off-white tinged with blue. Old pieces of Canton are thicker than the new; the skill in painting on the designs deteriorated with time; hexagonal platters notched at the rim were made after 1850.

The underside of a plate or bowl also yields much information. The rings on the outside of the rim, as well as those on the inside have special meaning. Occasionally a dynasty mark is enclosed in two rings. The color of the clay of the rim is also important--buff colored clay is characteristic of Lowestoft. Sometimes the color is smeared on the exposed rim to make the article appear better than it is. When one becomes a collector of porcelain, he inadvertently becomes a collector of wild tales. I have heard the rings on the outside of the rim means that the piece was made for the Emperor--another may claim certain marks signify a particular dynasty--when in truth they maybe a a wish for one's good health or good fortune.

ON BECOMING A COLLECTOR

There is so much confusion over the terminology used for porcelain that it is wise to preface one's remarks with the words--in general. It is also wise not to make toomany positive statements, since authors do make mistakes too. For example, William Chaffers, an outstanding writer credited an English factory with having made the Oriental armorial ware--hence the confusion over Lowestoft. Actually, the English Lowestoft was made of soft paste, while the Chinese ware was true porcelain. The Chinese did not keep accurate historical records. Dynasty marks were not always applied. At one time it was felt that it would be an insult to the ruler if his mark should be put on an article that might be broken.

There has been so much copying in the field--both by Europeans and the Japanese that even some of the most learned curators make mistakes. (I have several marked pieces, but have yet to identify one mark, in spite of many books which have tables of marks.) There were many people who became proficient in duplicating missing pieces of sets. Sampson of Paris was one of these artists. Imagine how difficult it would be to identify some of his works! Some like to use the term Chinese Export for all items made for the Western taste. Others refer to Cantonware as anything shipped out of Canton. Rose Medallion and Rose Canton are the same ware; it became popular after the War of 1812. Nankeen usually refers to a high grade of porcelain of the early 1800's--fine quality and decorated in blue and white. Nankin or Nanking sometimes is used to include all blue and white ware of the earlier period too. Fitzhugh refers to designs used for American imports only. (Did youknow that Meissen and Dresden actually are the same?)

Remember that a law was passed in 1890 requiring the country of origin to be stamped on all imported goods, therefore it behooves one to look carefully to see if a mark has been ground off

ON BECOMING A COLLECTOR

Since you cannot become an expert in too many different fields it is wise to pick out one field that interests you and learn all you can about it. Some collectors specialize in snuff bottles, another in family scenes, some in people playing musical instruments, some like childrens' pictures,others collect certain colors or perhaps a definite pattern--like Canton. There are still many bargains to be found at rummage sales and antique shows--these will be in the"unpopular"items. I found a piece of Jesuit porcelain at a rummage sale recently, a pair of blanc de chine doves at an antique show and also a pair of old bowls with deers painted on them. All these items were under five dollars! Happy Hunting!

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