

# China Mania! – The Global Passion for Porcelain 800-1900

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

If a civilisation was privy to porcelain before the Chinese, it's been lost to history. Nor was porcelain 'found'; its secret (a combination of white China clay known as *kaolin*, and porcelain stone known as *dunzi*, starved of oxygen during a firing process known as 'reduction') evolved over thousands of years of potters working with a variety of clays and glazes in the desire to please imperial patrons. Samples of the history of porcelain's evolution and the ceramics they have inspired await viewers in the Asian Civilisation Museum's current special exhibition.

The desire to imitate jade inspired China's earliest potters, from which evolved the range of (green) stoneware celadons produced by China's iron-rich clay bodies. The finest examples were those fashioned by the Longquan kilns in the southern coastal province of Zhejiang. *Longquan* wares were extremely simple – with moulded reliefs such as a pair of fish or lotus petals – so as not to detract from the beauty of the glaze. (Fig 1)



Fig 1. Longquan stoneware (13th century) with celadon glaze. Gift of Mr Chen Chia Hung

While China's southern kilns were searching for the ideal celadon, the potters of the 13th century's Yuan Dynasty were searching for a pure white glaze to best show off a new cobalt blue and white decorative technique. The early northern kilns best known for their white wares were the Xing and Ding kilns in Hebei Province, which both began producing wares around the beginning of the Tang Dynasty (early 7th century).



Fig 2. Qingbai bowl with incised decoration (Yuan Dynasty, 13th - 14th century)

The beautiful, utilitarian Xing vessels made of a fine *kaolin*-type clay fall into that in-between category between high-fire stoneware and true porcelain known as 'porcelaneous'. A coat of white slip (white clay thinned with water), applied over the white, leather-

hard clay body before firing, produced a fine, delicate china mooned over by poets as "white as silver and snow". After about 200 years, the neighbouring Ding kilns in Xingzhou, also in Hebei Province, began to displace the Xing kilns. Ding kilns were best known for their exquisite, thin white wares, some of which achieved 'official' (*guan*) status, so indicated by the Chinese character 官 carved on their bases. In order to produce even thinner rims that wouldn't warp during the firing process, Ding potters began to fire

their pieces upside down, requiring that the glaze on their rims be scraped off before firing.

During the Northern Song (960-1126) one of China's southern kiln centres, at Jingdezhen in Jiangxi Province, began to produce *qingbai*, believed by many to be the precursor to modern porcelain. *Qingbai* translates as 'blue-white'; the same wares are also known by the name *yingqing*, which translates as 'shadow-blue'. The clay body used in *qingbai* was locally-found *kaolin* clay and China stone (*petuntse*, a felspathic material with a high melting point), which causes the clay body to contract tightly during the firing process, a process known as 'porcelainisation'. (Fig 2)

When an invasion by northern Jurchen tribes (who founded the Jin Dynasty) caused the surviving members of the Northern Song court to flee south to form the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), the new court's attention turned back to the traditional green celadon wares of the nearby Longquan kilns. As a result, Jingdezhen potters began experimenting with new techniques to win back their customers, including the use of metallic oxides as underglaze colouring agents. For many art historians this marks "the transition from a classical absorption with glaze tone to the modern concept



Fig 3. Abbasid Empire (Iraq) earthenware, cobalt in-glaze painting (9th century)

of expressive painting." For centuries, Central Asian potters had been using cobalt to paint underglaze blue decorations (Fig 3); perhaps their pots inspired Chinese potters to try the same. The famous 'David Vases' in London's Victoria and Albert Museum, are the oldest blue and white porcelain known (an inscription dates the vases to 1351). The resultant blue and white porcelain produced by China is perhaps the world's best example of successful branding – china is still known for its country of origin.



Fig 4. Porcelain bottle, Jingdezhen (1620-83, Transitional Period) depicting the Seven Sages. Gift of the Tan family in memory of Dr Tan Tsze Chor

Some of the most breathtaking examples of the use of blue underglaze on porcelain are the 'Transitional Wares' made from the early 1620s onward. Made for the Islamic market, a few are included in the exhibition. These pieces introduced an exciting new decorative technique radically different from the previous conventions of peonies, fish, flowering vines,

etc. They introduced paintings: of scenes from famous novels, or landscaped scenes with details of farmers or fishermen, or such famous groups as that of the Seven Sages, scholar-officials from the third century, known for their wine drinking and poetry (Fig 4). The level of blue and white technique was so high during the early Ming that it was basically 'as good as it got'.

Sixteenth century blue and white porcelain was so highly regarded that as soon as the Portuguese reached China (1516), they began shipping it home along with the silks and spices that inspired the Age of Exploration. Chinese ceramics didn't really take off in Europe, however, until the late-joining Dutch, unable to establish their own trading centres along the China coast, had to make do with raiding. They captured two Portuguese *carracks* (sailing ships) in 1602 and 1604, then sold their cargoes back home. The 'mania' for china was born as deep-pocketed collectors vied for the best pieces and largest collections.

To meet the growing European desire for blue and white (while meeting the Dutch demand for low-priced goods), China began producing special export goods known as *kraak* (after the ships that introduced the original blue and white wares to Europe). These somewhat heavier, coarser dishes (Fig 5) were not meant for domestic use, but were producible in bulk.



Fig 5. A classic kraak dish with deer pattern. Jingdezhen porcelain (around 1580-1644). Gift of Mr and Mrs Toshio Egawa

Transport by ship was hazardous and wastage, through breakage and loss at sea, high. The *Vung Tau* was a hybrid Chinese-Portuguese private trading ship that was probably bound for Batavia when it sank around 1690 off the coast of Vung Tau, Vietnam. Its accidental discovery in 1986 by a local fisherman and subsequent 1990 official salvage was the source of several pieces featured in the ACM exhibition (Fig 6).



Fig 6. A large baluster vase with lid from the Vung Tau shipwreck. Gift of Hallstrom Holdings Ptd Ltd

The production of Chinese porcelain had a major setback in the mid-1600s, however, when the Dutch were the world's biggest suppliers of china, and the Ming Dynasty collapsed, to be followed by years of internal chaos and civil wars. Many major kilns were destroyed, and if not destroyed, unable to transport their wares to the coastal shipping ports, many of which were closed to foreign ships. This 'Ming Gap' necessitated finding other sources of blue and white.

Two new sources appeared: Delft, a local Dutch kiln (established 1653) began to produce tin-glazed lead

earthenware with underglaze blue decorations for the Dutch domestic market (Fig 7); and the Dutch began to export Japanese copies of Chinese *kraak* from its base at Dejima, near Nagasaki, Japan, wares made in the Hizen kilns. These pieces are also known as Aritaware for the nearby port of Arita. Eventually, Japanese kilns began producing more colourful wares that added an underglaze red and applied



Fig 7. Tin-glazed earthenware plate featuring a Christian crucifix, produced by the Dutch Delft factory, 17th century. Known as 'Delftware' in England, and Dutch faience in Holland



Fig 8. Jingdezhen porcelain copying the Japanese Imari decorative palette of underglaze blue and red with overglaze iron red and gold (around 1720)

gilt to the mix to produce the distinctive style known as *Imari*. Ironically, when the Chinese kilns were able to start producing again, they found the Japanese *Imari* so popular that they began producing 'Chinese *Imari*'. (Fig 8)

In 1708, Johann Böttger, a young chemist turned alchemist finally discovered the secret of 'white gold' (porcelain). His laboratory became the home of the renowned Meissen Factory and became one of dozens of European porcelain manufacturers who began copying both Chinese and Japanese prototypes and designs. Böttger had been given Chinese *dehua*



Fig 9. Meissen porcelain tea bowl and saucer made in the dehua style (around 1735). Gift of Mr and Mrs Toshio Egawa

porcelain as models by his patron, Augustus the Strong, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, and copies of these pieces are amongst Meissen's earliest production line (Fig 9).

At the same time (early 1700s), Chinese factories began copying European coat-of-arm designs to make made-to-order armorial porcelains for the growing communities of European traders and its managing directors. Soon more made-to-European-taste designs flowed east – drawings and wooden models of butter dishes, beer mugs and coffee pots – all to be copied as commissioned wares known as *chine-de-commande*.

European collectors, influenced by the baroque tastes of their age, turned pieces of their collection into fantasies (on the cover), combining Chinese porcelain with Japanese lacquer and Mediterranean coral to create incense burners mounted in gilded bronze by French craftsmen.

It was Marco Polo who coined the word 'porcelain' when he first saw it in China in Kublai Khan's court. It reminded him of nothing more closely than that of a delicate white seashell – in Italian, *porcellana*.

---

In her 20s and early 30s, **Patricia Bjaaland Welch** was an avid amateur potter who studied Chinese ceramics for inspiration and technique – a foundation invaluable, she feels, to her later study of Chinese ceramics.

---

All photos courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum