



“The Formation of the Western Tradition of the Still Life Genre with the Inclusion of Chinese Porcelain”

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Abstract: The field of contemporary art history has shown a strong interest in exploring the cross-cultural interactions between continents, particularly those involving Europe and Asia. Within this broad scope, there has been a significant focus on examining the cultural exchanges and reciprocal influences between China and Western countries. This research is part of a scholarly effort to offer insights into the artistic representations of Chinese ceramics in early European still-life paintings. Such representations established the tradition of incorporating Chinese commodities, particularly porcelain vessels, and figurines, in European still-life depictions, which later expanded in the 18th century to chinoiserie and the Aesthetic movement, with its enthusiasm for chinaware in the 19th century.

Our primary goal is to provide an analysis of the pioneering artistic portrayals of Chinese commodities that shaped Western perceptions of distant lands, aiming to demonstrate the dynamism inherent in the formation, continuity, and evolution of the Western¹ tradition, which involved Chinese items in still-life works. Upon conducting a comparative analysis, it is evident that a number of depictions of Chinese export objects aim to glorify and mystify Asian goods. Others are inclined to showcase the imperialistic ambitions of the West, as goods can also be regarded as signs of privilege and trophies synonymous with control and power². This dichotomy in representation underscores the intricate interplay between cultural appreciation and geopolitical hegemony within the framework of global trade and intercultural exchange.

Keywords: Chinese porcelain, Chinese figurine, still life, Western tradition, Renaissance art, Dutch baroque, Spanish baroque

¹ For the purpose of the present survey, the term “West” will be defined as “North America and the countries in the western part of Europe,” as per the Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary. This definition is employed considering that the roots of Western art can be traced back to the creative output of ancient Greece and Rome. These foundations were refined and disseminated across the European continent with the advent of Christianity, and by the late 15th century, European artistic styles had begun to make their way to the New World, giving rise to American and Canadian traditions that were closely intertwined with those of Europe.

² Julie Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 274.

Introduction

In the words of Robert Finlay, a prominent historian, Chinese philosophy, art, architecture, and landscape design left an indelible mark on Europe's aristocracy since their first encounters³. This led to the creation of numerous travel accounts, meticulous descriptions, publications, and illustrations of Chinese philosophy, culture, science, arts and crafts, as well as attempts to decipher the "other" cultural, social, and religious practices and customs of the celestial empire⁴.

Chinese blue and white porcelain, a type of underglaze ceramic decorated with blue pigment, typically cobalt oxide, was initially introduced to Europe during the fourteenth century⁵, causing a sensation particularly being viewed in comparison with the European pottery pieces that lacked a bright palette and durability. As Chinese ceramic vessels were regarded as objects of great rarity and luxury, some that appeared in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were often mounted in gilt silver, which served to heighten the perceived preciousness of the porcelains. Richard Hakluyt's second edition of "The Principal Navigations" (1598–1600) calls the chinaware "the best earthen matter in the world."⁶ The artistic giant of the Northern Renaissance (15-16th centuries), Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), avidly collected for his professional and personal pleasure, and he was fascinated by the objects of natural rarity and of exotic, non-European origins. Although we do not own the visual evidence in the form of artistic executions, archival documents prove that among his favorable pieces were costly Asian imports, such as Chinese porcelain.⁷ In addition, numerous representations and extant specimens of the European *Kunstkammer* and *Wunderkammer* reveal the presence of Chinese export porcelain among the coveted items of wonder and collection.⁸ Portugal's Santos Palace ornamentation serves as an epitome of the

³ Robert Finlay, "China, the West, and World History in Joseph Needham's 'Science and Civilisation in China.'" *Journal of World History* 11, no. 2 (2000): 267.

⁴ Anne Gerristen and Stephen McDowall. "Material Culture and the Other: European Encounters with Chinese Porcelain, ca. 1650–1800." *Journal of World History* 23, no. 1 (2012): 88.

⁵ Marco Polo brought this delicate ware from China or 'Cathay' to Europe in the 14th century and called it "porcellana". See Joseph Downs, "The China Trade and Its Influences." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 36, no. 4 (1941): 84–95.

⁶ Richard Hakluyt's second edition of "The Principal Navigations" (1598–1600), London, 67.

⁷ Jeffrey Chipps Smith, "The 2010 Josephine Waters Bennett Lecture: Albrecht as Collector." *Renaissance Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2011): 27.

⁸ See Frans II Francken (Flemish, 1581–1642), Chamber of Art and Rarity, 1620/1625, oak wood, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Gemäldegalerie, accessed April 24, 2024, <https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/751/>, includes the Ming porcelain bowl.

grandeur and opulence of the era, featuring a complex fusion of Neoclassical mythological themes and almost 200 rare porcelain plates from the Ming dynasty Chinese export mounted to the ceiling during the 16th and 17th centuries.⁹ Sophie Charlotte, the inaugural Queen consort of Prussia, undertook the commissioning of Charlottenburg Palace in the early 1700s, with an exceptional display of Chinese and Japanese porcelain vessels and figurines within a dedicated Porcelain Room.¹⁰

The integration of Chinese commodities in European visual arts, specifically in paintings, echoed the above-mentioned processes and tendencies and has established a tradition that incorporates chinaware in still-life compositions or paintings featuring still-life arrangements. Chinese porcelain and ceramic figurines have become a prevalent motif in Western still life, manifested through various artistic perspectives and stylistic implementations for assorted purposes. The concept of tradition¹¹ is closely associated with the notions of repetition, rigidity, and immutability on one hand and dynamism and transformation on the other. Therefore, we utilize the notion of tradition to explore the principles of continuity and change within the depictions of chinaware in European still life, which are deeply intertwined with the socio-historical and commercial exchanges between Europe and Asia, as well as the artistic trends of the time.

First European encounters with China and pioneering depictions of Chinese commodities

The field of art history is yet to establish conclusive evidence regarding the pioneering artists who first incorporated Chinese porcelain as a compositional element in their paintings. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that during the Renaissance (circa 1500-1600) and Early Modern period (circa 1500–1800), the relative inaccessibility of Chinese commodities gave rise to a mythology of Chinese mystery and exoticism, motivating artists to imbue depictions of chinaware with qualities of inestimable integrity, virtue, and divinity which, to some

⁹ Daisy Lion-Goldschmidt, "Les Porcelaines Chinoises Du Palais de Santos." *Arts Asiatiques* 39 (1984): 7.

¹⁰ Clare Le Corbeiller, "German Porcelain of the Eighteenth Century." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 47, no. 4 (1990): 6.

¹¹ John La Farge, "Tradition and Art." *The Irish Monthly* 71, no. 843 (1943): 378.

extent, appears to be a part of the Orientalist¹² discourses of the East. It is important to consider that still life, as a distinct, independent genre, emerged and developed only in the 16th century, and the first fine arts monuments featuring depictions of chinaware were either religious or historical compositions that incorporated still-life elements.

In this regard, the Italian painter of the Renaissance period, Francesco Benaglio (1432–1492), with his “Madonna and Child” (circa the 1460s),¹³ might be considered one of the first to-date European artists who employed the Chinese export bowl as a divine, otherworldly essence of Christian protagonists. The painting depicts the Virgin holding the Christ child on a cushion made of velvet while a blue-and-white bowl filled with fresh figs is placed on the right side of the viewer. The employment of such a vessel by the mother of God signifies the high esteem in which Chinese porcelain was held during that time. Bowls with a similar design were crafted during the preceding Yongle period 永樂 (1403–1425), leading to the possibility that the bowl depicted in the painting was produced earlier during the Yongle era.¹⁴ The British Museum houses one such type of bowl from the Ming dynasty with an identical design and Xuande (宣德, (1425 to 1435) mark.¹⁵

Supposedly, the Renaissance masterpiece “The Madonna and the Book” (circa 1482–1483) by Sandro Botticelli (1445 circa –1510) and Filippino Lippi (1457 circa –1504)¹⁶ demonstrated either a precious Chinese blue-and-white porcelain bowl next to Madonna and Christ or a piece of the first European failed imitations of Chinese ceramics. The cherries in the bowl allude to the blood of Christ, the plums to the sweetness of the love which the Virgin bears towards her child, and the figs to the Resurrection of Christ. Within this

¹² The term “Orientalism,” as expounded by Edward W. Said, is a consequential study that draws strong parallels with the nature of all existing European movements and styles that have been based on the utilization of Oriental subjects and motifs. Said notes that the Orient and the Oriental, whether it be Arab, Islamic, Indian, Chinese, or other, have become repetitious pseudo-incarnations of some great original, such as Christ, Europe, or the West, that they were supposed to have been imitating. The source of these rather narcissistic Western ideas about the Orient changed in time, but their character remained the same. Said also identifies the vision of China and the Chinese people in Western art as being “perfidious.” (See, Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 62, 108).

¹³ Francesco Benaglio (Italian painter of the Renaissance period) Veronese, c. 1432–1492, *Madonna and Child*, late 1460s, tempera on panel transferred to canvas, overall: 80.7 x 56.2 cm (31 3/4 x 22 1/8 in.), framed: 106.4 x 81.6 x 5.7 cm (41 7/8 x 32 1/8 x 2 1/4 in.), National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection 1942.9.44, accessed April, 2024, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.1183.html>.

¹⁴ Jessica Harrison-Hall, *Catalog of late Yuan and Ming ceramics in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 2001), 201.

¹⁵ Porcelain bowl, Ming dynasty, Yongle (period), 1403–1424, Jingdezhen, China, The British Museum, London, 1952.0513.2, accessed April 24, 2024, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1952-0513-2.

¹⁶ Sandro Botticelli (1445 circa –1510) and Filippino Lippi (1457 circa –1504), *Madonna col Bambino detta “Madonna del Libro” / Madonna and Child* is known as “The Madonna of the Book”, circa 1482–1483, tempera on wood, 58 × 39,5 cm, Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan.

context, it's noteworthy that European powers not only admired but were inclined to uncover the secret of the highly valued Chinese porcelain pieces. The porcelain made at the Medici workshops in Florence was the first to be produced in Europe. Francesco I de Medici established a ceramic workshop in the 1560s with the intention of imitating Chinese blue-and-white porcelain.¹⁷ Nonetheless, technically difficult and expensive to make, the fifty-nine pieces of Medici porcelain lack the ingredients that comprise hard-paste porcelain made by the Chinese.

One of the well-known paintings, with the early European exception of the Chinese ceramic piece as a compositional compound, might be regarded as the “Adoration of the Magi” (circa 1495–150) by Andrea Mantegna¹⁸ (circa 1431–1506) (fig.1), the court painter of the powerful Gonzaga family. The painting portrays three kings paying homage to the Christ Child, who returns the gesture by making a sign of blessing. While Jesus Christ, his mother, the Virgin Mary, and Mary’s husband, Joseph, are depicted wearing simple garments and haloes, the Magi are dressed in exotic clothing and adorned with exquisite jewels, bringing with them a collection of rare gifts. Among the Magi, Caspar is bearded and bareheaded, presenting the Christ Child with a delicate porcelain cup from China filled with gold coins, seemingly completing the circumference of the East. The Paduan audience would have been enchanted by the gifts of the Magi, their jewels, and textured clothes, providing an insight into the mysterious culture and people of the East. Notably, the porcelain cup would have been a rare oddity when the painting was created, and Mantegna likely had access to Ming porcelains from the collection of his patrons, including the Marquise de Gonzaga of Mantua and Pope Innocent VIII.

¹⁷ Clare Le Corbeiller, “A Medici Porcelain Pilgrim Flask.” *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 16 (1988): 120.

¹⁸ Andrea Mantegna (Italian, about 1431–1506), “Adoration of the Magi,” about 1495–1505, Distemper on linen, 48.6 × 65.6 cm (19 1/8 × 25 13/16 in.), J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 85.PA.417, accessed April 24, 2024, <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103RHD>.



Figure 1: Andrea Mantegna (Italian, about 1431 - 1506), Adoration of the Magi ¹⁹

Rosamond Mack notes the blue motif of flower stems and leaves on the cup, which recalls flower scrolls on early fifteenth-century Ming blue-and-white, but Mantegna slightly altered the cup's shape and decoration to fit the Magus's grasp.²⁰ Interestingly, the cup occupies the foreground of the painting, at the same time being close to Christ. The detailed particularity of the exquisite non-European gifts acknowledges the way the West economically and culturally benefits through Christian conversion. It represents the spread of Christianity throughout the world and its ability to reach even the most remote areas. If we view the painting within the historical context of Italy's burgeoning consumer culture, the porcelain bowl represents a highly desirable luxury item meant for the Son of God himself. Finally,

¹⁹ Andrea Mantegna (Italian, about 1431 - 1506), Adoration of the Magi, about 1495–1505, Distemper on linen, 48.6 × 65.6 cm (19 1/8 × 25 13/16 in.), J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 85.PA. 417, <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103RHD>

²⁰ Rosamond E. Mack, "Patterned Silks," in *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600* (Berkeley: the University of California Press, 2002), 32.

from the artistic prism, it subtly perpetuates the interest of the creator and commissioners towards the Chinese goods, forming a fantasy of Italy's access to the East.²¹

Painted by Giovanni Bellini (circa 1430/1435–1516), and completed by the forerunner of the Venetian school, Titian “Feast of the Gods”²² (1514–1529) (fig. 2) offers a certain decontextualization of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain simultaneously accentuating and trivializing their exalted value. Unlike its predecessors that emphasized the interconnection of the rarity of chinaware with the purity and might of Christian saints, this artwork juxtaposes the classical antiquity interpreted in the feast scene of Greco-Roman gods and goddesses with three large pieces of the fifteenth-century porcelain: one held by a nymph, another by a satyr, and the third filled with fruits and depicted in front of Neptune.



Figure 2: Giovanni Bellini (painter) Venetian²³

²¹ Jane Hwang Degenhardt, “Cracking the Mysteries of ‘China’: China(Ware) in the Early Modern Imagination.” *Studies in Philology* 110, no. 1 (2013): 138.

²² Giovanni Bellini (painter) Venetian, c. 1430/1435–1516, Titian (painter) Venetian, 1488/1490–1576, “Feast of the Gods,” 1514–1529, oil on canvas, 67 x 74 in. (170 x 188 cm), National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 1942.9.1, accessed April 24, 2024, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.1138.html>.

²³ Giovanni Bellini (painter) Venetian, c. 1430/1435 - 1516, Titian (painter) Venetian, 1488/1490 - 1576, Feast of the Gods, 1514–29, oil on canvas, 67 x 74 in. (170 x 188 cm), National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 1942.9.1, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.1138.html>

John A. Pope stated that the images of the Chinese porcelain render the pieces made in China between 1470 and 1510.²⁴ According to another hypothesis, Mehmed II, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, gave those valuable pieces as gifts to Bellini's brother, Gentile, whose visit to Constantinople has been recorded in textual sources. The ornamental system and the formal qualities of Chinese bowls resemble the numerous Chinese blue-and-white pieces in the Topkapi Saray Museum in Istanbul. Mack suggested that large, densely painted palmettes and blossoms framed by scrolls and tendrils correspond to the decoration of the Ming type that was exported to Persia, Syria, and Egypt.²⁵

We can assume that the artist could have also gotten acquainted with the rare Chinese ceramics due to his ties with Duke Alfonso I d'Este of Ferrara²⁶ (1476-1534), who was interested in collecting Chinese porcelains. These porcelains can also be interpreted as important evidence of cross-cultural interchange, because they were made in China, they reached the Sultan's collection in the late 1490s, and, lastly, in 1508 were sent as precious diplomatic gifts to Venice. The fact that these vessels made their way from China to the West underscores the far-reaching and dynamic nature of global trade during this period. J. Degenhardt argues that the significance of porcelain as an Italian collector's item might provide additional insight into the inclusion of those Ming pieces both in Mantegna's and Bellini's paintings, who were contemporaries and knew each other. Isabella d'Este, Duchess of Mantua, who was supposedly the commissioner of Mantegna's painting, was known for her magnificent art collection that contained Chinese porcelain pieces. Degenhardt presumes that Bellini, in his turn, imitated the samples from the identical collection in the above-discussed "The Feast of the Gods."²⁷ Hereby, both Mantegna and Bellini had similar inspirational sources for featuring Chinese ceramics.

It's noteworthy that Vincenzo Campi (circa 1530-1591), the 16th-century Italian painter of the Late Renaissance period, who was best known for his pioneering Flemish style of realist genre paintings, has embodied Chinese porcelain in one of his genre paintings— "Fruit

²⁴ John A. Pope and A. G. Wenley, *China* (Smithsonian Institution War Background Studies Number Twenty), (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Inst., 1944), 27.

²⁵ Rosamond E. Mack, "Patterned Silks," in *Bazaar to Piazza*, 40.

²⁶ "The Feast of Gods" was the first in a series of mythologies, or bacchanals, commissioned by Duke Alfonso d'Este to decorate the camerino d'alabastro (alabaster study) of his castle in Ferrara, Jaynie Anderson, "The Provenance of Bellini's Feast of the Gods and a New/Old Interpretation." *Studies in the History of Art* 45 (1993): 264–287, repro. no. 10.

²⁷ Degenhardt, "Cracking the Mysteries of 'China'," 143.

Seller” (1578–1581).”²⁸ This image, widely regarded as a significant precedent for Italian still-life painting, is part of a collection of four paintings.²⁹ Together these paintings possess symbolic significance and may represent the four classical elements. In this interpretation, this particular painting would signify the element of Earth, setting new horizons for the allegorical employment of chinaware in the Western tradition.

Dutch Baroque’s Pronk *stilleven* and Chinaware

The Chinese porcelains arrived in the Netherlands in larger quantities during the early 17th century as war booty from Portuguese vessels, known as *Kraak*.³⁰ The Dutch East India Company (VOC) revolutionized and transformed the Asian trade networks, becoming the major supplier of chinaware to all of Europe.³¹

Chinese export porcelain was an essential motif in colorful *ontbijtjes* (“breakfast pieces”), *banketjes* (“banquet pieces”), and more particularly in *Pronk stilleven*³² —a type of still-life painting popular in Dutch art from the mid-to-late 17th century, featuring elaborate displays of costly foodstuffs and luxury household objects. The Chinese porcelain was not presented in isolation but juxtaposed with domestic goods and edibles, Oriental tapestry, and Venetian glass as the epitome of economic power and taste of the patron. Most of the canvases produced during the Age of Enlightenment (circa 1685 – 1815) were commissioned by the affluent mercantile class as a reflection of their identity, leisure activities, familiarity with the arts, and depth of knowledge. In terms of aesthetics, artists exhibited a keen interest in incorporating blue and white hues, shimmering reflections of light on the smooth surfaces of Chinese vessels into their masterpieces, often utilizing that palette in combination with exotic

²⁸ Vincenzo Campi, “Fruit Seller,” 1578–1581, oil on canvas, 143 x 213 cm, Brera Pinacoteca, 397, accessed April 24, 2024, <https://pinacotecabrera.org/en/collezione-online/opere/fruit-seller/>.

²⁹ The painting is part of a series of four genre paintings originally housed in the guest quarters of the Hieronymite monastery of San Sigismondo in Cremona, Italy. Presently, these four canvases are situated in the Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. In addition to the “Fruit Seller,” the remaining three paintings, namely “Fishmongers” (c. 1580, oil on canvas Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan), “Kitchen” (c. 1580s, oil on canvas Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan), and “Chicken Vendors” (1580s, oil on canvas Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan), share similar thematic content. These works have been the subject of diverse interpretations, including traditional allegories of the four elements or references to the seasons of the year.

³⁰ The Dutch name *Kraak* or *kraakporselein* was employed to describe the Chinese imports.

³¹ Tonio Andrade, “The Dutch East India Company in Global History: A Historiographical Reconnaissance,” in *The Dutch and English East India Companies: Diplomacy, Trade and Violence in Early Modern Asia*, ed. Adam Clulow and Tristan Mostert (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 240.

³² P. J. J. Van Thiel, “Een Stilleven Door Pieter Claesz.” *Bulletin van Het Rijksmuseum* 23, no. 2 (1975), 119–121.

patterns, glossy surfaces, reflective textures of other objects to create their signature styles. It is worth noting that, contrary to the early depictions of chinaware in Renaissance art pieces, the chinaware featured in Dutch Baroque still life works is easily identifiable due to the meticulous attention to detail and the use of darkened backdrops that made the porcelain pieces stand out to the viewer.

Willem Kalf (1619–1693), the remarkable Dutch artist who left an impressive artistic heritage with the highlighted depictions of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain³³ (fig. 3), used those Asian items to appeal to the elite burgher audience who had accumulated wealth from the mercantile prosperity of the Dutch Republic. Kalf was not only influential in the process of development of the Western still life genre with his innovative manner, composition, and combinations of props but can also be credited, more importantly for our research, as one of the founders of the Western tradition of still life with Chinese ceramics as major compositional elements.³⁴ The structure of Kalf's still lifes is characterized by precise lighting direction meticulously planned down to the smallest detail, and the use of an imperceptible light source, which selectively illuminates only the most intensely colored objects. Among the illuminated compositional elements are the figurative and floral motifs present in Chinese porcelain.³⁵

³³ Willem Kalf (Dutch, 1619–1693), “Still Life with a Chinese Porcelain Jar,” 1669, oil on canvas, 30-3/4 x 26 in. (canvas), 42-5/8 x 37-5/8 x 4-1/4 in. (framed), Indianapolis Museum of Art, 45.9, accessed April 24, 2024, <http://collection.imamuseum.org/artwork/57562/index.html>.

³⁴ In the still life of one of his assistants or followers (After Willem Kalf, “Still Life with Nautilus Cup,” 1665/1670, oil on canvas, overall: 68.2 x 58 cm (26 7/8 x 22 13/16 in.), framed: 90.8 x 80 x 9.5 cm (35 3/4 x 31 1/2 x 3 3/4 in.), National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1974.109.1) the blue-and-white Wan-Li porcelain bowl with lid is decorated with colored figures representing the eight immortals of Taoist belief, See, National Gallery of Art, Washington, accessed April 24, 2024, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.54976>.

³⁵ Lucius Grisebach, Willem Kalf, 1619-1693, (Berlin: Gebr Mann Verlag, 1974), 278–79.



Figure 3: Willem Kalf (Dutch, 1619–1693), Still Life with a Chinese Porcelain Jar³⁶

One of his followers, Juriaen van Streeck (1632–1687), whose oeuvre is specified with the indications of the transience of life through the arrangements of overseas objects, brought

³⁶ Willem Kalf (Dutch, 1619–1693), Still Life with a Chinese Porcelain Jar, 1669, oil on canvas, 30-3/4 x 26 in. (canvas); approximately 42-5/8 x 37-5/8 x 4-1/4 in. (framed), Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, Gift of Mrs. James W. Fesler in memory of Daniel W. and Elizabeth C. Marmon, 45.9. <https://collections.discovernewfields.org/artwork/57562>

new juxtapositions of Chinese precious porcelain pieces with the human figures, more precisely with the African servants³⁷ (fig. 4). However, the piece presents various interpretive possibilities. Within the framework of the Dutch still-life genre conveying cultural insensitivity in the mid to late 1600s, the porcelain in relation to the Moor figure may have been intended to underscore the multicultural nature of Amsterdam. On the other hand, the enslaved figure could have been interpreted as a symbol of affluence, akin to the lobster or jewels. The presentation of the Moor as if on a silver platter in this piece signifies the colonial expansion of the northern Netherlands, globalism, consumerism, and the negative aspects of Western upper classes' attitudes towards the “otherness” of the East.



Figure 4: Juriaen van Streeck, Prunkstillleben mit Diener³⁸

³⁷ Juriaen van Streeck, “Still Life with Moor and Porcelain Vessels,” ca. 1670–1680, Sammlung Shack/Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, 6599, accessed April 24, 2024, <https://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de/en/artwork/ApL8q0NGN2/juriaen-van-streeck/prunkstillleben-mit-diener>

³⁸ Juriaen van Streeck, Prunkstillleben mit Diener, um 1670/80, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen - Alte Pinakothek München, URL: <https://sammlung.pinakothek.de/en/artwork/ApL8q0NGN2>

Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), the innovative and prolific face of the Dutch Golden Age, has authored one of the earliest depictions of a Western art connoisseur and collector,³⁹ surrounded by Chinese artifacts. Abraham Francen (1612 – after 1678) was an Amsterdam apothecary and passionate art collector. This detailed print reflects Rembrandt’s affection for his dear friend, who lived in the modest neighborhood where Rembrandt moved in 1658 after his insolvency. His work might, therefore, be seen as a token of friendship rather than a commissioned portrait. Rembrandt included the still-life arrangement as attributes to uncover the sitter’s character; the figure is surrounded by his cultural valuables, for instance, a painted triptych and a covered Chinese ginger jar. The large album on the table would have held prints and drawings, such as the sheet he examines here with rapt attention. The skull may allude to his profession or function as a traditional *vanitas* symbol of the transience of the material world.

The small-scale Chinese statute next to the skull is defined in the catalog of the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco as a “figurine of Confucius.”⁴⁰ More resembling the Ming dynasty figurine of a court official according to the shape of the headgear and the posture, it first and foremost speaks to the influx of not only Chinese porcelain vessels but also decorative artworks, such as statuettes circulating in Amsterdam. The juxtaposition of the Christian triptych and the Chinese figurine indicates the emerging interplay between Western and non-Western objects, which aims to unlock metaphors. This artistic approach aligns with Rembrandt’s aesthetic inclinations, as evidenced by his frequent use of Japanese paper and Oriental turbans in his portraits and genre compositions and the presence of imported Asian textiles in his works. Additionally, some of Rembrandt’s oeuvres display direct influences from Asian, specifically Mughal art, which also may explain his familiarity with Chinese figurines.⁴¹ The inclusion of the Chinese statue as one of the symbols of the connoisseur’s identity mirrors Rembrandt’s artistic vision and his ability to integrate different cultural

³⁹ Rembrandt van Rijn, Abraham Francen, “apothecary,” c. 1657, paper, etching/drypoint, height 157 mm × width 209 mm, Rijksmuseum, RP-P-OB-535, accessed April 24, 2024, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/RP-P-OB-535>.

⁴⁰ Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), Abraham Francen, “Apothecary,” 1657–1658, Etching, drypoint, and engraving, 156 x 208 mm (6 1/8 x 8 3/16 in.), Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, 1963.30.127, accessed April 24, 2024, <https://www.famsf.org/artworks/abraham-francen-apothecary>.

⁴¹ Zirka Z Filipczak, “Rembrandt and the Body Language of Mughal Miniatures.” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek (NKJ) / Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art* 58 (2007), 163.

elements into his works, indicating his aesthetic choices and the vogue for Oriental art in the Dutch art market of the time. Besides, the representation of the Western connoisseur interacting with art objects and goods from overseas highlights the encounter of the Western and Eastern cultures, underscoring the growing importance of Chinese culture in the Western perception of Asia and the West's self-image of the explorer and illuminator. This suggests that the Chinese commodity was no longer perceived as a mysterious and unattainable object of the divine or reserved for royalty but rather as a symbol for the intellectual middle class to decode their identity and display their intelligence.

Spanish Baroque and Chinaware

In the sixteenth century, Spain witnessed the rise of celebrated collectors of chinaware. Interestingly, the Spanish classified Oriental art objects as *bujerías*, or knick-knacks (*miudezas* in Portuguese), and listed them as such in documents, porcelains being lumped together with lacquered writing desks or boxes, semi-precious stones, jewelry, fans, ivory; porcelain and other exotica were even referred to as *bagatelas*—"mere trifles."⁴² This valuation contradicts the high regard granted to Chinese commodities in Northern Europe.

Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664), one of the key figures in Spanish Baroque and the leading painter in Seville, nicknamed "Spanish Caravaggio" for his *tenebroso* compositions, created a set of still-life compositions and genre paintings with the chinaware. In his famous painting of a Carthusian refectory,⁴³ he intensely reflects the ideal of this order of hermit monks: simplicity, sobriety, and quiet contemplation. A Chinese blue-and-white porcelain bowl is turned down on its rims. Two other chinaware jars create a sense of rhythm, corresponding to the overall mood of contemplation and spiritual tranquility.

The above-discussed tradition set up by Benaglio and Mantegna to use Chinese porcelain to indicate the sacral character of the narrative is extended in Zurbarán's "Sleeping Child Mary (1640–1650),"⁴⁴ which reflects the mid-seventeenth century monastic tales of the Virgin's childhood. Mary is depicted as sleeping soundly, lost in a spiritual dream, draped in a

⁴² Cinta Krahe, *Chinese Porcelain in Habsburg Spain*, Madrid, Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica, 2016.

⁴³ Francisco de Zurbarán, (b. 1598, Fuente de Cantos, d. 1664, Madrid), "St Hugo of Grenoble in the Carthusian Refectory," c. 1633, oil on canvas, 102 x 168 cm, Museo de Bellas Artes, Seville.

⁴⁴ Francisco de Zurbarán, "The Virgin Mary as a Child, Asleep," 1640–1650, Oil on canvas, 40 9/16 x 35 7/16 in (103 x 90 cm), Galerie Caneso, Milan, accessed April 24, 2024, <https://www.caneso.art/artworkdetail/779958/0/zurbaran-the-virgin-mary-as-a-child>.

crimson robe, symbolizing both love and royalty, and clutching a blue mantle, representative of hope and fidelity. The decor of the room is unassuming, with only a simple rush-bottomed chair and a Chinese bowl containing an arrangement of flowers: a rose, symbolizing love, a five-petalled red carnation, emblematic of the five wounds of Christ, and a lily, indicating virgin purity. As Cinta Krahe confirms, the depicted Kraak bowl is identical to a sample from the San Diego shipwreck, dated around 1600.⁴⁵

Juan de Zurbarán (1620–1649) continued the current tradition of his father, featuring expensive Chinese export bowls with the precise, sensuous application of paint and dramatic lighting.⁴⁶ His “Still Life of Lemons” (circa 1643–1649)⁴⁷ presents a highly symbolic composition with the porcelain bowl, which has a distinctive repeating motif of a deer; it was made in China for export and reappeared in another painting attributed to Francisco de Zurbarán, suggesting that it was in his studio. An example of the bowl, salvaged from a galleon that sunk off the Philippines in 1600, is in the Museo Naval, Madrid. In the current composition, a goldfinch perches on the edge of a Chinese porcelain bowl filled with water; the water and lily both refer to the purity of the Virgin Mary. Therefore, it’s yet another instance when the Chinese porcelain is implied as a symbol and alludes to the Mother of God, underlining her chastity, and typifies the Spanish Baroque approach to the usage of chinaware as a compositional element.

Conclusion

The cultural phenomena of Orientalism and Chinoiserie were preceded by the widespread popularity of Chinese porcelain and figurines as emblematic representations of the East for Western audiences, collectors, connoisseurs, and artistic communities. These commodities fostered an appreciation for Chinese artistry, aesthetic curiosity, and consumerism, yet their proliferation also reinforced Western perceptions of ownership and superiority over Eastern cultures.

⁴⁵ Cinta Krahe, *Chinese Porcelain in Habsburg Spain*, 272.

⁴⁶ Juan de Zurbarán, “Flowers and Fruit in a Chinese Bowl,” circa 1645, c. 1640–1650, oil on canvas, 82.6 × 108.6 cm (32 1/2 × 42 3/4 in.), Art Institute of Chicago, 1947.511, accessed April 24, 2024, <https://www.artic.edu/artists/42406/francisco-de-zurbaran>

⁴⁷ Juan de Zurbarán, “Still Life of Lemons,” about 1643–1649, oil on canvas, 81.4 × 108.5 cm, The National Gallery, London, NG6669, accessed April 24, 2024, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/juan-de-zurbaran-still-life-with-lemons-in-a-wicker-basket>

Chinese ceramic goods, originating in non-Western societies, didn't influence the style and the formal qualities of Western art, as the artists who painted them remained "Western" in their application of the paint, the artistic pursuit of realistic depictions, three-dimensionality, the illusion of depth, and the dramatic lighting, and compositional arrangements.

Nonetheless, the introduction of China-made porcelain to Europe opened up new possibilities for the subject matter of European painting. This development allowed artists to convey multilayered, symbolic ideas, allegories, and metaphors, leading to a greater complexity and depth of meaning in their work. In addition to this, it introduced new color combinations and a love for exotic details and ornamentation, which lent an exquisite touch to their art pieces. These tendencies created fertile ground for the development of the still-life genre in the following centuries, as well as the flourishing of movements in Western art that were highly inspired by Asian commodities, culture, and philosophy.

The continuity of Western tradition in the inclusion of Chinese ceramics in visual art monuments is reflected in the use of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain to allude to the purity and divinity of the Christian protagonists in the Italian Renaissance (Benaglio, Mantegna), further extended by the Spanish Baroque artists (Zurbarán, *The Virgin Mary as a Child, Asleep*). However, within the same tradition, a change was observed in the employment of Chinese commodities as compositional compounds by the Dutch Baroque artists (Willem Kalf). In this instance, the use of Chinese commodities was not to convey biblical overtones and Christian allegories but rather as symbols of economic power and the global circulation of Asian goods. Furthermore, the Dutch Golden Age painters were among the first Western artists to execute Chinese items alongside and in various combinations with other precious imported objects of the time. Nevertheless, the novel interpretation within the framework of the tradition was introduced by Rembrandt van Rijn. He is regarded as one of the pioneering Western artists who used not only a Chinese ginger jar but also a China-made art object—a figurine—as an item to unlock the identity of an art collector and connoisseur. This approach was to be enhanced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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