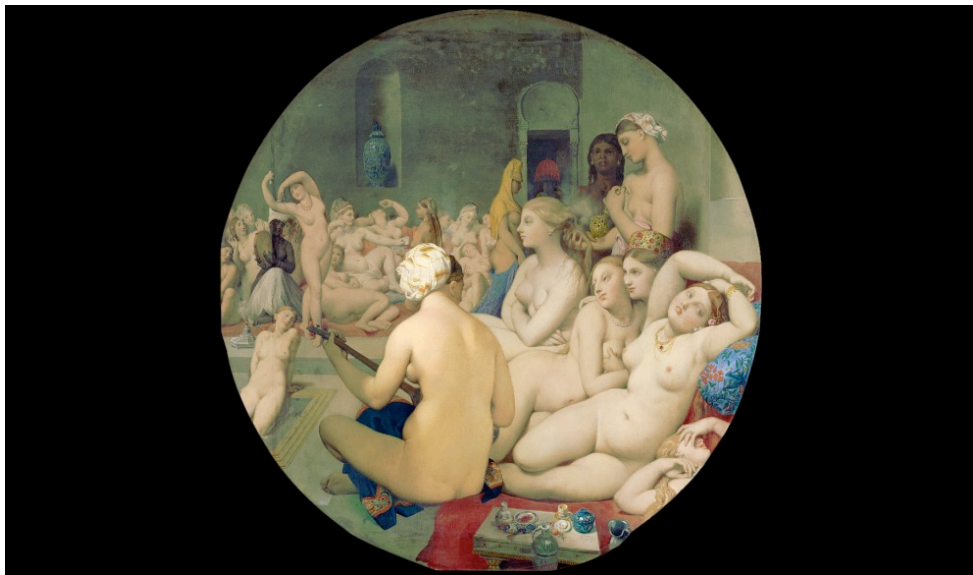


Chinese Blue-and-White Porcelain in Western Painting

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Examining Chinese blue-and-white porcelain within Western painting can illuminate the phenomenon and process of transnational cultural interactions. The medium itself is of a cross-cultural nature, since the cobalt used to produce the charming blue color was actually imported from Persia. Blue-and-white ceramics evidence cultural interactions not only through materials but also through designs and shapes. The item included in *Le Bain Turc* by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (Fig. 1) is a good example, inspired, to certain extent, by Chinese blue-and-white but still clinging to the nonfigurative aesthetics which were then fundamental in the culture of Turkey.



1 Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Le Bain Turc*, 1852–62, oil on canvas, 42 ½ x 43 3/8 in. (108 x 110 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris

Concerning the academic differences, if any, between Western scholars and their Chinese counterparts, my impression is that Western scholars are keen on the issue of otherness while tracking down the source of the porcelain and examining its relationship with the history of global trade and social trend for exotic flavour, whereas Chinese scholars are more interested in interpreting the relationship between the subject of the painting and the image or pattern on the porcelain, which usually is auspicious or descriptive of an episode of a famous narration. In other words, Chinese scholars are much more interested in seeing how integrated the artwork is with the porcelain detail included. Thus in terms of taste they prefer *A Still Life of Flowers in a Wan-Li Vase* by Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder (Fig. 2) to *A Still Life with Chinese Dishes and Nautilus* by Willem Kalf (Fig. 3).



2 Ambrosius Bosschaert the Elder, *A Still Life of Flowers in a Wan-Li Vase*, 1609–10, oil on copper, 27 x 20 in.(68.6 x 50.7 cm). National Gallery of Art, London

3 Willem Kalf, *Still Life with Chinese Dishes and Nautilus*, ca. 1660, oil on canvas, 25 ¼ x 22 in. (64.1 x 55.9 cm). Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid

It is very difficult to know exactly when Chinese porcelain was introduced to the West. Some scholars speculated that Marco Polo was possibly the first European to introduce the word “porcelain” to the West in 1298. It was not until 1328 that we reencounter “porcelain” in a Latin text by Jordan Cathala, and again in 1343, when Francesco Balducci Pegolotti used the word in his book, *Pratica della Mercatura*.¹ At that time Chinese porcelain was thought to be as rare as agate and rock crystal, objects of which were collected in royal and aristocratic collections of the 1360s. Even from the early period, some Western additions—usually precious metal bases, handles, and lids—were specially designed for addition to exported porcelains from China, enhancing their luxurious aspect and practical function (Fig. 4).



4 *The Trenchard Bowl*, China, 16th century, blue-and-white porcelain; silver-gilt mounts, ca. 1600, 5 ½ (height) x 13 ¼ (width) x 9 ¾ (diameter) in. [13.9 (height) x 34.1 (width) x 23.6 (diameter) cm]. Victoria and Albert Museum, London

For instance, a ewer listed in the 1416 inventory of Jean Duc de Berry, now held by the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, is an exquisite example of blue-and-white porcelain from the early fourteenth century and a silver-gilt mount with enamel has been added to it.² Though museums both in the West and China today retain these

historical additions to objects, the value of the original item could have been decreased because of the drilling of holes and the slight adaptation of shape.

Though blue-and-white porcelain has been very well-known in the West since the sixteenth century, the representation of it in painting has not always been accurate.



5 Jan van Kessel, *The Continent of Africa*, central panel, 1664–66, oil on copper, 19 x 26½ in., 16 plates, 5 ¾ x 8 ¼ in. each. (48.5 x 67.5 cm, 16 plates, 14.5 x 21 cm each). Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Even the painter of the seventeenth century, Jan van Kessel, incorrectly located quite a few beautiful blue-and-white porcelains in *The Continent of Africa* (Fig. 5) rather than in Asia in his seemingly encyclopedic series (1664-66) displayed at the Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Neither is he correct in representing Africa by showing black people in front of European classical architecture. Here, the Chinese blue-and-white provided only a generalized exotic flavor.

It is extraordinary that so many Western painters were fascinated by Chinese blue-and-white porcelain in various periods. Landmarks include paintings by Francesco Benaglio, Andrea Mantegna, Giovanni Bellini, Vermeer, Willem Claesz. Heda, Jan Davidsz. de Heem, Boucher, Henri Fantin-Latour, James Whistler, Dante Gabriel Rosetti, John Atkinson Grimshaw, and many others. The earliest extant Western painting that includes a detail depicting Chinese blue-and-white is arguably Francesco Benaglio's *Madonna and Child* (late 1460s), now in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. We cannot help but wonder why the artist placed a Chinese blue-and-white with fruit and a flower next to the Madonna and Child. Could this non-Western item associated with global trade be understood in relation to the sailing vessels depicted in the left far background and the travelling pilgrims to the right?

Presumably, Andrea Mantegna viewed some rare Ming porcelains in the collection of his patrons, including the Marquise de Gonzaga of Mantua and Pope Innocent VIII.³ His *Adoration of the Magi* (c. 1495–1505) depicted Caspar holding a delicate porcelain full of golden coins (Fig. 6).



6 Andrea Mantegna, *Adoration of the Magi*, ca. 1495–1505, distemper on linen, 19 1/8 x 26 in. (48.6 x 65.6 cm). The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

This piece suggests three things: (1) golden coins presented to the Holy Infant should be contained in a precious and unique vessel and a blue-and-white was second to none; (2) an Oriental item indicated the background of the visitors, though in a generalized manner; and (3) since the *Quran* prohibits dining plates made of gold or silver, porcelain is a fairly decent substitute. At the same time, the prominent porcelain within the painting implies the appeal of Christianity beyond the Western world.

Mantegna greatly influenced Bellini, and his taste for fine porcelain was no exception.⁴ Perhaps the most elaborate painting depicting blue-and-white porcelains is Giovanni Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* (1514), in which three huge pieces of blue-and-white porcelains were brilliantly rendered (Fig. 7).



7 Giovanni Bellini, *Feast of the Gods*, 1514–29, oil on canvas, 67 x 74 in. (170 x 188 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

We know that the patron, Duke Alfonso I d'Este, was very keen on collecting Chinese porcelains, so it was likely that he asked the painter to include these pieces. Also we should not forget that when the painting was executed, the artist was eighty-four-years old. As the artist's swan song, the painting is unusually large in size. As Jill Dunkerton remarked, the adopted canvas is also of unusually high quality, much better than any other canvases used by Bellini.⁵ More significantly, these porcelains offer important evidence of cultural exchange: first from China to the Mamluk Sultan in 1498 and then in 1508 when it was sent as a diplomatic gift to Venice. It is

generally difficult to find examples of such large-size porcelains, so the canvases also offer rare documentation of the Yuan blue-and-white.⁶

In selecting examples of Chinese blue-and-white porcelains Western painters conformed to their individual style and enhanced the charm of their specific artworks. Vincenzo Campi's *The Fruit Seller* (c.1580), for instance, is a large painting, in which a bowl with cherries can be definitively identified as a Chinese porcelain. The placement of the fragile porcelain looks risky—it almost certainly does not reflect any fruit seller's actual use—but the artist displayed his technical skill by including a landscape in the far background, a figure in the middleground, and still lifes as well as porcelain in the foreground.



8 James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *The Peacock Room*, 1877. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

James Abbott McNeill Whistler was a passionate lover of Chinese porcelain. He collected a large number of Chinese blue-and-whites when he lived in England. His prints and oil paintings frequently dealt with porcelain objects. The famous *Peacock Room* (1877) created a crowning place for him in the history of art (Fig. 8). Not only his painting, *Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* (1865) and interior decorative murals, but also the blue-and-white porcelains, completed a fascinatingly integrated art installation. It is arguable that if there were no Chinese blue and white, Whistler's creation would be much diminished! In a sense, the artist's immortality is closely linked with Chinese blue-and-white.

Notes

¹ See Jean-Paul Desroches, foreword to Stéphane Castelluccio, *Collecting Chinese and Japanese Porcelain in Pre-Revolutionary Paris*, trans. Sharon Grevet (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2013), 9.

² See introduction to Castelluccio, *Collecting Chinese and Japanese Porcelain*, 15.

³ See Craig Clunas and Jessica Harrison-Hall, eds., *Ming: 50 Years that Changed China* (London: British Museum Press, 2014), 292.

⁴ See Keith Christiansen, "Bellini and Mantegna," in *The Cambridge Companion to Giovanni Bellini*, ed. Peter Humphrey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 48–74.

⁵ See Jill Dunkerton, "Bellini's Technique," in Humphrey, *Cambridge Companion to Bellini*, 220.

⁶ See http://www.mashpedia.com/chinese_porcelain_in_European_painting. Also see Barbara Marx, Johanna Bauman, and Deborah Anne Bowen, "Medici Gifts to the Court of Dresden," *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 15, no. 1 (Fall–Winter 2007–2008): 46–82.