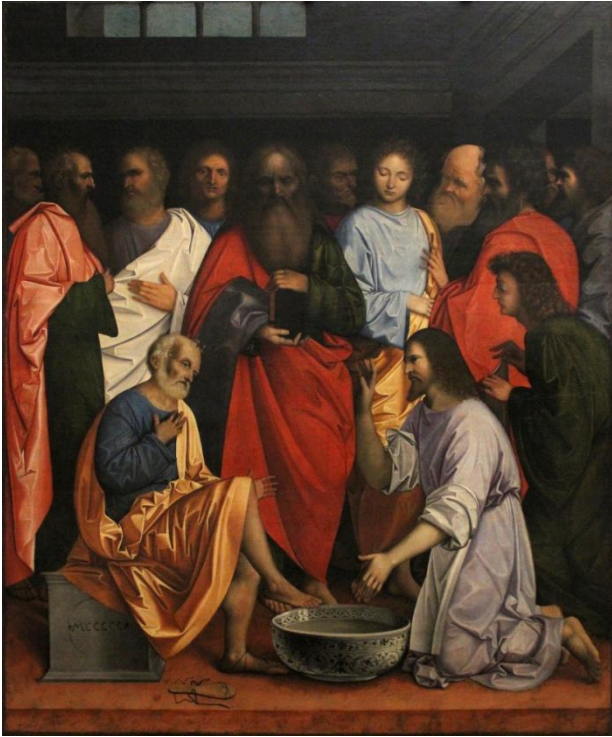


# Oriental Influences on 18<sup>th</sup> century Polychrome Decoration on the Porcelain of Italy and France by Errol Manners

## Italy



(1)



(2)

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Italy was just getting into its stride but it is surprisingly hard to find very much influence of Chinese porcelain on maiolica. One type of blue and white decoration is known as 'Alla Porcellana' and was described as such in: *The Three Books of the Potter's Art*, by Cipriano Piccolpasso. On the beautifully drawn dish (3&4), inscribed as being from the workshop of Maestro Ieronimo of 1520, you do see one of the best examples of this type of decoration but it is tucked away on the reverse. Was this lack of influence because this was a time of supreme artistic self confidence and they felt no need to borrow from anyone or were these designs just too alien? On other examples the scrolls are drawn as arabesques, so sometimes it is evident that the Italian potters were copying from Iznik wares rather than directly from the Chinese.

## Porcelain

When the first Italian porcelains, Medici porcelain, appear in the later part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, we do see considerable echoes of oriental motifs but the overriding taste is still that of the Italian renaissance.

Italy's contact with the East was different to that of northern and western Europe. They didn't have an East India company or maritime contact. But contacts with China had been established, on and off, since Roman times across the arduous overland trade routes.

In the Renaissance period the main point of contact was Venice with its trading network with the Ottoman Empire and beyond. In the 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries we have evidence from a number of paintings of some really fine Chinese porcelains arriving in Italy and of the prestige in which they were held. For instance in the painting (1) of Christ washing the feet of the Apostles by Giovanni Agostino da Lodi from around 1500 in the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, an early Ming blue and white bowl was considered suitable to be used by Christ to wash the feet of the apostles. This bowl could be one such as this from the British Museum (2), a type now dated to the early Hongwu period (1368-1398). Three bowls of this type are in the Topkapi Serail in Istanbul and so it is not altogether surprising that one got as far as Venice. Bellini's 'Feast of the Gods' where Chinese porcelain is seen as fitting for the gods to eat off is another famous example of this prestige.

At this period imported Chinese porcelain was nearly all blue and white with some celadons. Such porcelains are recorded in gifts from the Sultan of Egypt to Doge Foscari in 1442 and in subsequent gifts to later Doges.

It was at this time that the maiolica industry in



(3)



(4)

By the time we get to the first porcelains of the 18<sup>th</sup> century polychromy was all the rage but at the first factory, Vezzi (1721-1727), the Asian influence is again as likely to be from Turkey as China as is

evident from the distinctly Ottoman tulips, carnations and roses on the splendid coffee pot (5). And if the decoration is Chinese it as likely as not came via the influence of Meissen or the engravings of North Europe such as in the tea canister from the Victoria and Albert Museum taken from an engraving by Martin Englebrecht, 1684-1756, published in Augsburg.



(5)

As Chinese export wares trickled down to Italy you do get near precise copies of rather modest Chinese export wares made at Cozzi (and the other later Venetian factories) and Doccia near Florence. But very often it is the *chinoiseries* that are the most interesting.

Much the most exciting of all are the *chinoiseries* that blossomed at the royal Neapolitan factory of Capodimonte. I'm not sure if one can cite sources for these wonderful designs, maybe they are simply the products of the inventive genius of

the artists in Naples.

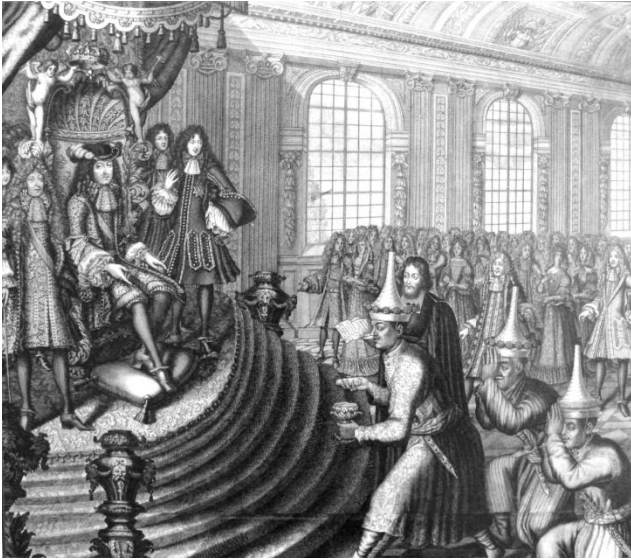
Surely the most remarkable of all European porcelain *chinoiseries* is the porcelain room, entirely lined with some 3000 interlocking pieces of porcelain, created for the Royal Villa of Portici between 1757 and 1759 which was later moved and still remains in the Capodimonte palace in Naples (6). The King, Carlo III was so fond of it that when he inherited the Spanish throne he moved the factory to Buen Retiro near Madrid and created a similar but slightly larger version at the palace of Aranjuez.



(6)



## France



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In France the leaders of the taste for East Asian porcelain were, as in so many things, the royal family. Louis XIV built the *Trianon de Porcelaine* for Madame de Montespan in 1669-70, it was destroyed in 1687 and we know little of what it consisted except that in it was mostly delftware and other faïence.

The event, or actually two, that stimulated enormous interest in eastern artefacts were the Siamese embassies of 1684 and 1686. In fact they weren't strictly embassies but trade missions organised by a Greek merchant who had settled in Bangkok, Constantinos Phaulkon. In 1686 the second Embassy was received in an impressive . . . . ceremony at Versailles (7). This time an even larger

quantity of gifts were given by the king of Siam to Louis XIV. Amongst them were '*quinze cens ou quinze cens cinquante pieces de porcelaine des plus belles, des plus curieuse de toutes les Indes; il y en a qu'il y a plus de deux cent cinquante ans qui sont faites, toutes très fines, et toutes des tasses et assiettes, petits plats et grands vases de toutes sortes de façons et grandeurs*'. '1500 of the most beautiful and curious porcelains of all the Indies; there are some made more than 250 years ago ... of the finest quality', if this is correct it included pieces from the early years of the Ming dynasty but the pages that should describe these pieces in more detail are missing from the *Journal du Garde Meuble Royal*.

The royal collections of ceramics have all been dispersed but we do have the inventories such as those of the Grand Dauphin, the duc d'Orléans and the prince de Condé which give a pretty good idea of what their taste was. Monseigneur's (the Grand Dauphin) collection was the most celebrated, even the King was said to be jealous of it. The inventory of 1689 lists 381 individual pieces of Chinese porcelain, the great bulk of it being blue and white. At this date there was apparently no kakiemon and very little imari or *famille verte*. As in Holland the dominant taste in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was for blue and white porcelain. A little later, by the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, this changed and the taste was increasingly for coloured wares. The porcelain that was considered the most desirable of all was Japanese kakiemon, sometimes described in inventories as: '*porcelaine ancienne de la premier qualité*'.



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The first commercially viable porcelain factory in France was St Cloud, its attempts at kakiemon on teawares were clumsy and lack the feel for the dynamic asymmetry of the original. More impressive are their larger pieces (8) and the pieces influenced by *famille verte* but blue and white remained the backbone of their production. But it was at the factory of Chantilly that the finest copies of kakiemon porcelain were made (9) although many of the most interesting pieces were actually copying other eastern treasures from the collection of its patron, the Prince de Condé.

In many ways *chinoiserie* found its most free expression in faience particularly at Sinceny and Rouen. The scale of these pieces lends itself to ambitious designs and perhaps the painters were given greater freedom.



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At the great royal factory of Vincennes/Sèvres, *chinoiserie* decoration was never a very large part of the production but none the less was always hovering in the background in intriguing ways. In fact the very earliest of all pieces that one can confidently attribute to the factory are *chinoiseries*, or *japonaiseries* or *turqueries* which derive loosely from Meissen (10). But at some point in the later 1740s the painted *chinoiseries* change completely in style into the familiar designs after François Boucher's *Scènes de la vie chinoise* (11). Perhaps this



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coincides with the arrival of the painter Jean-Jaques Bachelier who stated that one of his first tasks when he arrived in Vincennes in 1748 was to 'buy up pictures and engravings to replace the Chinese productions which were still being copied'. So around this time the early oriental influence derived from Meissen gave way to a home grown French rococo style of *chinoiserie*.

Boucher created a delightful fantasy world of elegant ladies and children in an idealised Cathay that bore little resemblance to the real China but



he was himself a collector of Chinese curiosities and used these objects as props in many of his paintings. It has been shown that his fanciful designs, in some instances at least, derive from Chinese woodblock prints which were uncommon imports at the time.



(12)

pieces that are copied directly from Chinese objects or graphic sources that were not normally part of the export trade.

Precise copies are technically impressive but actually it is the *chinoiseries* that are often more interesting and inventive.

**EM**

Errol and Henriette Manners worked in the Chinese and European ceramic departments at Christie's. Since 1988 they have operated from a shop in Kensington Church Street and focus on fine European porcelains of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Errol is currently chairman of the French Porcelain Society, lectures internationally and has published on a wide range of ceramic subjects. His excellent website is to be found at [www.europeanporcelain.com](http://www.europeanporcelain.com)

Perhaps the most remarkable of all *chinoiseries* on Sèvres are rare pieces painted around 1761 by the greatest of all Sèvres painters, Charles-Nicholas Dodin. This was evidently a rarefied taste confined to a small court circle around Madame de Pompadour. Dodin used Boucher engravings as his source for many of these pieces, but the ones that I find most intriguing however are the smaller group of Dodin pieces that are much more authentically Chinese and must copy some unidentified graphic source almost directly (12).

In the later part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when hard-paste porcelain was introduced at Sèvres the division persists between those pieces that are fanciful *chinoiseries* after Boucher and Pillement and those surprising