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BOOK REVIEW

Helen Espir

European Decoration on Oriental Porcelain 1700-1830
(London, Jorge Welsh Books, 2005)

With the publication of this work about Oriental porcelain with European decorations, Helen Espir opens the door to an entire new line of research about Oriental porcelain in Europe. For decades, scholars and aficionados of this theme have almost exclusively dealt with original Oriental porcelain, from Japan or China, produced and decorated in the Orient. All other pieces that were not immediately identifiable within these categories were *a priori* marginalised and were considered to be less "pure" objects, works of lesser quality and "hybrid" works. They were also deemed to be of little commercial value. This subject has already been examined in some studies, as J.V. Mallet mentions in the preface, however, these works merely proceeded to identify objects, without engaging in a more profound investigation.

In her opening lines, the author confesses that these pieces had always fascinated her on account of their beauty and exoticism, but this never induced her to analyse them systematically. And it was precisely the fact that she owned some of these pieces that led her to attempt to get better acquainted with the context in which they were created, their chronology and their place in markets and ceramic industries. Helen Espir embarks upon her quest in this spirit, clarifying at the very outset that this book is merely an essay and a glimpse of a fascinating world of Oriental porcelain that was decorated in Europe and is by no means a closed, conclusive work.

Her study is divided into six chapters, each one of them corresponding, by and large, to the development of several decorative themes found in these objects. Thus the index is a result of her research insofar as it groups together the porcelain she has identified into broad *decorative families*. In an initial introductory section, entitled *The Portuguese and Dutch Trade 1500-1700, and the Response of the Delft Potters*, she seeks to realise a generic introduction to the production of Oriental porcelain and its importation into Europe. As is known, the opening of

commercial routes between Europe and the Orient enabled the arrival of considerable quantities of rare and exotic products, which, quite naturally, included porcelain. Europe, which was only familiar with techniques of faience earthenware, was bedazzled by these translucent and apparently fragile pieces, which were nevertheless quite hardy, and their Oriental decoration had an enormous influence over collective European imagination, depicting as it did an exotic and distant world. Essentially, *blue and white* pieces were imported, some of which were commissioned orders while the vast majority were bulk purchases that filled the holds of Portuguese and Dutch ships returning to the Old World. Porcelain was always an expensive product and thus indicated the buyer's purchasing power and social status, continuing to be out of reach for most sections of society. This natural commercial demand for these products and the fact that, in the late 17th century, some channels of porcelain imports had closed, resulted in the fact that some European ceramic workshops, especially in Holland, tried to perfect the technique of manufacturing the clay and subsequently attempted to develop its Oriental style decoration.

Helen Espir thus crystallises the reason for the development of these kinds of pieces. The pressures of the market were such that a mass of people who did not have the economic power to acquire original pieces of Japanese and Chinese porcelain sought to acquire copies. The market for porcelain thus found three outlets: on the one hand, the development of faience techniques and its increasing closeness to the aesthetics of Chinese porcelain, on the other hand, the acquisition of virgin pieces of porcelain, normally called *blanc de Chine*, which would later be decorated in Europe, with Oriental style motifs, and finally the perfecting of porcelain techniques by European workshops (although this would only truly happen at a later stage).

One more interesting phenomenon is worthy of note. In addition to all these possibilities and the refinement of techniques, Dutch enamellers resorted to older pieces, some of which were already a century old, and redecorated them, applying techniques that had been perfected in the meanwhile and in accordance with new tastes, which had also evolved and now demanded stronger and more colourful designs. Thus, one can find pieces of traditional *blue and white* objects that were redecorated in red and gold, for example, a clear influence of pieces of Japanese porcelain decorated in the *Imari* style.

Subsequently, the author proceeds to analyse the collection of Augustus, The Strong, in the chapter entitled *The Importance of the Collection of Augustus, The Strong in Dresden*. Since this collection is one of the most important European collections of Oriental porcelain, and since it has been amply documented, it is an invaluable tool to date these kinds

of pieces, which in most cases have two dates – one that corresponds to the time when the primitive support was made and the second pertaining to the moment it was redecorated. An analysis of the existing inventory reveals that almost all the pieces were acquired in Holland, and that they included pieces of Chinese and Japanese porcelain that had been decorated again in Dutch workshops, in a Japanese style. However, the author stresses that the owner of this collection probably did not have a very clear idea of what he was acquiring. The fashion for exotic items that flooded European courts, and the consequent increase in demand for "original" pieces of Oriental porcelain, did not allow the market enough time to re-establish itself, and official buyers for collections often ended up by acquiring "altered" pieces. In this case there was a perceptible acquisition of pieces that had been decorated in European workshops and sold as porcelain of the purest Oriental tradition, which were classified in inventories as Japanese or Chinese pieces. The secretaries of these inventories, assuming that all the pieces were originals and from the same point of origin and unable to differentiate between "real" and "fake" pieces, grouped them together according to their colour in "colour families".

A further analysis of this royal collection reveals that a dominant taste prevailed. About 60% of the pieces in the inventory are of the Imari or Kakiemon[1] style, while the rest can be classified as *chinoiseries*, in the sense that they are a set of small parts of styles, according to tastes, standing out more on account of their aesthetics, the element that appeals to the eye, and not on account of being faithful reproductions of a style. Thus, the classification *chinoiserie* appears as a category where everything that did not quite fit into other categories could be classified, resulting in an extremely subjective and overly eclectic melange of items. In the chapter entitled *Japanese and Chinese Styles in European Decoration and the Resulting Chinoiseries*, the author expounds upon the various possibilities and variants in the adaptation of styles to existing pieces.

The transformation of a traditional *blue and white* piece into the Imari style was a quick and fairly effective process, in that it was enough to delineate the pre-existing motifs in red and golden enamel, as is clear in the image shown on page 74. An extremely simple teapot, dotted with some blue motifs on the lid, near the rim and near the base, acquires greater visibility and

1 The terms Imari and Kakiemon are recognised as designations of two styles of porcelain decoration that, in truth, originated in the same city, Arita. Imari is the name of a port in the province of Hizen, where the porcelain was loaded onto ships that later headed for the port of Nagasaki, and then set sail for Europe. Kakiemon was the name of a family of porcelain decorators in Arita, which developed some specific characteristics in their decorative language.

the piece mimics a more costly object, transmitting the impression of an opulent and expensive item. The transformations that took place were impressive in that it became obvious that with simple additions of colour, pieces could be dramatically altered. What happened in the case of Japanese styles also took place in the case of Chinese styles, which likewise appeared in redecorated pieces in the Pink Family and Green Family.[2] However, the need to imitate these styles was felt far less, because these pieces were more common and thus the originals were more accessible. The trade in Chinese porcelain was more stable and was an established line of commerce where the producers, aware of what their target audience liked and wanted, tailor-made their wares to suit the tastes of their end users.

Innumerable examples of extremely interesting transformations and modifications have been presented, which reveal the prevailing tastes of the age that, despite not understanding the messages and contents of Oriental decorative languages, were seduced by the brilliance and colour of the pieces, by their exoticness, a synonym for richness and luxury.

In the chapter entitled *Fine European Decoration: The Development of the Chinoiserie and its European Sources*, the author now does this exercise in reverse: she seeks out themes that clearly reveal a European influence in pieces of Oriental porcelain. The interesting examples presented in the book show the various forms of applying decorative elements traditionally associated with glass and faience, such as landscapes and plant, emblematic and mythological themes, amongst others. In the meanwhile, this approach leaves no doubt that the primordial model was always the porcelain and its Oriental style motifs, in that the definition and choice of decoration always sought out these influences.

There are some similarities with other arts, ceramic production also sought inspiration for decorative elements to be reproduced on pieces of porcelain in book prints.[3] And as

2 The term Green Family or *famille verte* was applied to pieces of Chinese porcelain where shades of green predominated in the composition, the same principle being used for the Pink Family or *famille rose*, and its fabrication was a characteristic feature of the early and mid-18th century. The taste for these pieces extended throughout Europe during the rest of the 18th century.

3 Since ceramic production also includes tiles, one must draw attention to the work of a Portuguese researcher in this area. Just like Helen Espir has done for some pieces presented in this book, where she places the piece alongside the print that inspired it, the same thing can be done for tile panels in Portuguese residences. In her Ph.D. thesis entitled *Histoires en azulejos. Miroir et mémoire de la gravure europeènne. Iconographie et sources d'inspiration dans l'architecture civile baroque à Lisbonne*, presented at the Université Catholique de Louvain in October 2005, Ana Paula Rebelo Correia has explored this theme in depth, showing how important engravings and prints were for the creation of tile panels, proving that most manufacturers

the author promptly reveals in her work, it is also possible to match these cases with the print that served as a primordial source (for example, the cases presented between pages 135 to 140). In most instances, engravings were used that were found in books that were widely circulated in Europe, many of them being veritable best-sellers, which could be easily found in libraries. Travel accounts were undoubtedly favourite sources for this kind of work. Many of them were accompanied by engravings that portrayed these remote and exotic lands, many of them were about the places from where the pieces they were decorating had originated. Books such as the work by Jan Nieuhof, *An Embassy from the East India Company of the United Provinces to the Grand Tartar Cham Emperor of China* (English translation rendered in 1669 of the original Dutch version of 1665), or the work by Arnoldus Montanus, *Atlas Japonnensis Being Remarkable Addresses By Way of Embassy from the East India Company of the United Provinces* (1670 English translation of the Dutch edition, published in 1669), amongst others, served as a source for fairly faithful reproductions. Books that depicted various animal and plant species were another important source, for example the reproduction of parrots was relatively common.

Alongside prints, pieces of porcelain were also a favoured support for more prosaic themes. In the chapter *Dutch Decoration: Topical Subjects and Their Historical Context* the author demonstrates that the pieces could also function as a way of commemorating and celebrating specific events. Although she dedicates an entire chapter to these works, the author stresses that these cases were a minority within the world of the porcelain under study and that the chances of new pieces being found are fairly low. She presents examples of plates commemorating royal weddings that show the date of the union, or items that were used as forms of propaganda by the House of Orange. There are pieces that also represent several traditional legends from Northern Europe, everyday scenes, whale hunting, hunts, urban and rural landscapes, religious scenes (Catholic and Protestant alike) and even more trivial themes such as flowers and animals.

Finally, the last chapter, *English Decoration on Oriental Porcelain c. 1700-1830* is dedicated to the English case. After having already examined the more significant schools of production, in which Northern Europe and especially the Dutch workshops, played a predominant role, the author takes the reader to England. Here,

were mere executors with limited creative freedom. The commissioners would choose the theme that interested them the most and would find the book that contained the necessary prints, which they then provided to the manufacturer. This small survey presented by Helen Espir only goes to show that processes were repeated and in some cases with the same themes.

local production of porcelain appeared at a later stage, since the importation of Oriental porcelain did not yet comprise a significant percentage of acquisitions of luxury products. Traditional production continued to function at a normal pace, although some experiments in perfecting the application of enamel and accurate baking temperatures for clay were recorded. In the mid 18th century, some workshops sought to produce porcelain in a more serious and consistent manner, which provided the necessary impetus for the diffusion of the technique and an increase in consumption. This resulted in the fact that redecorated works and Oriental style decoration persisted until a fairly late stage. The author points out cases that can be dated to the 19th century, which reveal a perfect domination of techniques, both in terms of baking the clay as well as in the application of enamel.

Helen Espir ends her book with a word of caution and not a conclusion. The information presented in the pages of this work is not an exhaustive or complete survey, as has been mentioned above, but is instead a pre-inventory. There is an urgent need to once again analyse existing inventories and re-evaluate the pieces contained in them, comparing them with the data that has been compiled in the meanwhile. Helen Espir seeks to position herself in this context and this is this book's greatest asset.

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