

Blue-and-White

by Robert McCormick Adams

It is commonly assumed that worldwide technology rivalries and the interdependence of trade are modern developments. But the history of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain and its Middle Eastern, Japanese, European, and New World derivatives challenges this view.

Blue-and-white was traded southward and then westward late in the 14th century (about a hundred years after it was first introduced), although by that time other Chinese export wares were centuries old. They had long moved in both directions between China and the Islamic world (and its antecedents), along the ancient overland Silk Road through Central Asia and in the cargoes of Arab and Persian seafarers. Indirect though it was, this distribution system efficiently communicated back to the Chinese information on the tastes of their Muslim customers.

Meantime, there also developed in the Middle East a wave of cheaper local copies. When they began appealing to customers in their own right, these products no longer needed to be so strictly imitative.

Soon the West got into the act. After a resolute process of exploration at least as consequential in the eyes of contemporaries as the voyages of Columbus, the Portuguese finally rounded the Cape of Good Hope late in the 15th century, opening the Orient to sea trade. Quantities of blue-and-white were being shipped to Lisbon as early as

Samarkand under Mongol patronage in the 13th and 14th centuries.

Blue-and-white ceramics are a good example of East-West interchange along Silk Road lands during this period. Islamic potters had decorated tin-glazed vessels with cobalt from about the 9th century onward. Muslim merchants in South Chinese coastal cities introduced this ware to China where, in the late 13th century, it was copied by Chinese potters creating high-fired porcelain ware. The white porcelain vessels decorated with cobalt blue designs were then exported to West Asia and to Southeast Asia where they became enormously popular and were copied, although not in high-fired porcelain. A good example of cobalt-decorated ware inspired by the Chinese examples is Turkish stoneware from the Iznik kilns, dating from the late 15th century onward. In the 15th century the Chinese court finally began to patronize blue-and-white porcelain, encouraging domestic production and use of the wares, not just their export.

1530, becoming no less prized in European markets than they were elsewhere.

Once again the Chinese producers were quickly responsive to the changing demands, helped along in this case by painted wooden models that the Dutch sent along with their huge orders.

The Japanese part in all this is equally fascinating. Their taste for blue-and-white did not develop until they had begun to master the technology themselves, which they succeeded in doing about 1600. Not long afterward they made their own entry into world markets. Splendid Dutch records tell a story of massive shipments of Chinese blue-and-white into Japan at first, followed by a Japanese invasion of Southeast Asian and European markets when Chinese production was temporarily interrupted by a civil war. Only in the later part of the 17th century did the Chinese reemerge as competitors. By then the producers of Japanese Imari wares, originally crude and derivative, had developed their own vigorous, indigenous styles for which there was a secure niche in the upper tiers of European and Middle Eastern markets.

Then there is a New World element. Spain came comparatively late to the Pacific by way of the Philippines. Annual shipments of Mexican silver from Acapulco quickly followed, eventually reaching China in quantities sufficient to drive out Manchu paper currency and greatly

The importance of the historical Silk Road, with its emphasis on overland routes, declined after the 15th century, when Europeans began to dominate the sea routes connecting Europe, the New World, and Asia. These sea routes increased the ease of travel and the availability of goods. Objects and ideas continued to influence East and West as Westerners adopted Asian fashions and collected Asian objects, and, in turn, Asians developed a taste for Western fashions, food, and technologies. The exchange of objects continues today in the global marketplace at an accelerated rate, with camel caravans and clipper ships replaced by e-commerce and overnight air delivery.

ELIZABETH TEN GROTHENHUIS, AN ASSOCIATE IN RESEARCH AT THE REISCHAUER INSTITUTE OF JAPANESE STUDIES AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY, IS ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ASIAN AND JAPANESE ART HISTORY AT BOSTON UNIVERSITY.



disrupt the internal economy. The return trade was in silks – and, of course, blue-and-white. Dispersed across Mexico, pieces found their way even to the rude northern frontiers of New Spain. Sherds still turn up from time to time in historic Indian villages along the upper Río Grande, just as they do more frequently along the Arabian coasts.

Initially imitative industries sprang up in northwestern Europe, in Italy, even in Mexico. Out of these, in time, came the splendid tradition of Delftware and the English porcelains that still grace our tables. But what is most interesting is the antiquity as well as the worldwide range of the shifting patterns of supply and demand, stimulus and response. An ebb and flow of technological and trading leadership long antedates the modern era.

ROBERT McCORMICK ADAMS, AN ARCHAEOLOGIST, WAS SECRETARY OF THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION FROM 1984 TO 1994. THIS ARTICLE ORIGINALLY APPEARED IN *SMITHSONIAN MAGAZINE*, MARCH 1986.

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Left: Plate. Turkish, Ottoman dynasty, ca. 1500–1525.

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Center: Dish. Chinese, Yuan dynasty, ca. 1350.

Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Right: Dish. Japanese, Edo period, ca. 1690–1710. Freer Gallery of Art,

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