

The Allure of Chinese Blue-and-White Porcelains

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Chinese blue-and-white porcelains signified a drastic cultural change in Chinese art as a whole. Previously, Chinese art was culturally isolated to only China, as ritual art and paintings were mostly meant for national audiences rather than global ones. For instance, ritual art often remained in tombs, and paintings like Gu Kaizhi's *Admonitions of the Court Instructress* specifically gave instructions for members of the Chinese society. Furthermore, these forms of art could not be produced on a mass scale due to the thorough process required to produce them and therefore would theoretically be very limited in export. Blue-and-white porcelain adopted a technique of factory art that allowed for mass production and therefore global distribution, which internationally established China as a highly-esteemed cultural powerhouse.

The technique to make the iconic blue-and-white porcelains evolved almost unbelievably rapidly due to external influences on preexisting Chinese art. The porcelains originate from the Yuan Dynasty, during which Chinese art styles were combined with Persian influences. The white porcelain body was a holistically Chinese characteristic, but the blue cobalt was imported from Persia. The Yuan Dynasty is credited for large innovations involving the use of cobalt blue, which we know by examining thousands of shipwrecks containing Chinese porcelain; it was during the Yuan Dynasty that we began to see blue-and-white appear in vessel cargo. The reason why the art style was able to develop so quickly is because of how its origins came from the Muslim trade. Not only was cobalt imported to apply blue decorations on the preexisting art of white Chinese porcelain, but Chinese artists also borrowed Islamic motifs to decorate their works with. Therefore, the art form was able to almost be carried over into China, and simply needed to be finessed and applied to Chinese ideologies.

The Chinese blue-and-white ware stood out as a heavily sought item because of its unmatched, luxurious quality. The porcelains were ubiquitously considered beautiful particularly

due to the way color was used. The simplicity of the colors emphasized the negative space on each ware, which is a method modernly known as ‘Albers effect.’ The discovery by Joseph Albers was that the impression a viewer gets from a color, in this case blue, is reliant on the colors around it. This is apparent when different shades of cobalt blue are used, as this creates the illusion of different shades of white, and therefore the illusion of relief on the porcelain. This effect could not have been achieved with the previous Song Dynasty’s *qingbai*, because the color was often too subtle to have such a powerful effect. The technique that went into these porcelains is further emphasized in the fact that these wares are three-dimensional, and therefore must work around atypical shapes. Most of the time, each ware was given a discernable orientation due to its upright posture or simply by the obvious orientation of the illustration. Furthermore, the process by which the glaze was fired could not be paralleled by any other country. After the decorations were applied, each porcelain was placed into an excessively hot kiln, so that cracks would not form later. The detail that went into each porcelain proved worthwhile, as the objects soon became an item to lust for.

What is most remarkable though is how such intricate works of art could now be produced fairly quickly and on a large scale. Factory art is a prevalent characteristic throughout all of Chinese art history, as division of labor can be seen as far back as in Qin Shi Huang’s Terracotta Army. In order to craft so many identical or similar objects, labor needs to be specialized by individuals so that the process is accelerated. This is how blue-and-white porcelains could be so prestigious and mass produced, as individual workers had a small scope of skills, but didn’t need to know everything and could just intensely specialize in one job. We can infer the number of individual orders for the European market through surviving documents, which for instance list an astonishing 355,800 orders in 1644 for the Dutch. It was vital that

factory art had been mastered through several Chinese dynasties, for there was high demand for the beautiful blue-and-white porcelains.

Every aspect of the blue-and-white porcelains points towards the intention of distributing the wares in a wide market. Desire for these valuable porcelains spread the continent, which can even be seen through imitations of the blue-and-white. Through the practice of orientalism, Vietnamese jars imitated the Chinese style in the fifteenth century, which even had a market of its own. The blue-and-white was further imitated in Renaissance works, many of which fall under the category of *Chinoiserie*, due to their imitations of Chinese themes. Regardless, Yuan traveler Wang Dayuan listed in 1349 a total of forty-five countries that wanted Chinese blue-and-white porcelains, which included Vietnam. Yet, the Ming Dynasty provided a brief blockade in trade due to complications about mixing the trading system with a new tribute system. Regardless, the dynasty made a turn in the 15th century with a new emperor and Zheng He's voyages to the west. Zheng He's journeys imitated the imperialism of former great emperors, as Zheng's massive cavalry astounded all forty-six countries and regions he visited. The voyages nevertheless posed little impact on China's maritime trade, as European countries were already well on their way to establishing maritime trade with the far east, for sea vessels provided the most convenient and efficient means of globally transporting the alluring blue-and-white porcelains.

The Chinese blue-and-white porcelains succeeded in both elevating the status of China's artistic cultural value and satisfying the world's hunger for the beautiful works of art. The works manage to receive the same respect today, as their high standards of quality are second to none.