Trade Winds from China

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To Canton, in the eighteenth century, European trading ships brought lead and silver, woolens, and spices from Indonesia. Returning to their home ports they carried teas and silks and—one of the most coveted of China’s commodities—hard-paste porcelain. This durable and lustrous white material had long been admired by the Westerners, who had often tried to duplicate it; although eventually successful, they nonetheless laid their tables throughout the century with the more plentiful and much cheaper Chinese ware, which they could afford to order in a wide range of styles and decorations. It is part of the charm of China-trade porcelain that its designs can hardly be disentwined from the fortunes and identities of its Western purchasers. Directly by coats of arms or indirectly by the copying of engravings and shapes peculiar to certain countries, its function was to add luster to the pretensions of the thousands of Europeans whose tastes it so handsomely gratified. Some recent additions to the Helena Woolworth McCann Collection, made possible by the Winfield Foundation Gift, suggest how various these tastes were.

Heraldry, long a cherished exhibit of family pride, was the favorite decoration for this porcelain. The stylish mantlings, the crowns and coro-

nets, the symbols that half declared and half concealed the distinction of an ancient family subsumed an eighteenth century fascination with social trivia and romantic antiquarianism. One of the earliest armorial examples among our new acquisitions is a plate (Figure 1) on which a design of Chinese figures and flowers surrounds the arms of the Flemish province of Artois. It is one of a number of such plates, most of them bearing the arms of a town or province in what at the end of the seventeenth century constituted the United Netherlands. As two plates of the set exist with the arms of England, it would be tempting to think that it was ordered by a Dutch official in the service of William III shortly after 1689 when this prince of the house of Orange acceded to England’s throne. But the recent discovery of a plate of this pattern with the royal French arms makes the destination of the set uncertain.

It was an Englishman for whom the covered bowl shown in Figure 2 was made. In his short life (1686-1721) the Right Honorable James Craggs enjoyed the successive positions of Minister at the Spanish court, Minister of War, and Secretary of State—offices which were considered the just consequence of a “Compass of Thought, a sweet and uncomon expression, & a Perspecuity scarce to be met with.” It was probably at the height of his career, about 1717, that Craggs ordered this bowl together with other pieces for a tea service. His coat of arms has been placed inconspicuously inside the bowl and the finial of the cover, leaving uninterrupted the fluent pattern of vines and flowers which spills over the whole surface. First sketched in underglaze blue, the decoration is finished in bright colors of iron-
red and green to which a liberal use of gilding contributes sparkling highlights.

Made for the Dutch market, somewhat later, is a dish on which the arms of the Valckenier family of Amsterdam are surrounded by three grisaille city views, one of them of the entrance to the city of Cleves (see Figures 3, 4). A branch of the Valckeniers had settled in Batavia, the eastern headquarters of the Dutch East India Company, in the seventeenth century, several of the family rising to prominence as governors of that city and of the Dutch East Indies. It is therefore not unexpected to find their arms on several pieces of China-trade porcelain: on a blue and white jug with Dutch silver mounts owned by Mr. Robert Hays Gries of Cleveland, on the Museum’s dish, and on two platters still differently decorated in the Helena Woolworth McCann Collection at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Although Russia was most advantageously situated for trade with China, her relations with that country were strained throughout the eighteenth century. Russia was, it is true, permitted to carry on an overland fur trade with Peking, but direct contact by sea with Canton was forbidden. Her porcelain trade was officially nonexistent and few wares made for the Russian market are in fact known. Of great interest, therefore, is a pair of plates (see Figure 5) bearing the imperial Russian arms and reputed to have been ordered by Catherine the Great. That they were at least part of a service owned by her can be inferred from the red numerals and Cyrillic letters on the backs, the inventory marks of her summer residence at Gatchina. Since, as the Ch’ien-lung Emperor reminded the Cantonese in 1791, China had been “at variance with that Nation for some years past, and no intercourse allowed of,” our plates cannot have been ordered directly through Russian factors. But it was understood that unrecognized countries wishing to deal in porcelain simply transported it in ships flying the flag of some other nation whose merchants were more welcome at Canton. Such was probably the Russian practice.

If coats of arms point directly to identification of the buyers of China-trade porcelain, engravings are no less informative—although in somewhat more devious ways. It is perfectly apparent that engravings were the sources of the groups of birds on a pair of plates dating from the first half of the eighteenth century: seldom do the wet brush and bright palette of the Cantonese painters evoke the precise and delicate incisions of the engraver’s burin with the success here achieved by the careful strokes in grisaille. On one plate (Figure 6) birds of prey harass their victims: the two eagles with a serpent in the tree can be traced to a design by the seventeenth century Dutch artist Pieter Boel (see Figure 7). But it is to Boel’s English contemporary, Francis Barlow—who redrew Boel’s eagles and claimed them as his own, as we know from an engraving by Francis Place (1647-1728)—that we must turn for the source of two of the tropical birds on the other plate (see Figures 10, 11). The remaining birds presumably derive from still other sketches by the two artists. Since we can be sure that a design copied by the Chinese, however elusive its source, was copied literally, the engraved sources of our plates must be from the hand of a third artist—possibly Francis Place—who knew the work of Boel and Barlow and simply re-fashioned it into compositions of his own.

Few of the Western decorations that appear on China-trade porcelain in the eighteenth century were originally intended to be so used. Engravings of paintings, songbook illustrations, artists’ sketchbooks were all supplied the Cantonese enamlers; and their resultant appearance on
Fig. 3. Dish with the Valckenier arms. The detail, right, shows a view of Cleves and was copied from the engraving below. Chinese, made for the Dutch market, about 1760. Diameter 9 inches
Acc. no. 58.155.1

Fig. 4. The Entrance to the City of Cleves, published in *Vues et Perspectives de la Ville de Cleves, et de Sa Cour* (Amsterdam, 1695). Color engraving, 6 3/4 x 5 3/8 inches
Dick Fund, 28.3

ceramics is often curious. It is thus of especial interest to encounter China-trade porcelain that was “designed.” Such an example is the group of pieces, forming part of a tea service, shown in Figure 8; the panache and its encircling border of lappets have a unity of style rarely seen on this ware. Both the decoration and the coloring—cool shades of violet on a bright yellow ground—are apparently unique, the single recorded exception being a tea service of the same pattern painted in an equally unusual palette of iron-red and pale green. The significance of the design, once thought to be heraldic, can be safely ascribed to a more purely ornamental source. It follows a style first promulgated by the French designer Daniel Marot (1663-1752), whose influence was widespread on the Continent and in England. In addition to our service, two pieces of China-trade porcelain are known to make separate use of these Marot-like elements. On a plate in the Victoria and Albert Museum a more shell-like form of the panache is superimposed on the same ground pattern (itself a shorthand adaptation of a traditional Chinese border). On a vase in a private collection in Paris a cartouche is framed by a trio of the same lappets. The design of these two pieces is attributed to Cornelis Pronk, a painter and drawing master who was hired by the Dutch East India Company in 1734 to design and supervise the execution of models for, and decoration of, all the porcelain to be ordered from China. Few designs can be authoritatively ascribed to Pronk. One such is the so-called Parasol Plate, a pseudo-Oriental scene of two ladies by a river. Pronk’s original sketch for the plate, together with an example of it in a private collection in Brussels, was illustrated in John G. Phillips’s book, *China-Trade Porcelain*. Since the publication of that volume in 1956 the
Museum has been able to acquire an example of the plate for the McCann collection. To Pronk's oeuvre we can possibly add the design of our tea service which, in the similarity of its decorative elements, its unusual coloring, its distinctly European cast, compares closely with his known and attributed work.

Sometimes, rather than the design, it is the shape, copied from a European model, that gives away the market for which a piece of China-trade porcelain was destined. From the very beginning of the trade the Chinese were forced to modify certain shapes and to copy others to suit the table customs of the Westerners: as early as 1608 the Dutch were ordering a thousand salt-cellar s "if they can make them," and throughout the history of the trade there were many such requests. A uniquely English invention, the monteith or wineglass cooler, was copied at the beginning of the eighteenth century; on our example (Figure 15) the decoration, painted in a clear deep blue, includes on the outside the traditional Chinese motifs of the crane, the mythi cal ch'i-lin, and other creatures; inside, motifs of a vase and a table with a bowl of fruit are adroitly spotted in each of the eight projections of the scalloped rim. Also derived from an English model is the plate shown in Figure 9. The model was popular at the Staffordshire factory about 1760; recognizing the transience of fashion it can be assumed that the copy was ordered about the same time.

A number of eighteenth century Europeans who ordered Chinese porcelain were themselves, apparently, active in the trade; their calling is sometimes alluded to in the decoration of the pieces they ordered. It was surely an officer of the English East India Company who purchased the plate shown in Figure 12, which bears as its chief ornament that company's arms. A large dish of about 1785-1800 (see Figure 16) also suggests an association between the ultimate buyer and the China trade. A cargo ship rests in a harbor with a medieval castle at the water's edge: undoubtedly copied from an engraving, the scene may represent any one of the half-dozen North Sea harbors, stretching from Flushing to Hoorn, used by the Dutch East India Company.

An exception to the custom of using decorations of European origin is the plate illustrated in Figure 17. We know of none quite like it. Painted in an uncompromisingly Oriental perspective, its only concession to Western taste is the gilt rococo border which contrasts somewhat oddly with the soft mauve of the central scene. From sketches and paintings by European travelers of a few years later we can recognize the scene as Canton Harbor at the mouth of the Pearl River. The round fortification near the center is one of several maintained in the harbor by the various East India companies as protection for their ships—and known as "follies." Our plate shows the Dutch Folly Fort. Towards the end of the eighteenth century another aspect of Canton becomes familiar: the cluster of the European factories—the hongs—that was the heart of the porcelain trade. A large punch bowl recently added to the McCann collection shows the Danish, Austrian, French, Swedish, British, and Dutch factories lined up along the edge of the Pearl River (see Figures 13 and 14). Each has its pier, its flagpole, its patio, its shops and offices—vividly evoking for us today the bustle and liveliness of the China trade.
Fig. 6. Plate. The birds in the tree are adapted from a design by Pieter Boel (1622-1674). Chinese, probably made for the English market, first half of the XVIII century. Diameter 11 inches  Acc. no. 60.78.1

Fig. 7. Anonymous engraving after Pieter Boel’s Diversi Ucelli. French (Paris), early XVIII century. 10 x 14 inches  Whittelsey Fund, 51.501.1215

Fig. 8. Pieces from a tea service. Perhaps after a design by Cornelis Pronk (1691-1759). Chinese, possibly made for the Dutch market, about 1735-1750. Diameter of circular dish 8 inches  Acc. no. 61.64.1-8
Fig. 9. On the left is an example of the Staffordshire salt-glazed pottery plate from which the Chinese plate, right, made for the English market, was copied. Both about 1760. Diameter of English plate 10 ¾ inches. Diameter of Chinese plate 10 ¾ inches   Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William A. Moore, 23.80.68, and acc. no. 58.155.2

Fig. 10. Engraving by Nicolas Robert (1614-1685) after Francis Barlow (1630-1702). French, XVII century. 8¾ x 7 ½ inches   Whittelsey Fund, 56.644.21 (18)

Fig. 11. Plate with tropical birds copied in part from a design by Francis Barlow. Chinese, probably made for the English market, first half of the XVIII century. Diameter 11 inches   Acc. no. 60.78.2
Fig. 12. Plate, one of a pair, with the arms of the English East India Company. Chinese, made for the English market, about 1800-1810. Length 10 1/4 inches Acc. no. 58.155.3

Figs. 13 and 14. Two details from a punch bowl depicting the European factories at Canton. In the right-hand illustration are the imperial Austrian flag, the French royal ensign, and the Swedish flag. The Austrians had no East India Company of their own: their flag was used as a front for private companies, chiefly English, trading from Ostend. Chinese, made for the European market, about 1780. Diameter 14 1/4 inches Acc. no. 58.52
Fig. 15. Monteith. Chinese, made for the English market, first quarter of the XVII century. Diameter 12 3/4 inches Acc. no. 60.8
Fig. 16. Detail of a dish. Chinese, possibly made for the Dutch market, about 1785-1800. Diameter 15 3/4 inches Acc. no. 58.134

Fig. 17. Plate with a view of Canton Harbor. Chinese, made for the Dutch market, about 1750-1760. Diameter 9 inches Acc. no. 60.80

Notes Last February the Museum announced that the three terracotta warriors, formerly labeled Etruscan, must be considered of doubtful authenticity. At that time a full report of the investigations concerning them was promised; this report, by Dietrich von Bothmer and Joseph V. Noble, has now been published as Number 11 of the Museum's "Papers." Coinciding with the publication the warriors and related material have been installed in a separate room.