Dream-Pictures of Cathay:
Chinoiserie on Restoration Silver

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The last quarter of the seventeenth century has been called England’s “Silver Age,” in reference to her indulgence in that precious metal. The luxury of English decorative arts in the 1680s could hardly be more aptly epitomized than in the silver-gilt toilet set recently acquired by the Museum. During the troubled years immediately preceding the reign of Charles II, relatively little new silver had been produced, and a distressing amount of old silver had been melted down for currency. But at this period royalty and nobility, having built up a renewed sense of security following the restoration of the monarchy, turned to silver as their favorite medium for articles both decorative and useful. John Evelyn, writing in 1673, gave a vivid picture of the opulence of the day in noting that the Duchess of Portsmouth’s dressing room contained “great vases of wrought plate, tables, stands, chimney furniture, sconces, branches, brasseras [braziers], etc., all of massy silver and out of number.”
This was the expansive age when fashion in silver favored pairs instead of single objects, and sets instead of pairs. Chimney garnitures of three to five vases, and dressing-table ensembles like ours illustrate the trend. Evelyn afforded a very fair idea of where this development had led by 1690 when he itemized in verse more informative than fluent the dressing-table equipment of a lady of quality. In his “Mundus Muliebris (or The Ladies Dressing-Room Unlock’d and Her Toilette Spread),” he wrote:

A new Scene to us next presents,
The Dressing-Room and Implements,  
Of Toilet Plate Gilt, and Emboss’d,  
And several other things of Cost;  
The Table Miroir, one Glue Pot,  
One for Pomatum, and whatnot?  
Of Washes Unguents and Cosmeticks,  
A pair of Silver Candlesticks:  
Snuffers and Snuff-dish, Boxes more,  
For Powders, Patches, Waters Store,  
In silver Flasks, or Bottles, Cups  
Cover’d or open to wash chaps.

One gathers from this inventory that in the great houses visited by Evelyn sets of a dozen or so pieces were not exceptional. Our new acquisition is a handsome instance of an even larger garniture. Its nineteen pieces expand the range of types by adding a pincushion and a pair of footed salvers that were probably used as jewelry stands. Other documented sets contain additional items, such as a hand bell, pin tray, funnel, ewer, brushes of various kinds, and boxes for combs.

It is difficult at this distance of almost three centuries to estimate the relative abundance of silver toilet services during the reign of Charles II (1660-1685). Certainly very few complete ones are now to be found. Their earliest appearance in inventories occurs during the Restoration, and to judge from the records of the London silversmith Paul de Lamerie, who made one of twenty-eight pieces in 1724, the demand for them continued for more than half a century. Toilet sets ranked high among gifts to royal ladies and court favorites. Evelyn tells of having seen in 1673 the service owned by Charles’s wife, Catherine of Braganza, which was “all of massie gold, presented to her by the King, valued at £4000.”

Although ours is one of the few great seventeenth century sets to have survived, its history can be traced no farther back than the beginning of this century: it was owned by Sir Samuel Montague in 1900, by Lord Swaythling in 1911, and until recently by Lord Astor of Hever.

It was wrought in the main by a silversmith known only by his initials, WF. His mark appears on the twelve most important pieces: the mirror frame, a jewel casket with scrolled feet, and pairs of candlesticks, footed salvers, covered bowls, and boxes in two sizes. Of these, ten show the date letter f in the so-called black-letter design, signifying 1683/84. The remaining two, a pair of twin-handled boxes with covers, are with-
out date marks. Besides WF, four other silversmiths contributed to our set as it was added to from time to time. These are IH, who was responsible for the snuffer tray of 1683/84; WB, who did the undated snuffers; a maker using D in a shield, found with the date letter for 1687/88 on the pincushion and a pair of scent bottles; and finally TI, probably Thomas Issod, who is known to have been at White Horse, Fleet Bridge, in 1690. His mark appears on the pair of pomade pots. These five maker’s marks are here reproduced, four times enlarged, in the margins.

Our set memorializes the Silver Age in a very special way, by belonging to that small category of seventeenth century plate tooled with chinoiseries – fanciful vignettes conceived to be Oriental by Occidental artists drawing more upon their imagination than upon enchorial source material. These chinoiseries are executed in a technique that superficially resembles engraving but is actually flat-chasing, a method in which delicate lines are achieved by the pressure of tools that do not dig away the metal, as happens in engraving. Both this technique and the chinoiseries themselves stand in contrast to the embossed ornament so abundant in that period: Evelyn’s plate “gilt and emboss’d” was of a type often overburdened with close-packed floral scrolls or grotesques, derived in large part from Dutch models or pattern books. Chinoiserie decoration on silver seems to have been confined to England between the 1670s and 1690s. Although it is found, in rare instances, on earlier silver, as on a tankard of 1650 or a sconce of 1665, this is undoubtedly a result of an owner’s desire to bring his old-fashioned object up to date; the history of silver is replete with such anachronisms. The influence escaped only to colonial America, where a few precious examples were produced, such as the pair of candlesticks made about 1705 by the New York silversmith Cornelius Kierstede, now in the Museum’s American Wing.

Chinoiserie on silver was only one aspect of the vogue for things Oriental that had begun in earnest more than a century before, as a by-product of Europe’s self-sought trade with the East. The first symptom was the acquisition of Chinese porcelain. Inventories from the Age of Navigation reveal that Queen Isabella, Emperor Charles V, and King Philip II pioneered as porcelain collectors; Philip, indeed, owned more than three thousand pieces. At Fontainebleau Francois I gathered vases, silver, and costumes from China and the Indies for his private quarters. Queen Elizabeth had both porcelains and lacquers from the Orient; porcelains in silver-gilt mounts dating from her reign are in the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert. Her Lord Treasurer, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, owned four great blue and white Ming pieces mounted in English silver gilt now in the Metropolitan.

The founding of the English and Dutch East India Companies at the turn of the century stimulated imports from the Orient and broadened their variety. Thus the London Calendar of State Papers for 1628-1633 mentions the importing of chests of fabrics, drugs, porcelains, coffers, and a “screetore,” or writing desk, fitted with small accessories. An ever greater opportunity to cater to the Western demand for Eastern ceramics was provided by the silk trade and, in the second half of the seventeenth century, the newly acquired taste for tea. Such cargoes were comparatively light in weight, while porcelain and stoneware provided welcome ballast.
3. Salver from the Museum's toilet set. Maker WF.
9¼ inches square. Fletcher Fund, 63.70.11
The collecting of Orientalia became a cachet of fashion in Europe. In France, during the seventeenth century, Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin boasted of coffers of China wood enriched with mother-of-pearl, cabinets and folding screens in lacquer, and gold-embroidered bed hangings. It is thought that Mazarin introduced the king’s mother, Anne of Austria, to an admiration of Far Eastern wares. In 1663 we find Louis ordering her new apartment at Versailles to be furnished with the two things she cherished above all else: jasmines, and her Oriental art, which included furniture, textiles, and filigree in precious metals.

Once the vogue for Eastern wares took root, the demand exceeded the limited supply, creating a market for chinoiseries, or things made locally with a presumed Oriental flavor. Chinoiserie—the term comprehends decoration with virtually any Oriental characteristics, be they Chinese, Japanese, Indian, or Persian—offered a welcome escape from the heavy formality of late seventeenth century classicistic design. It had the virtue of being lighthearted and refreshingly different, and it was regarded as sophisticated because of its allusion to a complex and cultured empire. The harbinger of this type of decoration was probably “japanning,” or domestic lacquerwork in the Eastern style, which had already taken hold in England, Holland, France, and Sweden at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Other evidence of this “do-it-yourself” trend is provided by a 1649 inventory of Mazarin’s personal property: it lists “dix pièces de serge
de soye à plusieurs couleurs, façon de la Chine faites à Paris.” An important factor favoring European substitutes was the excessive cost of early imports. In 1613, Princess Elizabeth, daughter of James I, received as a wedding present the furnishings of a “cabinet of China-worke,” totaling £10,000 in value.

The chinoiserie movement became international with the production of domestic versions of imported ceramics. Before the middle of the century, Portuguese tableware of faience was being decorated with Oriental figures in blue against a white ground, echoing contemporary Chinese porcelain; and at the important French ceramic center of Nevers, as Arthur Lane points out in his French Faience, the potters “had for once stolen a march on the court designers” by reproducing Chinese porcelain shapes in addition to Chinese ornament. One Nevers piece, a hexagonal “temple jar,” is dated 1644. In that year the Ming dynasty fell. This event is believed to have reduced the supply of Chinese porcelain available for export for about twenty years, a period in which the potters of the Netherlands stepped up their production of imitative wares. At Lambeth in England, during the 1680s and 90s, pottery such as the jardinière in Figure 2 was decorated with pseudo-Chinese figures in white on a blue background—a type of Nevers faience that in turn borrowed its decoration from Chinese porcelain.

In England, the Great Fire of London doubtless played a considerable role in accommodating a desire for change, since, after September 1666, four-fifths of the city had to be rebuilt. This conflagration increased the demand for colorful and exotic imports, such as inlaid and lacquered furniture and elaborately patterned fabrics. As elsewhere, when there wasn’t enough Oriental material to suffice, domestic imitations rounded out the supply: furniture in the current English style was inset with lacquer plaques or wholly japanned in the Oriental manner, and crewel embroidery was laboriously worked by fashionable ladies in quasi-East-Indian designs. Silver chased with chinoiseries was a timely English supplement to the fashion for things Oriental.
Although English chinoiserie on silver is illustrated most spectacularly on furnishings for the dressing table, where the multiplicity of objects offers the decorator an opportunity to expand his inventive virtuosity, this form of ornament is by no means limited to articles for milady's chamber. It is also found on vessels associated with drinking, such as monteiths, punch bowls, tankards, mugs, and caudle cups. Little concession was made in altering the Occidental shapes and proportions of silver vessels so "Orientalized." (Later, when the taste for chinoiserie was revived in eighteenth century rococo art, it became general in England and Continental countries to apply these fantasies to silver of both Eastern and Western design.)

The Museum's new set illustrates exceptionally well the five principal elements of chinoiserie on late Restoration silver: landscapes with architecture and fountains; highly stylized rockery; fantastic birds; exotic shrubbery; and posturing, vaguely Oriental figures. There is little reason to doubt that in the main they spring from contemporary arts and literature, both foreign and domestic.

The landscapes are studded with Continental architecture, often of a ruinous or

12. Four pieces from the Museum’s toilet set: covered box (maker WF), covered bowl (maker WF), pomade pot (maker TI), and covered box (maker WF). Each object is one of a pair. Length of covered bowl 5¾ inches. Fletcher Fund, 63.70.4, 19, 10, 5
sketchy nature, featuring crumbling columns, fragmentary arches, viaducts, and obelisks (Figures 3 and 5). All these elements were part of the general vocabulary of seventeenth-century design and have only an oblique connection with the East, unless the Egyptian connotation of obelisks is taken into account, and unless the viaducts are a European’s visualization of the fabled Great Wall of China. Inspiration for such details existed in numerous contemporary books on Rome, such as Filippo de’ Rossi’s Ritrato di Roma Antica (1645) or Le Cose Meravigliose dell’Alma Città di Roma (1672). They could also have been gleaned from landscape and perspective prints, which had been popular during the preceding century and which were circulating throughout the seventeenth. Echoes of the architectural views designed by Jacques Androuet DuCerceau and other French artists of the sixteenth century can be detected, though the forms are simplified and the perspective distorted. There is a provocative affinity between the etching shown in Figure 4 and the burning tower (did the artist mean it to represent a pagoda?) on one of our salvers (Figure 3).

Fountains are given surprising prominence among the decorative elements on the Museum’s toilet set, one appearing on the mirror cresting (Figures 1 and 18) and another on a footed salver (Figure 19). The form of each is basically European—a gadrooned or shell-shaped basin, as found over and over again in prints and books of the period, such as that mine of information about fountains, G. A. Böcklern’s Architettura Curiosa Nova (1664). On the silver they have been Orientalized by the grafting on of rocks of prismatic form, as on Chinese porcelain (Figure 17), or by introducing vaguely dragonlike creatures.

The genesis of the bizarre birds that strut and swoop in ungainly fashion remains baffling. They include cranes, pheasants, parrots, ducks, and other species frequently seen in Oriental painting, porcelain, and lacquer. Here they are mercilessly caricatured with weird proportions, wire-thin legs, and paper-fan crests. Such grotesque birds were a preoccupation of engravers in northern Europe from Renaissance times onward, and since similar odd creatures could be found in Chinese wares, Indian textiles (Figure 9), and European travel-book illustrations, they perhaps embody a medley of Eastern and Western influences.
We are on firmer ground with the plant motifs. Counterparts of trees and shrubs bearing gigantic fruit are found in the illustrations to contemporary travel books, such as John Nieuhoff’s account of his trip to the Orient as part of an embassy from the Dutch East India Company to the Emperor of China. Originally published in Amsterdam in 1668, the book was an instant success; it had an English edition the next year. The tree at the left of the illustration shown in Figure 13 is repeatedly echoed in the chinoiseries, even to the diagonal crosshatching of its fruit (Figures 10 and 12). The sinuous bamboo rising from mounds of rock, occurring over the mirror, on several of our boxes, and again on a salver in the collection of Irwin Untermyer (Figure 15), is probably of another derivation. Its closest counterpart in Oriental wares is the so-called Tree of Life, which was the principal motif of the Indian palampores (Figure 14) that were being shipped to Europe in large quantities at the time our toilet set was made. According to the recently expressed view of John Irwin of the Victoria and Albert Museum, these fabrics were themselves of modified Oriental flavor, having been made to order for the European market, from designs originating in England.

Probably because the travel books featured only the more spectacular trees and plants, the small floral motifs that fill the minor spaces of the silver were drawn from a more immediate source—the English countryside. Typically English species on our pieces are pinks, on the front panel of the jewel casket (Figure 18), and holly or pin oak, on one of the large covered boxes (Figure 12).

If Mediterranean architecture, north European fountains, and English flowers seem oddly transplanted in the “Chinese” settings, the human figures that cavort among them add the most unrealistic note of all. They are ethnologically unidentifiable, and their occupations are as strange as their costumes. Our mirror cresting (Figures 1 and 18), for instance, depicts a servant holding a parasol over a fountain, although the sunshade is probably intended to shelter the lady at right, who postures like a singer and carries a parrot perched in a triangle, to the intense fascination of a small boy. A similarly theatrical fountain scene appears on one of the salvers (Figure 19), complete with a woman whose dress and pose almost duplicate the one on the mirror cresting, though in mirror image. Not one of the figures on our toilet set, however, is known to be repeated elsewhere on English plate, or to have been taken from any one specific illustration, though the servant with the parasol is a type often depicted in contemporary accounts of travel in the Far East.

Figures on other chinoiserie pieces may be traced more precisely to their ultimate sources. Compare, for example, the man holding an elongated fan on a monteith of 1686/87 (Figure 21) to the spearman on the prow of a boat, shown in Figure 20. Compare, too, the offhand pose of the man in Figure 24 and the

one at the left of Figure 25. Both engravings come from John Nieuhoff’s book, and, like the crosshatched fruit, suggest that these illustrations, and others like them, contributed to the chinoiseries.

Sometimes we find a repetition of the same motif on objects produced by different makers in the same year. There is, for instance, the closest possible correspondence between the warrior on our 1686/87 monteith (Figure 21) by the maker IS, and his double on the cover of a tankard of the same date (Figure 22), by a maker whose mark is a goose in a dotted circle. The same figure, in reversed pose, recurs on a porringer, also of 1686/87, by the latter silversmith.

These figures, whatever their source, are the most fascinating aspect of chinoiserie decoration. Whereas crewel embroideries tend to avoid human figures, and japanwork subordinates them in landscapes, the silver makes a feature of them. How is this emphasis to be explained? One answer might be that both other techniques have contemporaneous Oriental prototypes, while the silver apparently does not. (Although there is Chinese precedent for decorating metal in flat-chasing on a matte ground, surviving examples of this technique are rare and so remote in date—tenth to thirteenth centuries—that it is not very likely that such pieces served as source material in seventeenth-century England.)

Consider, too, the strong resemblance of the figures to one another in style, an unusually vivacious one, humorous to the point of caricature. What English counterpart to such figures is found in any other medium? They are assembled and depicted with such individuality, in fact, as to suggest that a single person was responsible for the basic designs. This artist could be the “missing link” in the genesis of the chinoiseries on silver: contributing verve and humor to his source material, he may have been the sole supplier of such drawings to silversmiths or silver decorators.

Even granting the existence of an artist with a comic turn of mind, the question still remains as to why he chose to depict human figures in such curious poses—posturing by fountains, carrying triangles, and so on, or
why he placed ruined arches and freakish birds in his landscapes. It is not enough to point out the separate sources from which some of the figures, architectural details, and verdure could have been derived. To orchestrate these diverse elements into dream-pictures of Cathay, a catalyst of some sort was needed. Here our mirror cresting provides a clue. The figures are grouped under their valanced border like actors within a proscenium arch. Their poses are theatrical, as are their costumes, which only the theater’s magic could invest with plausibility. But did chinoiserie exist in the theater world of Charles II?

Indeed it did. Ephra Behn, author of the novel Oroonoko, seems to have had some influence in that direction. On returning from the Dutch colony of Surinam, she presented to the Theatre Royal a set of feather costumes that were used in the 1664 production of The Indian Queen, where they were “infinitely admired by Persons of Quality.” (Pepys saw it on January 27, and John Evelyn on February 5.) Mrs. Behn doubtless looked upon this play, which dealt with Mexico and Peru, as a glimpse into a small corner of her beloved Surinam, characterized as a supercontinent extending “from East to West, whose vast extent was never yet known, [stretching] one way as far as China and another to Peru.” Such delightfully romantic vagueness probably helped to make plumed headdresses as acceptable in the portrayal of Chinese characters as of the subjects of Montezuma. That interest in things Eastern continued in the theater after the ’60s and ’70s is shown by the success of The Indian Queen, which enjoyed three revivals before appearing as an opera at Drury Lane in 1695. A more strictly Oriental theme came to the London stage in The Conquest of China, produced by Elkanah Settle in 1675. Yet even there the incongruity of naming the leading characters Orunda, Alcinda, Amavanga, Quitazo, and Lycungus probably was accepted as part of the general exoticism.

Fittingly enough for that era of geographic gallimaufry, there appeared in 1692 another Settle production with Chinese overtones: The Fairy Queen, based on Shakespeare’s A Midsummer-Night’s Dream. Although the appeal of Cathay on silver was fast waning, it still lingered in the theater. The Fairy Queen was presented at Dorset Garden, a theater designed in 1671 to accommodate the growing trend toward the use of stage machinery. The stage directions have by chance been preserved, and, published in Robert E. Moore’s Henry Purcell and the Restoration Theatre (Purcell wrote the music for the performance), they reveal that the producer took full advantage of the mechanical possibilities. The setting of the final act is an exotic garden, where an aria is sung by “a Chinese man.” When Oberon makes his appearance, he commands that a “new transparent world be seen,” and then: “While the scene is darkened, a single entry is danced; then a symphony is played; after that the scene is suddenly illuminated, and discovers a transparent prospect of a Chinese garden, the architecture, the trees, the plants, the fruit, the birds, the beasts quite different to what we have in this part of the world. It is terminated by an arch, through which is seen other arches with close arbours, and a row of trees to the end of the view. . . .

OPPOSITE:
18. Four pieces from the Museum’s toilet set: mirror frame, pair of candlesticks, and covered jewel casket. All by the maker WF. Height of mirror 16 1/4 inches. Fletcher Fund, 63.70.1, 7, 8, 2

19. Salver from the Museum’s toilet set. Maker WF. 9 1/4 inches square. Fletcher Fund, 63.70.12
It is bounded on either side with pleasant bowers, various trees, and numbers of strange birds flying in the air; on the top of the platform is a fountain, throwing up water which falls into a large basin." Might this not have served equally well as a prescription for a design on a silver jewel casket? The imagery of Restoration silver is reflected so vividly in these stage directions that one cannot help imagining that the staging of earlier theatrical productions played a part in its inspiration.

A final question concerns the artists who actually executed chinoiseries on silver. Were they the silversmiths themselves or other specialists? Since the chasing of the designs shows no marked diversity in style, it would seem that very few craftsmen were involved. This similarity might well indicate, in fact, that the chasing was done in a single shop, which could have served as the center for the dissemination of the chinoiseries. One remaining clue, so minor as to seem inconsequential, suggests such an answer, at least as far as chinoiseries on silver dating from 1678 to 1688 are concerned. On silver of that decade, most of the panels are enclosed by narrow, matte borders. In example after example, the inner edges of these bands are accented with sawtooth projections alternating with crescents, twin humps, or bracketlike cusps. The outer edges, though sometimes plain, more often repeat the toothlike ornaments in alternation with others, including trefoils, curving spurs, or asymmetrical scrolls. A few pieces vary the formula—for example, the upper edge of the mirror cresting (Figures 1 and 18) uses triple spurs and triple fleurs-de-lis, along with other devices.

It may be supposed that these motifs are markers dividing the borders into mathematical parts—approximate halves, quarters, eighths, and so on—to govern the proper spacing of the pictorial decoration. Almost always the major elements of the compositions stand directly above these spacers, or are centered between pairs of them. Occasionally the markers are worked into the composition itself by means of stems or sprays of leaves that are grafted onto them. Less frequently, those along the upper border intrude into the picture area, sometimes conflicting with details of the architecture. From this it would seem that these rhythmic ornaments were worked into the silver before the pictorial decoration was added.

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motifs appear to be limited to silver of the decade 1678 to 1688, and twenty of the fifty such items known to the writer are date-marked 1683/84. The lack of inventiveness displayed in the humble motifs arouses one's curiosity when it is pointed out that the silver itself in this group represents the work of at least twenty-three makers. The number of silversmiths involved, contrasted to the similarity and routine appearance of the borders, suggests that the borders might be the work of apprentices in a shop of silver decorators.

The art of silver chasing requires a high degree of draughtsmanship. It was apparently a specialist occupation (though almost nothing is recorded about its status in the seventeenth century), for there were craftsmen who could be commissioned to inscribe heraldry or inscriptions on plate. (In a later generation, William Hogarth was one of these.) We can only surmise that there might have been a London shop specializing in the chasing of chinoiserie designs. To such a shop, silversmiths and private owners could have brought their plate to be decorated in the latest fashion — with fantasies "in the Chinese manner," blending East and West with an inventiveness that lent an extra measure of charm to both.

REFERENCES


24. Panel from the same monteith as Figure 8

25. Chinese men. Engraving on page 40 of the fifth part of Nieuhoff’s Legatio Batavia. 3 3/4 x 6 1/6 inches. The Library of the Metropolitan Museum