21st Century Antiques – Chinese Export Porcelain in China Today

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"How old do you want it to be?" Mr. Wu asked me without even the suggestion of a smile. "We can make it look and feel like the Kangxi original, or like a modern imitation. But it will sell best as a 19th century copy, nobody will raise an eyebrow." I looked at him, amused. I recalled the letter the Jesuit missionary Père d'Entrecolles wrote from Jingdezhen in 1712:

> *The Mandarin of Jingdezhen, who counts me among his friends, makes presents to his patrons at Court, of old porcelain, which he has the art of making himself. Or rather he has mastered the art of imitating antique porcelain or at least that of recent antiquity and to this end employs a great many workmen.* [1]

Like many of the great Jesuit missionaries to Qing Dynasty China, Père d'Entrecolles was a keen observer and contributed to a lively exchange of knowledge between his Chinese contemporaries and his peers in Europe. He recorded in great detail what he learned about the production of porcelain, and was an important source for the Europeans eager to develop this art themselves.

It was in his spirit that I first travelled to Jingdezhen in 1999, and I have never truly left. I set out to make the best decorative porcelain in the European taste since the 1960's when Mildred Mottahedeh met with Chinese potters in pursuit of the same goal. The people of Jingdezhen are still as dedicated to the production of porcelain as they were 800 years ago (though they have now diversified into mini vans and helicopters) and they hold among them all the skills and knowledge on the subject. The industry is dominated by *riyongci*, 'daily-use-porcelain' turned out in vast quantities by factories and family-run workshops, but an exclusive club has evolved over the past six to eight years, of artisans able to create and re-create all styles of fine wares, mainly of traditional Chinese taste. The best craftsmen are the most discreet, and these were the ones I set out to meet.

A careful review of auction catalogues and dealers' shop windows over the past few years turns up an ever increasing number of pieces of Chinese porcelain that can be described as 'unusual' at best and obvious modern reproductions at worst. The tendency is all too often to give pieces 'the benefit of the doubt'. Only two years ago an auctioneer asked me for advice on a pair of decidedly 'unusual' dogs: "They may not be very old, but are they provably new? Is this a known model?" François & Nicole Hervouët[2] give part of the answer: "Fakes are rare. They are generally unique, first of all because the

faker does not work in an assembly line, and secondly, because he has no interest in multiplying identical objects, leading to an oversupply which would make the task of unmasking the fake easier." One might add today: good fakes are not even necessarily copies of existing pieces, but beautiful pieces made in the spirit and style of the original.

In this sense the writers of a 1980's guide to collecting may be somewhat over-optimistic when they state: "What no forger, faker or copier can reproduce is the state of mind under which the original artist worked. The can only imitate a style of mannerism, they cannot create it." [3] Only in May 2001 I recorded in my Jingdezhen diary: "I was introduced to master sculptor Li and had an enlightening conversation with him. He told me how he did not faithfully copy an original, but rather adopted the understanding of a craftsman of the 18th century, the view of the world of his ancestors, the naivety of those uneducated but skilled sculptors, in order to achieve a new interpretation of the subject in the old style."

For a collector of antiques, first-hand experience is vital, but it is no longer adequate to study antiques alone. In addition, it has become essential to gain an understanding of the techniques that were used then and those that are available to the artists of today. Many 'experts' in the field have little knowledge of the methods of production. It has become necessary to see at first hand what is made today, at the highest level, and in today's well-travelled society there is hardly an excuse for not gaining that experience.

Pair of Brown Hawks, Copeland Collection
at the Peabody Essex Museum, 1750-60

Pair of Brown Hawks,
limited edition, 2003

Pair of Seated Boys at the Victoria & Albert
Museum, late 18th century

Pair of Seated Boys sold in London,
made in Jingdezhen in 2001

Duck Tureen, Copeland Collection
at the Peabody Essex Museum, ca.1750-60

Duck Tureen,
limited edition, made in 2003

Soup plate decorated in famille rose, with the arms
of Newland impaling Hutchinson, from the Bullivant
Collection, ca.1740-70

Soup plate with 18th century rim
and Victorian arms, part of a
36-piece service made in 2000

Among the examples illustrated, the brown hawks based on the mid-18th century originals at the Peabody Essex Museum serve to show one of dozens of similar copies also frequently seen in the antiques market place, alongside the originals they are based on. Minor variations in colour are not our concern here. The original birds are somewhat more awkward than their modern counterparts, displaying a difference in body structure typically found in modern reproductions. The other significant detail is the surface: the treatment of the modern hawks after the final firing is smoother and of a more velvety evenness than the originals. In this way, many modern reproductions are too perfectly formed, while others err on the opposite end of the spectrum, displaying a lack of detail and tending toward the exaggeratedly naïve: compare the boys from the Victoria & Albert Museum with their 21st century counterparts, who fail to convince on this count. Similarly the duck tureen based on an original at the Peabody Essex Museum: this piece was made with a new collectors' market in mind and is marked with an underglaze blue mark to avoid any possible ambiguities.

Typically, objects such as these are copied from photographs, often from the auction catalogues readily available at one Jingdezhen bookshop. However, it is not unheard of for originals to make their way to Jingdezhen, where they are avidly collected by admirers and artists alike. The reproductions make their way into auctions in circuitous ways, while the original may well remain the pride of the owner for the foreseeable future.

Another group is more readily identifiable with the help of published sources.[4] The soup plate made in early 2000 for an English family is such an example: the rim of gilt floral motifs is based on the mid-18th century design found on a dish in the Bullivant Collection[5], while the coat-of-arms is of a Victorian design, an incongruous combination to the orthodox eye. The choice of glaze was an unctuous *qingbaiyou*, a glaze with a touch of celadon, applied with an airbrush and fired at a higher temperature than the paler 'orange peel' glaze usually desired.

Jingdezhen has a well-developed and versatile industry, catering for thriving domestic, Asian and international markets, though European protectionism limits the export of standard wares to the wealthiest centres. A local chemical supplies company offers most materials required for overglaze decoration, many of them brought in from Guangzhou, Japan and even Europe. A number of corner shops sell powdered gold and a variety of special oils for porcelain painting. It is the senior artists who have the empirical knowledge of selecting and mixing the materials available, and carefully guard their notes on how best to fire them.

Pseudo-tobacco Leaf Pattern Dish, made in the 1770's

Pseudo-tobacco Leaf Pattern Dish, made in 2002

The *famille rose* pseudo-tobacco-leaf pattern plate illustrated here is an example of good matching of colours and successful copying of the overall design, yet upon closer inspection the reproduction is heavy-handed in the outlines, with little differentiation and a lack of spontaneity. This again is a feature frequently found on modern copies of 18th century originals, as the artists today are very meticulous and deliberate in their work, spending much more time on the outline drawing than their forebears are likely to have afforded.

Perhaps more sophisticated is the science of glazes and the cobalt oxide for underglaze decoration: for their supply most artists call on the skills of Mr. Qiu, an experienced ceramic technician who has previously worked in France and Portugal and now has a workshop in Jingdezhen where he offers every shade of underglaze blue with the appropriate glaze for each period and style. In the most unlikely neighbourhood, in the midst of the fish and meat market, where bloodied trays are piled high with pig's trotters and fish bladders, Mr. Qiu offers all those shades of blue that decorate blue and white porcelain since porcelain began: the greyish hue associated with some poorer domestic wares of the 15th century, the rich tone of purplish hue that defines some of the best

Kangxi pieces, the impure blue that erupts in black iron spots, and all the glazes to match. He has advice to give the initiated on how to employ each powder, what glaze mixture to use and how to apply it and fire it. Those accustomed to using the wood-fired kiln will – occasionally – achieve the most impressive results.

Most porcelain clay is still mined in the vicinity of Jingdezhen, and while it may be highly purified for wider commercial use, the best reproductions are made of clay with natural grains of sand and added salts with the aim of achieving pinholes and other characteristic features. For sculptures, the most widespread casting methods today are *daojiang,* pouring liquid clay into hollow moulds, and *yapei,* press-moulding into plaster or metal shapes. The appropriate method for 17th and 18th century items is *yinpei,* laying carefully sliced sheets of clay into the plaster mould and pressing it into place, resulting in the finger marks typically found on the inside of many sculptures.

Another highly secretive art is that of 'antiquing': beyond polishing any gold decoration with agate in the proper way, this art involves not only cautious abrasion with a whetstone appropriate to the likely use of a piece, but extends to the subtle softening of enamel surfaces with acids and the application of heat to create the halo associated with *famille verte* wares. Potassium permanganate solution is widely used to numb the brightness of the unglazed surfaces, and a special machine oil gives the glossy surface the sheen of generations of handling.

In the context of reproductions, it is important to bear in mind the Chinese penchant for worshiping the ancestors and emulating past masters. William Sargent, an expert in this field with an extensive practical understanding of ceramics, gives much weight to this point,[6] perhaps in the realisation that this is the only explanation for the frenetic production in Jingdezhen that will be tacitly accepted in the West. By contrast, some authors and antique dealers – feeling understandably threatened by these developments – take a more conservative stance, judging all Jingdezhen potters 'deceitful'. In my view, it is unhelpful to judge the artists and their products in this way, for they are doing what most businesspeople strive to do: to satisfy a hungry market. Their income depends on their artistic skill, and stands in no proportion to the price the best pieces may ultimately fetch at auction. Most importantly, all those artists I have spoken to agree: they would never mistake any modern reproduction for an antique piece of Chinese porcelain, however well made, for they know exactly what they are looking for in a modern piece.

There is no rule of thumb for detecting modern reproductions and I have purposely avoided suggesting guidelines for identifying them. Instead, it is hoped that a growing understanding of the skills of contemporary artisans will lead to greater appreciation of their undisputed abilities and perhaps even create a new collectors' market for beautifully made porcelain of the qualities and character of the originals. When the finer antiques have moved out of reach for most pockets and the skills of the potter and the porcelain painter have reached the levels of their ancestors, this is an opportunity for enthusiasts to create a collection of their own, with pieces of a beauty and quality in no way inferior to the originals.

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[1] Père d'Entrecolles in a letter dated 1. September 1712, in the appendix to Stephen W. Bushell; *Description of Chinese Pottery and Porcelain*. Oxford, 1910, p.206.
[2] Hervouët, François and Nicole Hervouët. *La Porcelaine des Compagnies des Indes a Décor Occidental.* Paris, 1986.
[3] Robert Cumming (Ed.). *Christie's Guide to Collecting*. New Jersey, 1986, p.59.
[4] The most comprehensive reference books are clearly those by David S.Howard, *Chinese Armorial Porcelain*, Vol.I (1974) and Vol.II (2003).
[5] Phillips Auction Catalogue 22 March 1988, *The Bullivant Collection of Armorial Porcelain*, lot 180.
[6] William R. Sargent. "A Legacy of Imitations", in *American Ceramic Circle Journal*, Vol.IX, 1994, pp.5-27