

# Mounted Oriental Porcelain

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Some ten years ago I organised what I believe to have been the first exhibition ever to have been held of Chinese porcelain in metal mounts of European design. It was shown in New York in the galleries of the China Institute in America. I was asked to speak at the dinner given to mark the opening of the exhibition which was attended largely by members of the Institute, most of them connoisseurs and collectors of oriental porcelains. I opened my speech by saying: 'I imagine most of you here this evening think I have organised an exhibition of desecrated Chinese porcelain'. There were no audible sounds of dissent from the assembled company. I am quite sure that most serious students of Far Eastern porcelains regard the idea of setting them in metal mounts of Western design as a total destruction of their aesthetic qualities. I remember that great but today forgotten collector of Chinese porcelain, the late Leonard Gow, telling me over fifty years ago that if he ever bought a piece of porcelain with such mounts he immediately tore them off and threw them away. As an admirer of mounted porcelain I consoled myself with the thought that since he specialised in collecting enamelled wares of the *famille rose* and the *famille verte*, the mounts were probably merely pastiches made in the 19th century, for such porcelains were hardly ever mounted at earlier periods.

In this article I hope to trace briefly the history of the practice of mounting porcelain in Europe, the various purposes for which it was done, and to try to explain that the technique has an aesthetic of its own.

A large variety of rare and exotic objects, not only of porcelain but of rock crystal, semi-precious hard

stones, glass etc. have been mounted in this way in the course of European history. Indeed the practice seems to be deeply rooted in man's nature even outside Europe. At Knossos Sir Arthur Evans excavated an early Egyptian faience cup which had been given a gold setting almost two millennia before the Christian era; and in the Soshoin treasury at Nara in Japan there is a blue glass vessel, probably of Sassanian origin, mounted as a goblet on a foot of Tang silver in 8th century China as a present to the ruler of Japan. Such things were set in mounts of precious metal as a tribute to their rarity and strange exotic character, much as jewels have been given settings of gold from the earliest times.

Today when one can get on a plane in London or New York and find oneself in Hong Kong or Beijing within little more than twelve hours it is difficult to imagine how distant China was until quite recently and how rare and exotic anything coming from China seemed in the West. In spite of this some sort of intermittent contact with the Celestial Empire had existed from remote antiquity. Almost two thousand years ago the Emperor Claudius was complaining of the excessively large sums that Roman ladies were paying for silk for their dresses. Over the course of centuries China has taught the West much: the cultivation of silk worms, for example, or the manufacture of paper. Perhaps even printing itself.

We do not know when the first examples of oriental porcelain reached Europe. There is some reason to suppose occasional pieces arrived as early as the 11th century but there is a problem here over the interpretation of documents. There was no word to describe

such unfamiliar material. Even three centuries later we see this clearly from an entry in the inventory of the treasures belonging to the duc d'Anjou, brother of King Charles V of France and a famous art collector, drawn up in 1379/80:

*'Item 714. Une écuelle d'une pierre appelée porcelaine . . .'*  
(Item 714. A dish of a stone called porcelain . . .)

Such a description makes it clear how rare and unfamiliar the material was at this date. We may therefore be certain that this strange, hard, white, translucent material caused the greatest sensation when it first appeared in the West, especially when we remember that for all practical purposes, no porcelain of any sort was manufactured in Europe before the 18th century. It is hardly surprising therefore that porcelain was thought to be some sort of precious or semi-precious stone when it first made its appearance in the West and, as such, was deemed worthy of being mounted in gold or silver like a jewel. In fact the entry describing the duc d'Anjou's piece of porcelain quoted above goes on to describe how the 'écuelle' was mounted in gilt silver and enamelled with the coats of arms of its European owner.

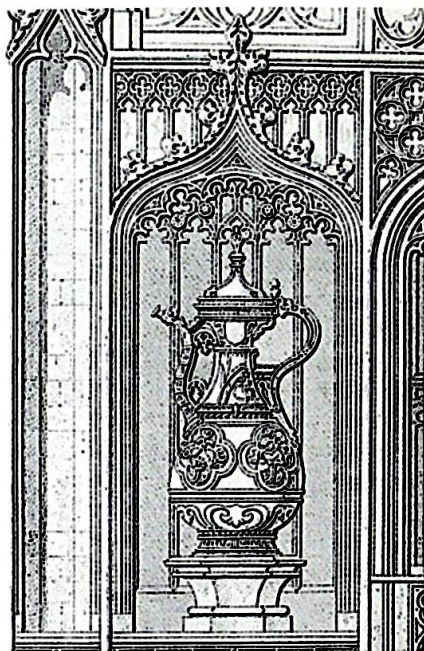
The duke's dish has of course, long since vanished or become totally unidentifiable from the loss of its mounts. Only one piece from this remote period has survived in identifiable form into the modern world. This is the so-called Gaignières-Beckford vase. Unhappily its mounts which survived down to well on in the 19th century have vanished mysteriously today though their appearance was carefully recorded by two of its early owners. This famous object, a pear shaped bottle



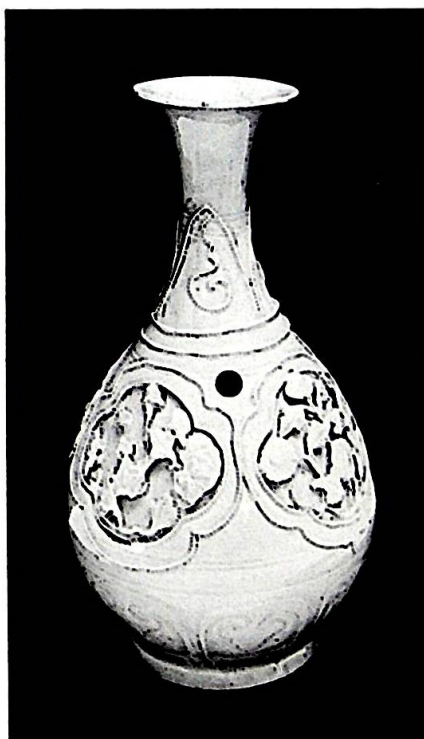
of shadow blue Yuan porcelain decorated in pierced relief seems to have been mounted for King Louis the Great of Hungary in 1381 and presented in that year to Charles III of Durazzo on the occasion of his ascent to the throne of Naples (*Plate 1*). The mounts, which were of silver gilt enamelled with armorial bearings, converted the porcelain vase into a ewer of European design with a handle and long spout of metal. At a later date it passed into the possession of the Grand Dauphin, son of Louis XIV and a famous collector of Chinese porcelain (it is fully described in the inventory of his porcelain collection). At a still later date it entered into the possession of Roger Gaignières, a French archaeologist deeply interested in French history, and of William Beckford of Fonthill Abbey in Wiltshire, one of the greatest of English art collectors. Each of them left a record of its appearance, Gaignières drawing showing the armorial mounts in the greatest detail. Although the mounts were still attached to the vase when Beckford sold it in 1822 they have vanished today (probably destroyed by some connoisseur of Chinese porcelain) and the vase alone survives in the National Museum of Ireland. But there can be no doubt of its identification for the holes pierced to take the spout and the handle are clearly visible (*Plate 2*).

The earliest piece of Chinese porcelain to survive still complete with its mounts of German gilt silver is a lidded cup mounted for a certain Count Phillip of Katzenelbogen shortly before 1453. In 1530 Archbishop Warham presented a mounted celadon bowl to Wadham College, Oxford, where it is still one of the College's most treasured possessions. But such things remained objects of the greatest rarity until well on in the 16th century.

But with the development of the sea route to the Far East by the Portuguese an entirely fresh



1 The Gaignières-Beckford Vase. Detail from the title-page of J Britton: *Illustrations, Graphic and Literary, of Fonthill Abbey, Wiltshire, showing the vase complete with its 1381 silver-gilt and enamel mounts as displayed at Fonthill* (Private Collection)



2 The Gaignières-Beckford vase as it survives today. This is the vase seen in *Plate 1* without the mounts converting it into a ewer of European design. (National Museum of Ireland, Dublin)

perspective of trade with China was opened up. No longer would it be necessary for Chinese goods to travel by the slow 'Silk Road' across Central Asia or overland from the Indian Ocean. By the middle of the century Chinese porcelains (and other oriental materials) were appearing on the Lisbon market in some quantity. Before the end of the 16th century King Phillip II of Spain possessed no less than four thousand pieces of Chinese porcelain and the collections of other European sovereigns and great princes were only slightly smaller. Queen Elizabeth I owned enough to make a fine display on a sideboard when she gave a great banquet.

With the foundation of the Dutch East Indies Company in 1602 the flow of Chinese goods to the West increased greatly. Several Portuguese and Dutch carracks sunk in shallow waters on the return journey from the Orient have been raised to the surface in recent years. Their cargoes often including as many as 20,000 pieces of Chinese porcelain, give some idea of the size of the trade. Within a few years the Dutch had wrested the best of this carrying trade from the Portuguese and Antwerp replaced Lisbon as the chief market place for porcelain and other oriental goods for the better part of the next two centuries.

Paradoxically this increased flow of oriental porcelains to Europe actually increased its popularity amongst collectors. Every petty prince or nobleman wanted to have his own collection. Many devoted whole rooms to its display arranging it in quantity on chimney pieces, overmantels, cornices and even around skirting boards as well as on innumerable brackets attached to the walls. Such displayed collections still survive in Dresden and a few other German cities and are illustrated in numerous engravings of the period by Daniel Marot and others. Many of these display pieces were mounted, for the habit of mounting



eastern porcelains was too well-established to be lightly abandoned.

Although oriental porcelain was collected and mounted in England, Holland and the Germanic lands, it was in France, the most artistically sophisticated country in Europe at this period, that the taste for porcelain and *lachine* (as what we call *chinoiserie* today was then named) was carried to the greatest lengths. In 1671 Louis XIV built a small pavilion in the park at Versailles for his reigning mistress, the beautiful and witty marquise de Montespan. It was known as the *Trianon de Porcelaine* for its exterior walls were cased with faience tiles painted in blue and white in imitation of Ming porcelain. The same scheme of decoration was carried out in the interior of the building where the walls and the hangings and upholstery were also of blue and white in the Chinese taste. Unfortunately the faience tiles could not stand up to the rigours of a northern winter and the pavilion had to be dismantled within a few years. The taste for orientalia however, continued unabated. After the visit of two 'embassies' from Siam (in fact they were merely trade delegations and not diplomatic missions) in 1684 and 1686 bringing lavish gifts of porcelain, lacquer, textiles for the King and his courtiers at Versailles, everything Chinese became the height of fashion at the French Court. Even the king was accustomed to taking his breakfast cup of bouillon from a bowl of Chinese porcelain mounted with handles of gold in the form of entwined snakes. Costume balls in which the guest appeared in Chinese or pseudo-Chinese costumes were a regular feature of fashionable life in Paris and at Versailles and the number of shops specialising in *lachine* in the capital multiplied rapidly.

The fact that Louis XIV's bouillon bowl was still mounted points to a new aspect of this practice. No longer was porcelain mounted as a tribute to its extreme rarity but



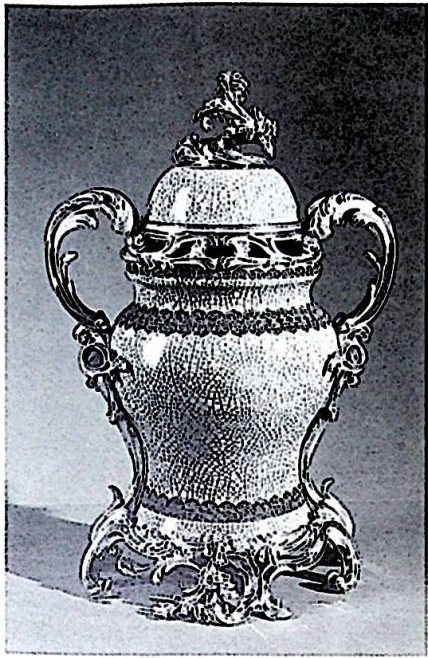
3 Tankard of Chinese blue and white export porcelain of European design with Dutch silver mounts (Philadelphia Museum of Art)

rather to adapt it to a contemporary domestic setting. Sometimes this was for purely functional purposes as in the case of the King's soup bowl or as a drinking tankard (*Plate 3*), very popular in Holland, but more frequently in a purely decorative role as an ornamental vase or dish. At the beginning of the 18th century porcelain mounts continued for the most part to be of silver or silver-gilt (more rarely of gold like Louis XIV's soup bowl). But as the rococo style developed (and architectural historians date the inception of the style to the last years of the 17th century), these precious materials were gradually replaced by gilt bronze. Partly this was for economic reasons; the first decade of the 18th century was a period of great financial stringency in France. Porcelain was reaching Europe in ever increasing quantities and mounted porcelains were no longer the prerogative of kings and great princes. There was a widespread demand for its use in a purely domestic setting and not merely as a display object in a

collection of princely curiosities. Gilding played a highly important part in the rococo interior especially in France where the taste for Far Eastern objects was most fully developed especially in the years following the visits of the Siamese 'ambassadors' to Versailles. The generally white painted panelling of the walls was picked out with gilding on the carving, clocks, barometers, lighting fittings, candlesticks and candelabra, fire-dogs, chimney furnishings and other appurtenances of domestic living were generally of gilt bronze and most furniture of the period was embellished with gilt bronze mounts. Porcelain mounted with gilt bronze not only blended more easily into this type of setting than silver or silver gilt mounts but the western character of the mounts themselves gave a quasi-French appearance to the often exotic shapes of this foreign material. Mounted porcelain thus became as it were absorbed into the decoration of the contemporary domestic interior.

In Paris particularly the fashion for everything oriental was encouraged and developed by a group of traders known as *marchands-mercier*. This word is impossible to translate. It is tautological and literally translated means 'merchant-merchant'. This obfuscation is made more difficult to understand because no such body of merchants existed in England or any other European country. The *marchands-mercier* were neither artists nor craftsmen. They combined the roles of the modern interior decorator, antique dealer and industrial designer with that of the purveyor of the *chic* and the fashionable. They made nothing themselves but employed a wide variety of different craftsmen to carry out their ideas. Diderot, a contemporary writer, stigmatised them as '*faiseurs de rien, marchands de tout*' (makers of nothing, dealers in everything). Their true function was as middlemen of taste. They thought up ingenious devices for





4 Pot-pourri vase of Chinese crackleware porcelain dating from the mid-18th century. The French gilt bronze mounts converting it from a lidded jar to a pot-pourri are struck with the crowned-C, a tax mark indicating they were made between 1745 and 1749. (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco)



6 Candelabra. The figure of Pu Tai Hosang is of Chinese yellow porcelain of the Kangxi period. It has been adapted as a two light candelabrum by the addition of French gilt bronze mounts of mid-18th century date enriched by the addition of porcelain flowers probably of Vincennes porcelain. (Private Collection, New York)



5 Ewer. Baluster-shaped vase of grey-green Chinese celadon porcelain of the Kangxi period converted into a ewer of Western design by the addition of French gilt bronze mounts struck with the crowned-C, thus dating them between 1745 and 1749. (The J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu)



7 Decorative Group. The figure of Pu Tai Hosang and the cup, both of blanc de Chine (Fukien) porcelain dating from the first half of the 18th century, have been placed under a richly scrolled rococo arch of French gilt bronze to which are attached European porcelain flowers, probably from the Vincennes factory. The gilt bronze struck with the crowned-C and thus dating from 1745 to 1749. (The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore)



the decoration of the houses of the rich and fashionable. They devised many ingenious ways of mounting oriental porcelain, for instance by inverting two matching Chinese bowls one over another and linking them by a pierced band of gilt bronze thus forming a pot-pourri (Plate 4) or by converting Chinese vases into monteiths or flower holders of one sort or another. Or by converting them into ewers of European design by the addition of handles and spouts of gilt bronze (Plate 5) as had already been done in the middle ages with the Gaignières-Beckford vase. Some of their most attractive devices involved the use of figures of orientals, *pagods* or *magots* as they were then called, to form standishes or candelabra (Plate 6) or perfume burners. Often too, they would combine the figures with porcelain flowers (a new fashionable product of the Meissen porcelain factory) simply as something decorative or amusing to stand on a side table or chimneypiece (Plate 7).

By good fortune the sales ledger or *livre-journal* of one of the most famous of these *marchands-mercier*, Lazare Duvaux, has survived to this day and provides us with a vast amount of information about mounted porcelains (and other things) that he sold. This includes the prices of such mounted objects as well as the price of porcelains and the mounts. The names of innumerable people who bought mounted porcelain (almost everyone in fashionable Parisian Society) and occasionally (but only very rarely) the names of the craftsmen who actually made the mounts. The sales ledger covers the years 1748 to 1758, just the years when the taste for mounted porcelains was at its height. In addition the ledger makes it clear that for the most part it was only the cheaper types of export ware which were mounted, mostly celadons or blue and white porcelains. The richly decorated enamelled wares were rarely exported and even more rarely mounted.

To Duvaux's shop *Au Chagrin de Turquie* in the fashionable rue Saint-Honoré came all that was smartest in Paris society from the King downwards. Mme. de Pompadour was one of his most faithful clients. Hardly a week passed without her purchasing some object or other from the shop. In the decade covered by the account book she bought no less than one hundred and fifty pieces of mounted porcelain. Foreign ambassadors and visiting foreigners of distinction like the English Lords Hervey and Bolingbroke visited the shop when passing through Paris and made purchases to take back to England with them.

Literally hundreds of pieces of mounted porcelains of every sort are recorded in Duvaux's sales ledger. This was, to a great extent, a tribute to the success with which the *marchand-mercier* had adapted the exotic character of oriental porcelain to Parisian taste in interior decoration. Chinese art itself had contributed to the development of the rococo style. Not only did its curving lines echo the curvilinear character of rococo decoration but the use of asymmetry and non-European perspective so typical of all Chinese art certainly accustomed western eyes to these salient features of the rococo style. But there was more than mere aesthetic reasons for the rage for things Chinese which prevailed in all Europe throughout the greater part of the 18th century. The passion had a more serious than mere social fashion. Voltaire, the most widely influential moralist of the period taught that the Chinese Empire was far better and more rationally ruled than any European country and that Confucianism was really a form of Christianity purged of the obtuse accretions added to its original form by ecclesiastics over the centuries. Indeed he came close to claiming that the Confucian *Analects* were the Chinese equivalents of the Christian *Beatitudes*. Voltaire's most popular play was entitled *L'Orphelin de la*

*Chine* or *Les Morales de Confucius en Cinq Actes* and enjoyed a great popular success. Such beliefs as these, though based on comparatively slender knowledge of China itself, took so strong a hold in France that in 1756 that most sceptical monarch Louis XV was even persuaded to plough the first Spring furrow in the park at Versailles in emulation of the fertility rite which had been performed each year at the vernal equinox by the Emperors of China from time immemorial.

The widespread popularity of mounted porcelains as of other Far Eastern artifacts like lacquer, textiles and wall-paper, had been greatly encouraged, as we have seen, by the rise of the rococo style with its use of curvilinear lines, asymmetry and non-central perspective. This had been sparked off initially by the sight of the Siamese 'ambassadors' with their strange exotic costumes arriving at Versailles with a wealth of oriental presents for the king and his courtiers. Around 1760 a new excitement stirred the fashionable world. This was awakened by the striking evidence of life in classical antiquity being brought to light by the excavations of the ancient cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. This brought visions of a world quite as unfamiliar as the Celestial Empire and totally different. Knowledge of daily life in ancient Rome had hitherto rested only on the evidence supplied by literature and surviving sculpture. Now the minutest details of the daily life of the classical world with its domestic equipment was suddenly being revealed by excavation all in a remarkable state of preservation in the lava and dust thrown up by the eruption of Vesuvius in A.D. 79.

With this interest in Antiquity taste naturally began to turn from the sinuous lines, odd perspectives and asymmetry of the rococo to the severely rectangular lines of classical architecture. This led to a decline and ultimately to the death of the taste for mounted oriental





8 Urn. Formed from the cut-down neck of a trumpet shaped vase of Chinese green porcelain of the Kangxi period. The mounts of French gilt bronze of markedly neo-classic design date from around 1775 to 1785 (The Detroit Institute of Art)

porcelain. Although such porcelains continued to be mounted for a

time, mounts of neo-classic design seldom blended so well with Chinese porcelain as had the sinuous rhythms of the rococo (Plate 8). With the coming of the French Revolution whose ideas and philosophy were so often based on those of Roman republicanism this reaction of taste was heightened. The philosophy of Confucianism no longer appealed as it had done half a century earlier. In addition, as the Revolution developed, there was a violent reaction against anything which seemed to smack of the hated *ancien régime*. It was to be many years before the taste for mounted porcelain was to return into fashion.

Although a small amount of oriental porcelain was mounted, almost always with mounts of inferior quality, during the reign of Louis-Philippe it was only with the return into fashion of 18th century decorative art in the later years of the Second Empire that a widespread demand for furniture and decorative objects of the 18th century and with it a demand for mounted porcelains, again awoke. The high water mark of this revived interest in *dix-huitième*

decorative art came in 1882 with the Hamilton Palace sale when six successive lots of French furniture fetched prices which, having regard to the changed value of money, far exceeded anything which has been paid in the sale rooms in recent years. In the following year at the Leybourne-Popham sale a single celadon vase with rococo mounts of gilt bronze fetched the surprising price of £2,415 which constituted for many years an auction record. With such a demand from collectors the reproducer and the forger began to appear, for what had survived from the 18th century was insufficient to meet requirements. Some of the pastiches produced in Paris in the later years of the 19th century are of remarkably high quality and by no means easy to distinguish from genuine 18th century pieces. Indeed a number of such reproductions have found their way into museums as genuine objects. It has even been suggested that the record breaking mounted vase which appeared in the Leybourne-Popham sale had been made, not necessarily with any intention to deceive, less than a decade before its appearance in the sale rooms.