

Chinese Ceramics at a Glance

By Margaret White

Chinese ceramics are the most enduring of all China's decorative arts and could be considered the most dominant and influential technically and artistically in world ceramic traditions.

Ceramics are made from clay and fired in a kiln. Clay is unique in that it can be formed so easily and in so many different ways: coiled, thrown on a wheel, moulded or slip-cast. China has been blessed with a large variety of clays, an abundance of forests to supply fuel for kilns and easy access to waterways for transport of goods both domestically and overseas.

Evidence reveals that the Chinese were fashioning low-fired pots in Neolithic times. The early innovation of the potter's wheel in the Longshan period (3000–2000 BCE) accelerated pottery production and could be viewed as crucial.

It appears that China began exporting ceramics via the well established overland Silk Routes to Egypt, West Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia during the Tang Dynasty (7th century) in exchange for other goods. During this golden age, high-quality cobalt imported from Persia greatly enhanced the quality of underglazing in domestic production. The range of wares expanded to include monochromes, polychromes, celadons, white wares and *sancai* or three-colour wares.

By the Song Dynasty (10th–13th centuries), the arts of painting, calligraphy and ceramics were thriving. Some emperors seemed even more interested in the arts than in military and administrative matters. As they collected and became connoisseurs, they elevated the status of ceramics even further. Of course, only the finest quality wares went to the Imperial Court. Forms were harmonious, decoration was reduced to a minimum in monochromatic wares, and glazes, including crackle, received great attention.

From the 10th to 14th centuries, China traded with over 50 countries. From 1150–1265, however, a series of Imperial edicts prohibited the export of precious metals, and Chinese traders were forced to export silk, lacquer and ceramics in exchange for products they desired. Ceramic production underwent intense revision to meet the new demand, which resulted in specialisation of labour and technology and improvements in transport to drive this massive expansion.

With the arrival of the Mongols who founded the Yuan Dynasty (1260–1368), the extreme refinement of Song Period ceramics gave way to a bolder and more energetic style. The greatest innovation of this period was in the decoration of porcelain with cobalt underglaze, which resulted in a blue and white porcelain of great beauty that soon became the most influential of all Chinese ceramics.

The Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) saw a return from Mongol to Chinese control and also heralded another great artistic age. Between 1460 and 1487, porcelain became thinner and



Song Dynasty 12th century celadon bowl

Photo courtesy of Ceramics Source Book, ed. Errol Manners Chartwell Books, Inc 1990

overglaze enamels were introduced. During this era, blue and white porcelains achieved heights of technical and artistic excellence never since rivalled.

The later Ming Period was rent with internal problems, which led to a decline in technical standards, although lively enamelled pieces continued to be made in great profusion and variety. One especially popular group was known as *wucui* or five-colour ceramics, which also were particularly popular in Japan. Other wares known as *dehua* (*blanc de chine*) and Swatow (named after the export port) were generally of coarser quality but sought after in Southeast Asia.

The fall of the Ming Dynasty brought a new era of decorative experimentation known as the Transitional Period into the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). Some ceramics were made for the domestic market but many were exported. New markets were developing in Europe and Japan as China began to lose her trading dominance. The Portuguese, Dutch and British fiercely fought for control of the lucrative export markets of China. New ceramic shapes, designs and technical processes such as *famille rose* and *famille verte* enamels became popular. In the latter half of the 18th century and throughout the 19th century, the quality of potting and painting declined significantly. Established Qing forms and styles of decoration continued to be used throughout the Republic Period (1911–1949), but the dominance of Chinese ceramics had ended.



Swatow export ware

Photo courtesy of He Li, Thames and Hudson 1996



Tang dynasty horse decorated with *sancai* or three colour ware

Photo courtesy of Ceramics Source Book, ed. Errol Manners Chartwell Books, Inc 1990

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