

# Porcelain and the Portuguese Trade

By Maura Rinaldi

In 1498 the Portuguese, under the command of Vasco da Gama, reached Calicut on India's southwestern coast. The local rajah received them dressed in silks, adorned with precious jewels and surrounded by items of daily use made of gold. This was no primitive tribal chief such as the Portuguese had become accustomed to dealing with in Africa. In stark contrast, the presents they presented to the rajah were pitifully simple: woollen clothes and hats, jars of honey and oil and a few strings of coral beads.

From this experience, the Portuguese learned that if they wanted to trade in the East's sophisticated markets they had to find more suitable trading merchandise to offer. Orientals were not interested in the poor, agricultural goods Portugal had to offer. This was a challenge for the Portuguese who did not have enough capital to invest in the spices and luxury goods they were seeking.

With lightning speed, the Portuguese set about solving this problem. A few decades later they were solidly entrenched on the east coast of Africa, in Persia and in India. The spice trade from the Indonesian islands was controlled from Malacca while their lucrative trade with China was carried out from their enclave of Macao from where their ships (the *carracks*) sailed yearly to Japan. Goa, on the western coast of India, was the capital of the *Estado da India*, as they called their eastern maritime empire.

They were the first to implement the complex interport trade system later adopted by the Dutch and the British. This system allowed the Portuguese to earn the capital needed to buy the spices and other goods meant for the European market.

On their way to the Orient they bought slaves and ivory in Africa. The slaves were sold in India and with the money thus obtained, Indian cotton textiles were bought. These were in great demand in Southeast Asia where they were bartered for spices and other aromatic products. These in turn were carried to Macao and then bartered



*Kraak Porcelain dish  
Ming Dynasty, circa 1595 - 1605*

in Guangzhou for silks and porcelain, which were coveted in Japan and exchanged for silver, an abundant and extremely cheap metal there. The *carracks*, loaded with Japanese silver, returned to Macao where the bullion was used to buy more silk and porcelain from the Chinese. Portuguese profits were four to ten times their costs.

At this stage Chinese porcelain became the principal item of trade. Traded in Japan for silver, it was bartered for spices destined for European markets; to obtain Indian products it was exchanged in Persia and Arabia for jewels and perfumes.



*Kraak Porcelain, Ming Dynasty, circa 1610 - 1635*

Porcelain was also carried to Lisbon, which during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was the principal market for this luxurious commodity in Europe. It was coveted everywhere because until the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century China was the only country in the world capable of mass-producing this commodity. Korea knew how to produce porcelain, but the output was small and geared exclusively to its home market.

In 1602 and 1603 the Dutch, then at war with the Portuguese, captured two *carracks* loaded with the beautiful blue and white wares made in Jingdezhen, the great ceramic centre in Jiangxi province. Both ships were sailed to Holland where their cargoes were sold at auction. It is said that the second *carrack* was loaded with tens of thousands of porcelain pieces. This caused a sensation in northern Europe where such refined wares had never before been seen in such quantity.

From that time on, the porcelain that had played so great a part in building the Portuguese maritime empire was known as 'the porcelain from the *carracks*' or Kraak porcelain.



*Kraak Porcelain  
Ming Dynasty, circa 1605 - 1635*

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**Maura Rinaldi** is an independent scholar, international lecturer and author of several publications including *Kraak Porcelain, A Moment in the History of Trade; The Ceramic Cargo of the Concepcion Wrecked in 1638 and Ceramics in Scholarly Taste. She lived in Singapore from 1980 to 1996 when she was involved with FOM, including being president in 1983. She now resides in Rome, Italy.*

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*All photos courtesy of the author*

**Please note:** On 19 October Maura Rinaldi will be giving a Friday Evening Lecture on Kraak porcelain. See page 30 for details.