

The Palace Vases:

A Deep Dive Into Porcelain

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The music room of the Gibson House, where the guests and the Gibsons enjoyed themselves after a meal, was designed to show off the family's wealth and power to their guests. Exquisite objects fill the room and would have caught visitors' eyes. Beside the fireplace sit two precious vases with a sense of exoticism that exude luxury. The Gibson House's blog explains that these Palace Vases are from Guangzhou (Canton), China, specifically the Ch'ien Lung period under the Qianlong Emperor (1736-1786). After the American Revolution, the trade between the United States and China made many Bostonians wealthy, including the Gibson family. According to Charles Gibson, Jr., these vases were brought to the room by Mr. Nathaniel P. Russell in 1835 (Holmes). How did these vases travel all the way from China to Boston?

The story begins with trade between Portuguese traders and the Chinese, who sold valuable items such as silks and spices. Initially, porcelain was not a part of the trade between Europe and China. It was originally used as ballast for Chinese ships. When trade started between Portugal and China, it attracted Europeans to auspicious Chinese symbols and exotic items such as porcelain. In the early days of this trade, exported porcelains became lucrative for Chinese merchants. They found the profit from trading these new porcelain wares was more than twice the profit of exporting silk and lacquers (Wang 26-29).

As the Chinese sought to expand their influence and find more consumers worldwide, their production line was also developed to meet the increase in demand for export porcelains. The manufacture and glazing process of porcelains took place in Jingdezhen, but the enameling process

happened in Guangzhou, where all the custom symbols were added. The flourishing export porcelain industry also helped Guangzhou to improve its skill in manufacturing (Wang 26-29).

In North America, early Chinese porcelain was brought from Europe around the seventeenth century (Miller 28). Archaeological records found evidence of porcelain in wealthy families' households. When ships from Europe, especially England, arrived in North America to exchange goods, Chinese porcelains were brought for trade. Due to the long distance between China and Europe, export porcelain often went through the hands of middlemen in India, the Caribbeans, and other ports between Europe and China that were colonized by European powers such as England, the Netherlands, and France. Finally, these porcelains were sent to wealthy North American households and dealers for trading. When the number of orders from Europe rose in the 1730s, Europeans sent their favored patterns and symbols to the Chinese traders, and porcelains were produced based on the requirements of oversea consumers (Wang 26-29).

Europeans, specifically the English, sought porcelain because their ceramics technology was nowhere near as advanced as that of the Chinese. Porcelain was durable, yet thin and delicate, a kind of pottery that had yet to be seen; therefore, objects made of porcelain were in high demand. The process of making porcelain was an important part of China's material culture. The locals' connection to the materials they handled could be seen through the sentimental value of the clay they used, implying their patient and unhurried work, up until the late seventeenth century. They would bury the clay for a long period of time, which was thought to last even centuries, showing forethought about what porcelain could do for future generations (Gerritsen and McDowall 93). Material culture aside, creating porcelain was still a tedious process consisting of molding the perfect clay with precise recipes and then firing it in high temperatures for up to eighty hours, which the English would later try and replicate. The objects made would be supported in the kiln

to prevent any damage, such as the products shrinking or softening (Carey). Anything could go wrong, yet the Chinese had this technique mastered around the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). This mastery was what stood out to the English; one could even go so far as to say that the creators of porcelain and what they produced were astonishing and ingenious.

Despite this, since the creation process was so tedious and unpredictable, the ceramics industry became more unprofitable, as merchants kept trying to keep up with new unique shapes for the European market, resulting in a loss and the dampening of China's material culture (Gerritsen and McDowall 104). The English admiration for Chinese porcelain turned to jealousy and greed as they imitated the production process, since porcelain magnified their wealth during the seventeenth century. They changed the way porcelain was produced, rapidly firing it at a higher rate than before, discarding the well-thought out-process of the Chinese and altering the quality, meaning, and production of porcelain (Gerritsen and McDowall 105-108).

These actions came from Europeans' changing ideas about what porcelain symbolized and their desire to own more porcelain objects and gain these high-status symbols. Material culture was lost and the production process was industrialized—in fact, porcelain helped propel Britain's Industrial Revolution. Therefore, the British wanted more of the material that brought such wealth in their nation. To Europeans, the porcelains flooding their houses and spanning multiple floors showed their wealth and high status not just for themselves, but for guests from neighboring countries who would visit. In the Gibson House, we see the Palace Vases framed by a grand fireplace, which draws attention to the symbols of wealth and the main centerpieces of the room (Burchmore 144-145).

The production of porcelain was now tied with assembly lines, changing the artistry of porcelain to wealth and “modularity” during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the

Palace Vases were produced. Alexander Burchmore discusses the Chinese artist Liu Jianhua's creation of *Regular-Fragile* (2001-2010) based on his early training as an assembly-line ceramicist and the modularity, or mass-production, of porcelain beginning in the seventeenth century. He claims that Jianhua's art shows "[t]hese objects...are not rendered meaningless by their abstraction and isolation but are opened to new associations that might not have emerged within a defined context. Their material modularity is reflected by a conceptual multiplicity as parts of a more complex whole that can be arranged and rearranged to create an almost infinite number of narratives" (152). Since many objects like the Palace Vases would be remade as soon as they hit the global market, they may have been one of many reproduced objects or produced by those who were still in touch with their artistry (148, 152-156).

One interesting design element of the Palace Vases are the handles, which resemble red dragons outlined in green and dotted in white (Fig. 1). In Chinese mythology, dragons are powerful beings that control the weather and bring good luck, rain, and fertility. Juliet Wood writes that "[d]ragon imagery continued to develop during later Chinese dynasties as part of complex symbolic systems, and they came to symbolize the cardinal directions, as well as specific features of the landscape and the protective role of the emperor" (160). For the past two thousand years, dragons have commonly appeared in Chinese artworks, especially porcelain objects such as the Palace Vases (Wilson 286, 299). The dragon's association with the Chinese emperor became especially strong during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1644-1912). In fact, at the time the Palace Vases were made, the Qianlong Emperor and his wives and concubines appeared in portraits wearing beautiful and intricate Dragon Robes (Wilson 306-307). For the Chinese, the color red has festive connotations, and a red dragon chasing a globe is linked with the Chinese New Year (Wood 160). In Buddhist artworks, dragons are often depicted being

trapped in vases as a way to represent people's need to overcome the obstacles holding them back from enlightenment (Liu 69). The dragon-shaped handles have a rich set of meanings—positivity, celebration, and royalty—that enhance the overall beauty and artistry of the vases.

As seen in Figs. 2 and 3, another important design element are the brilliant pink flowers resembling Chinese tree peonies, which appear all over the Palace Vases, including near the inside of their mouths and next to painted human figures. In China, the peony has symbolic implications that are as complex as those surrounding dragons. It is a popular motif in Asian artworks of all kinds and appears in Chinese embroidery, paintings, and clothing. The peony is considered China's national flower as well as the official flower of spring. In art symbolism, it can stand for wealth and power, along with generally being “an omen of good fortune and a happy marriage” (Chwalkowski 267). These flowers often symbolize attractive young women and evoke romantic or even erotic shades of meaning (Eberhard 285). Like the dragon, the peony has a whole range of positive suggestions in Chinese culture, which deepen the complexity of the Palace Vases' aesthetic qualities. As Alexander Birchmore writes about Liu Jianhua's porcelain art, the dragons and tree peonies imply many narratives, and visitors to the Gibson House can choose how to interpret the Palace Vases for themselves.

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