

Chinese Porcelain Artworks:

The Gibson House Palace Vases

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In the seventeenth century, when Western dominance was met with China's ability to produce luxury goods such as porcelain, Europeans were left awestruck. They had never beheld such unique ingenious art and it remained clear that Chinese porcelain, such as the Palace Vases in the Gibson House, held supremacy over European's ability to produce porcelain (Gerritsen and Mcdowall 2).

The first pieces of documented Chinese porcelain exported from China to Europe were produced during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1128), but Chinese porcelain was the most sought after in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Gerritsen and Mcdowall 4). Europe's fascination with porcelain eventually led to America's interest in it as well. All Chinese trade to Europe and America was limited to China's southern port, Canton, modern-day Guangzhou (Holmes). Explorer William of Rubruck states in a letter to King Louis IX of France in 1255 that the Chinese are "[e]xcellent craftsmen in whatever skill...the source of the finest silk cloth" (qtd. in Gerritsen and Mcdowall 1). As trade opened between China and the West, Europeans became fascinated with the beauty of all Chinese art; they admired not just porcelain, but also goods such as silk. Porcelain, and other luxury goods, displayed the expertise and riches of the Chinese people and left Europeans starstruck.

The explorer Marco Polo (1254-1324) of Italy gave porcelain its name and introduced it to Europe, stating one "might buy three (Porcelain) bowls of such beauty that nothing lovelier could be imagined" (qtd. in Gerritsen and Mcdowall 6). Until the eighteenth century, no country matched China's ingenuity in making porcelain, and, because of this, the pieces were highly

sought after and represented symbols of wealth to Europeans. European interest in Chinese porcelain led to deeper curiosity about the method used to create it.

Porcelain objects are crafted from a mixture of broken down pieces of feldspar and kaolin. Water is then slowly added to the mixture of kaolin and feldspar until the fine powder transforms into a liquid paste. The shape must then be crafted to perfection, with no air bubbles or dents, and left to air dry, then painted and glazed before firing (Moore). This process can sometimes take up to six weeks. Porcelain represented the skilled craftsmanship and work ethic of the diligent Chinese artisans.



Fig. 1. Clay photo from: Colvin, Jessica. “Back in Stock: Kaolin Clay, White INCI.” *Flickr*, 22 Nov. 2016. <https://www.shutterstock.com/search/kaolin>.

The top photo is an image of feldspar, a rock that gives porcelain its shiny look. Below it is an image of kaolin, a clay. Both are found throughout China.



Fig. 2. Feldspar photo from: St. John, James. “Potassium Feldspar.” *Flickr*, 30 Jan. 2017. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/jsjgeology/32499528651>.

Chinese porcelain was not only beautiful, but it was also recognized for various traits. Its thin, fragile structure was multipurpose and had both an aesthetic and functional value. The Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) observed that porcelain could “bear the heat of hot foods without cracking” (qtd. in Gerritsen and McDowall 9). The European interest in porcelain led Americans to seek Chinese art. The Palace Vases in the Gibson House stand in the Gibsons’ music room for the same reason that Europeans loved porcelain: beauty and ingenuity. In America and Europe, porcelain displayed a family’s wealth, but it had various uses and qualities as well.

Caroline Frank’s book *Objectifying China, Imagining America: Chinese Commodities in Early America* describes how chinaware arrived in the United States. Frank writes that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, objects from China reached the North Atlantic basin through maritime trade. Although Chinese porcelain played an essential aspect in trade, “it never shed its tributary status as a precious gift, proffered as a token of a kingdom’s far-reaching territorial influence, valued more for the politically charged statement it made about the worldly status of the gift-giver and receiver than for its market price” (103). Both Americans and Europeans considered Chinese porcelain to be of the same high quality as typically coveted metals like gold and silver. Chinese porcelain and its description also appeared in a “Boston newspaper, [so people] can safely assume that Americans vicariously participated in aristocratic European dining standards” (144).

In general, Chinese porcelain was not placed in kitchens, which tells us that the pieces were not of practical use. Instead, Chinese porcelain was found “in parlors and master bedrooms, places called ‘Front Room’ or ‘Great Chamber’” (134). Therefore, the porcelain pieces held a decorative role. The Gibson House vases reflect this idea, since they are not located in the

kitchen, which means that they were and remain for ornamental use in displaying the family's status.

To define the designs of the vases, we used John Q. Feller's book, *The Canton Famille Rose Porcelains: Chinese Export Porcelain in the 19th Century*, which describes two common Canton variants for porcelain vases. The first variant has groupings of flowers and greenery along with small winged creatures such as birds. The second and more common variant consists of "floral reserves [alternating] with others depicting Chinese figures at various pursuits" (viii). The Gibson House Vases fall in the second category because there are clusters of pink and blue flowers, along with human figures that break up the floral arrangements (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Gibson House Canton Vase from: Gin, Matthew. "Close Up Canton Figure." The Gibson House Museum, 1 April 2022.

Another way to describe the vases is that they have a “Canton Rose Border.” This design occurs when the “pattern depicts a bird with a lantern enclosure” (Feller vii). The Gibson House vases exhibit the pattern near the mouth of the vase, where there is a distinct section of a decorated rim that consists of birds (Fig. 4).

Finally, there are three distinct patterns for Canton Rose pieces: “Bouquet of Flowers,” “The Garden,” and “White Celadon” or “Sacred Bird and Flowers.” The rim of the vase captures the “Sacred Bird and Flowers” pattern, and “generally, its use has been restricted unnecessarily to refer to a pattern of birds, flowers, and butterflies, usually in orange or sepia” (Feller ix). Once again, there are small birds, which are accompanied by butterflies, along with orange and blue flowers (Fig. 3).

By drawing from Feller’s book, we found that the Gibson House vases are “Floral Reserves and Figures” with a “Canton Rose Border” and a “Sacred Bird and Flowers” pattern (Fig. 3).



Fig. 4. Gibson House Canton Vase from: Gin, Matthew. “Wide Angle Canton Vase.” The Gibson House Museum, 1 Apr. 2022.

Porcelain has evolved during the various historical dynasties of China. The porcelain of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) is known as “Tang tricolor” because, in that era, it was composed of bright yellow, green, and cyan. Song Dynasty (970-1279) porcelain was primarily light gray, and the porcelain of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) began to focus on blue and white. The Gibson House Palace Vases are different from these two color palettes. The whole bodies of these vases are colorful, so they would belong to the Ming (1368-1644) or Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). But, according to *Ming-Qing Cai CI*, “Multi-colored porcelain was popular in [the] Wanli period, but it was carried forward on this basis in the 17th century and Kangxi period. Among them, green was the main color, accompanied by blue, red, yellow and black color. In the 1720s, potters introduced pink color and made powder color porcelain with opaque pink color materials, which

made the color richer and more changeable” (Zhao). Since pink was not used on vases until 1720, the pink flowers on the Gibson House vases reveal the true dynasty of the vase: the Qing Dynasty (Fig. 5). However the dynasty is only a fraction of the facts concerning the origin of the vase.



Fig. 5. Gibson House Vase from: Jin, Wenjie. “Pink Flower.” The Gibson House Museum, 1 Apr. 2022.

During the Qing Dynasty, many emperors had different preferences for vase designs. Famously, blue porcelain emerged under the Shunzhi emperor (1644-1661). In contrast, colorful porcelain was associated with the Kangxi emperor (1661-1772), and there were often black spots on it. In the period of Emperor Jiaqing (1796-1820), a circle of colored patterns was prevalent near the vase’s mouth. According to the porcelain styles depicted in the *Kangxi Period of the Qing Dynasty*, the Gibson House vases most likely come from the Qianlong period (1735-1796) because they depict many people (Li). Also, the portrayal of the characters on the vases are a symbol of the Qianlong period. Although depicting human characters was also popular during the Kangxi Emperor period, their faces were often blurred; therefore, we would not see their

facial features accurately. However, the facial features of the characters in Qianlong period are specific and intentional, so we would be able to see their eyes and noses clearly. Moreover, the names of the characters appearing on the vase also prove that they were the products of the Qianlong period (Fig. 6). Since these fonts were called *Lishu* in China, it was common to write *Lishu* on vases during the Qianlong period.



Fig. 6. Gibson House Vase from: Jin, Wenjie. “Character’s Name.” The Gibson House Museum, 1 April 2022.

The characteristics of vases reflect society in the Qianlong period. In order to cater to the Western aesthetics at that time, the characters changed from vague to concrete in just a few years. Not only that, but those famous heroes from ancient Chinese history on the vases are the spread of culture. During the Qing Dynasty, China banned foreign trade. Trade did not restart until 1727, when Emperor Qianlong opened a port in Guangzhou (Canton), which led to Europeans and Americans to consume Chinese culture through their porcelain products.

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